

(TRANSLATION)

**Statement on Cooperation for the Sustainable Development  
of the Mekong River Basin**

**4 April 1995, Chiangrai, Thailand**

On 5 April 1995, governments of the lower Mekong Basin, those of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, will participate in the signing of the agreement for "Cooperation in the Sustainable Development of the Mekong River Basin".

On this occasion, we, the undersigned Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) of Thailand, respectfully submit this **Statement** to the Government of Thailand to convey our sincere concern to all parties involved.

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The 4,200 kilometre Mekong River is the source of a rice-growing civilization. Food productivity throughout the 795,000 square kilometre Mekong River Basin is also important for the world. Large areas of pristine forest constitute the source of hundreds of large and small tributaries flowing into the Mekong and also provide habitat for many rare animals including the Kouprey and the Vu Quang Ox.

The ecological system of the Mekong River Basin also includes seasonally flooded forests, Cambodia's Great Lake, and the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. In all, the Mekong River Basin sustains one of the most biologically diverse fish and aquatic fauna populations in the world. Mekong fishes undertake massive seasonal migrations to feed and spawn throughout the river basin. Scientists are still identifying new fish species in Mekong waters and estimate that there are more than 1,000 species. Fish are the primary source of protein for the vast majority of people living in the Mekong River Basin.

The Mekong River Basin is also a centre of great cultural diversity, representing a heritage that is both unique and of great value for the world. The traditional balance and harmony of rural people's livelihoods with the ecosystems of the Mekong River Basin is both the foundation and potential for agriculture-based economic development.

- **We, the undersigned, support the principle of equal cooperation amongst the riparian countries of the Mekong River Basin through the equal participation of Mekong citizens.**

Long before the Mekong countries were separated by different political ideologies, the Mekong River had always been and continues to be a symbol of the close relations between people living in the Mekong Basin. Now in this era of industrial-based economic development, the Mekong is viewed by some as an untapped resource for which riparian governments must compete to attain economic development by industrialization. To ensure access to this resource, those governments with more political and economic power have a tendency to oppress less powerful neighbouring governments and people, and therefore new conflicts are likely to emerge.

Over the past three years, the difficulties in negotiations between Mekong governments regarding the revival of the 4-nation Mekong Committee have revealed a tendency towards conflict rather than cooperation, although a compromise agreement is about to be finalized this week.

Politically, this is the first step that will encourage discussion and cooperation between the countries of the Mekong Basin, according to the Minister of Environment for Cambodia. This statement implies that without a compromise agreement, the more powerful countries will do what they wish without consultation with other riparian countries.

*We agree with and fully support this first step to create a forum of discussion for Mekong countries. But this is not sufficient; there must be a guarantee that the discussions will be based on equality and a process of working towards solidarity.*

When the new Mekong River Commission is developing plans or projects, there must be thorough study of every potential impact, extensive dissemination of reliable and meaningful information, and comprehensive public consultations through which local people and other concerned parties can have their questions and concerns effectively addressed.

Approval of a project must be reached by consensus and participation of every party -- at the local, national, and regional level.

We object to the politically self-serving posturing and economic nationalism that have characterized the negotiations thus far, as this will only generate further conflict. Every party must deal with each other on the basis of sincerity and goodwill and must not undertake actions that will adversely affect the natural environment or the means of livelihood of people living within the Mekong River Basin.

According to information released by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Agreement appears to be based upon a defunct model of river basin management and plans which have not fundamentally changed for the past four decades. *As such, all plans require substantial revision which must be conducted within an open and transparent framework and process whereby all parties are held accountable for their proposals which directly affect the people of the Mekong River Basin.*

- **We, the undersigned, oppose the influence of the dam-building industry in the discussions, planning and determination of the objectives of the Agreement, which has defined a single, centrally-planned concept of development.**

Development within the Mekong River Basin has been defined over the past 40 years as the construction of large dams with plans for improved navigation, fisheries and environmental protection as mere add-ons to the main agenda of dam construction. International dam consultants have surveyed the Mekong Basin and have proposed over 200 hydroelectric dam projects with an estimated total potential hydroelectricity generating capacity of up to 60,000 megawatts. The political situation in the past permitted the implementation of only a few of these projects. Now, due to pressures during the process of determining the Agreement, the construction of large-scale hydroelectric dams and large-scale water diversion schemes are the top priorities on the development agenda for the Mekong.

Based on UNDP-released information about the Agreement, its message is that 'the natural flowing Mekong is destructive; during the rainy season, the Mekong floods; during the dry season, it does not supply sufficient water; if not dammed, the Mekong flows wasted to the sea.' This message is designed to indicate the "need" for large dams in the Mekong basin and illustrates the dam building agenda that has shaped the content of the Agreement.

In the absence of an effective political agreement amongst riparian governments and before the Agreement has even been ratified, the Mekong Secretariat has recently updated and published a revised plan for up to 11 large-scale, "run-of-the-river" hydroelectric dams on the Mekong River.

