

Third Annual Mekong Flood Forum

Don Chan Palace Hotel

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## **OPENING REMARKS**

By

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**His Excellency Mr. Sithaheng Rasphone, Vice Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Vice Chairman of Lao National Mekong Committee**

**Mr. Bakker, Mr. Starnitzky, Dr. Cogels, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:**

It is my honor and pleasure to welcome you to the MRC Third Annual Flood Forum on behalf of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance. I congratulate MRC on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of 1995 MRC Agreement on Sustainable Development

The Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance or OFDA in short, is the US agency that is responsible for providing humanitarian assistance when lives are threatened by natural hazards or technical and human-caused catastrophes. In addition to disaster response, OFDA also supports mitigation activities to reduce the impact of recurrent natural disasters which lead to OFDA and MRC partnership since 2001.

Tremendous loss of lives, livelihoods and human suffering caused by a tsunami in Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004 is a reminder that natural hazards do not recognize national borders. Heartbreaking images of this disaster that some of us in this room directly affected and most of us watched on TV screens illustrated once again that early warnings and well prepared communities are critical in saving lives. The extent of suffering from Indonesia to Somalia has proved that real-time open and unconditional data and information exchange, established communication networks and basin-wide cooperation are vital in reducing vulnerability to natural hazards. The tragic stories underline the importance of an integrated disaster management with multi-hazard, multi-discipline and basin-wide approach. Many lessons learned from this tragedy can be transferred to mitigate floods and other hydrometeorological disasters.

Flood mitigation and preparedness can be viewed as an end-to-end process from collecting data, forecasting, planning, disseminating information to taking measures to prepare or lessen potential impacts. State of the art technology and

perfect forecast alone does not have any value if the population affected is not informed timely, does not have plans and policies in place, or simply does not know what to do when crisis hit. Similarly, even a very well prepared community is highly vulnerable to hazards if they do not have the forecast of potential hazards in other words lead-time to take necessary actions. Therefore, each component in this process is critical in mitigating disasters and failure of one component will lead to failure of the entire process.

MRC's FMM Program has proven that an integrated approach to flood management and mitigation is possible. Riparian cooperation in the Lower Mekong basin has set an example of basin-wide cooperation to many other river basins around the world. OFDA and MRC have been cooperating on flood preparedness and mitigation activities since 2001. MRC and OFDA have been implementing community based flood early warning and preparedness project in Cambodia and currently getting ready to implement similar activities in Laos. In 2003, MRC and OFDA have initiated their cooperation under Asia Flood Network (AFN), a USAID/OFDA flood mitigation initiative in Asia. AFN lead by provision of satellite precipitation estimation is envisioned to identify and fill gaps in an end-to-end flood mitigation and preparedness process in the region. AFN seeks to strengthen the capacity of national and regional hydrometeorological institutions in climate, weather, and hydrological forecasting while directly involving communities at risk in reducing vulnerability to hydrometeorological hazards which is critical for sustainable development.

I would like to thank MRC, National Mekong Committees and other partners for organizing and hosting the forum. I also would like to extend my appreciation to MRC, NOAA, USGS, ARC, CRC, ACF, and riparian hydrometeorological agencies, especially Cambodia and Laos for their motivation and efforts in implementing community-based flood early warning project. We are looking forward to our cooperation with MRC this year and years to come to reduce the vulnerability to floods in the Lower Mekong river basin. Thank you for your participation. I wish you a successful forum.