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28 May 2008

His Excellency, Mr Samak Sundaravej
Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Thailand

Your Excellency,

Re: Sharing our concerns and calling for good governance in the decision-making process concerning the proposed Mekong mainstream dams.

We refer to the programme "Conversations Samak Style" which was aired on the National Broadcasting Service of Thailand on 25 May 2008, in which you discussed the decision to implement a project to divert water from the Mekong and its tributaries in Lao PDR to Thailand and three hydropower dam projects on the Mekong in the provinces of Loei, Nong Khai and Ubon Ratchathani. In addition to providing water for agriculture or rice production in the North Eastern region of Thailand, you stated that both Thailand and Laos would benefit from utilising the Mekong. Citing China's dams in the upper Mekong mainstream as an example, you claimed that these projects would only have minimal impacts. During the programme, you stated repeatedly that "we have already decided now" and "if we don't think, if we don't have the courage to decide, we will never do it. But this government has thought about it, and decided already, and will get down to action".

We, the Thai People's Network for Mekong, and civil society organisations listed below, have been following the situation of the environment in the Mekong region, and are greatly concerned about your statement as well as the overall position of your government to push ahead with proposed the Mekong mainstream dam projects. This will lead to the hasty implementation of these projects, without hearing the views and allowing sufficient participation of people in the decision-making process. We therefore would call upon Your Excellency and the government to address the following concerns.

1. On the programme, you stated that, "We will do everything according to the law, including the international laws, and the laws in this country of ours..." In practice, this means that various steps must be followed prior to making a decision, including but not limited to: assessing the feasibility of the proposed projects, and their social and environmental impacts; disclosing information to the public; hearing the views of a range of people in Thailand; and consulting the governments and people in the Mekong region, who may be affected by the projects. This is to ensure that decisions are based on a comprehensive and factual foundation. However, Your Excellency's statement indicating that a

decision has already been made may influence the work of various responsible agencies, and work to exclude civil society from participating in the above process. Thus, we call upon the Prime Minister to stop lending political weight to the project and allow the various relevant agencies to carry out their responsibilities without interference.

2. The Thai government is trying to rush ahead with the proposed projects. This can be seen from the visit of the Minister for Foreign Affairs (Noppadol Pattama) trip to Vientiane on 25 March 2008 to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Government of Laos concerning the feasibility study of the proposed Baan Koum dam in Ubon Ratchatani province. However, the people in Ubon Ratchatani province were neither told nor given the chance to participate and express their views. This MoU may bind Thailand to develop the project without disclosing information to, and the participation of, Thai public in the decision making process. That is to say, this action is not transparent and failed to adhere to the principles of good governance. We call on the government to halt the finalisation of any other agreements with the Government of Laos, until there is public disclosure of information, public hearings, and until the feasibility study reports and environmental impact assessments have been completed.

3. In fact, all of the Mekong mainstream dams are large projects. Your statement that these dams were “check dams” or just a barrier to slow the water flow is incorrect and misleading to the public. According to an earlier study commissioned by the Department of Alternative Energy Development and Efficiency (DEDE), the Baan Koum dam in Ubon Ratchathani would have a generating capacity of 1,872 megawatts – three times greater than the Bhumiphol dam, currently the largest dam in Thailand in terms of generating capacity. If built, the Baan Koum dam would have significant impacts. The dam’s reservoir would stretch 110 kilometres from Khong Chiam to Khemmarat district, and inundate numerous islands and sandbars that are important to livelihoods of people on both sides of the river. Fishing and the growing of seasonal crops on these islands and sandbars, provide an important source of income to buy rice to eat. There is very little paddy land in the area, and some villagers do not have any paddy fields at all. On the Thai side alone, the dam’s reservoir would affect people’s livelihoods in least 20 villages, and not two as you claim.

4. The Thai government must not trivialize the impacts that these large scale projects will have on communities on both sides of the Mekong. Referring to villages that would be flooded by the Baan Koum dam, you stated that, “the Lao authorities say that it will flood seven villages. But never mind, in Thailand it’ll flood two”. Thailand’s benefits should not be built on the loss of resources and friendship between Thailand and Laos. This may have the effect of creating a negative image of Thailand in the eyes of civil society around the world.

5. The Thai government should review its approach to the use of the Mekong. The simple logic that says *China has dammed the Mekong, so Thailand and Laos can dam it too rather than letting the river flow freely without any ‘benefits’*, displays an ignorance of the numerous impacts from dam projects. The projects in China have disrupted the flow of the river, creating impacts on

the livelihoods of people living along the Mekong in Chiang Rai province, northern Thailand. This has been evident since 1993, when Manwan dam, the first dam on the upper Mekong, was completed.

The Mekong is one of the world's most diverse and fertile ecosystems. Hosting more than 1,200 fish species, traditional fisheries forms a significant part of local economies in the four Lower Mekong countries. According to research published by the Mekong River Commission in May 2002, the total catch of fish and other aquatic species in the Lower Mekong Basin in 2001-2002 weighed 2,033,000 tonnes with a value of around US\$1,478 million (or almost 50 trillion baht).

No government, therefore, should use the Mekong based on claims of national sovereignty. We ask the Thai government to work towards sustainable use of the Mekong, based on the recognition that the Mekong provides innumerable benefits to people in the Lower Mekong basin, instead of thinking only of the benefits to Thailand.

Finally, we call upon the Thai government urgently to respond to the questions and concerns raised in this letter, and publicly release all studies and updates related to the aforementioned projects. We will monitor and publish your response and any actions of the government through forums and the mass media so that everyone can have access to this information.

Respectfully,

Thai People's Network for Mekong

(Full list of civil society organisations signatories available in the Thai original)

Signatories include 46 Networks, 19 Projects, 11 Groups, 11 Foundations, 6 Institutes,
6 Centres, 18 Academics

cc:

Members of the Thai Cabinet
Department of Alternative Energy Development and Efficiency
Provincial Governors of Loei, Ubon Ratchathani, Nakhorn Phanom, Mukdaharn