At the same time, the Asian Development Bank, the UNDP, the governments of Japan and other industrialized countries have organized and sponsored a series of meetings to promote the interests of the dam building industry in industrialized countries. These meetings and participants have pressured governments of the Mekong Basin towards construction of large dams as a strategy for economic development. In the past, dam projects on the Mekong were promoted as having multi-purpose benefits -- hydroelectricity, flood control, irrigation, navigation. Today the 'benefit' of Mekong development is limited to electricity generation to serve industrial growth chiefly in Thailand. *These dam projects will provide lucrative opportunities for consultant companies, commercial logging interests, financial institutions, the construction and dam industries. But the impacts that will occur as a result of these dams will be borne by the local people and natural environment of the Mekong River Basin.*

- **We, the undersigned, oppose the Mekong water diversion plans of the Government of Thailand.**

The Khong-Chi-Mool and Kok-Ing-Yom-Nan water diversion projects are proposed to support irrigated agriculture. But the Kok-Ing-Yom-Nan Project is actually designed to provide water to the perennially depleted Sirikit dam reservoir in order to supply water to the lower Chao Phrya River Basin, and Bangkok in particular. The Khong-Chi-Mool (KCM) project alone will require more than 200,000 million baht to complete. In 1992, Phase I of KCM was approved despite the fact that academics appointed by the Thai government to review the project objected to the project cost, rejected the environmental impact assessment (EIA) as inadequate, and further recommended that Phase II and III be cancelled. The public should note that the KCM Diversion Project is the responsibility of the Department of Energy Promotion and Development, which is under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment, the same ministry responsible for enforcement of Thailand's environmental law which requires an approved EIA before a project can proceed.

In terms of the Mekong Agreement, the Director of the Department of Energy Promotion and Development, a longtime proponent of Khong-Chi-Mool, was one of the chief negotiators. So while the substance of the discussions and the aim of the Agreement has allegedly been focused on reducing the potential for conflict between riparian countries, the KCM has been promoted as a main component of the Agreement and has already created conflict. Within Thailand, Phase I of KCM has already destroyed extensive tracts of seasonally-flooded forest and increased salinization of farmland in Northeast Thailand, and the project was approved without a guarantee that it would benefit the people. Regionally, the Khong-Chi-Mool project, with its impacts on the natural environment and local people, has been subjected to criticism while Phase II and III of KCM have been criticized by other riparian countries because of its potentially adverse effects on Mekong river flows.

- **We, the undersigned, demand an end to the era of environmental destruction and the beginning of an era of sustainability that does not damage the natural environment and which benefits all members of societies.**

The lessons of political conflict and the failures of industrial-based economic growth reveal both as destroying the natural environment and as a source of problems in society. These lessons demand a search for sustainability in the Mekong River Basin and have led to public recognition of the value of biological and cultural diversity, upon which sustainable development must be based. A holistic approach and the decentralization of authority to local communities must replace the concept of large scale water development centralized within the State, a concept which is being criticized and rejected in all parts of the world. The role of experts, the dam industry and the financial agencies in destroying rivers, forests, and livelihoods of local people is being closely monitored by the public. Consequently, the problems resulting from dams, and indeed, industrial-based economic development, are steadily becoming more apparent in every part of the world.

We, the undersigned, conclude that,

**The Mekong River basin has immense value and potential to form the basis of a new era of sustainability. Recognition of this is an important first step towards long-lasting peace and a better quality of life for all people living in the basin.**

Yours Respectfully,

1. Friends of the People Group
2. NGO Coordinating Committee on Development
3. NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (North)
4. NGO Coordinating Committee on Development (Northeast)
5. Villagers' Committee for the Recovery of Livelihood and Community in the Mool River Watershed
6. Committee of 16 Institutes for the Conservation of Natural Resources and the Environment
7. Isarn Natural Resources and Environment Working Group
8. River Protection Network
9. Conservation of the Phrom River Watershed Project
10. Conservation and Recovery of the Phong Watershed Project
11. Community Forest Project, Surin Province
12. Community Forest Development Project, Phan District, Suring Province
13. Lao Watershed Development Project, Chiangmai Province
14. Kok Watershed Conservation and Recovery Project, Chiangmai Province
15. Thamool Project, Surin Province
16. People's Organization Network for Conservation of Watersheds
17. Local Development Institute
18. Union for Civil Liberties
19. Creative Association for Life and Environment, Chiengrai Province
20. Association for Study and Culture of Akha People
21. Isarn Farmers' Union
22. Wildlife Fund Thailand, Under the Royal Patronage of Her Majesty the Queen

23. Seub Nakasathien Foundation
24. Thai Volunteers for Society Foundation
25. Foundation for Ecological Recovery
26. Coordinating Committee for Plain of the Weeping Kula Development  
Cooperation, Roi-Et Province
27. Northern Development Workers Association
28. Rural Reconstruction Alumni and Friends Association
29. Siam Environment Club
30. Technology Centre for Society