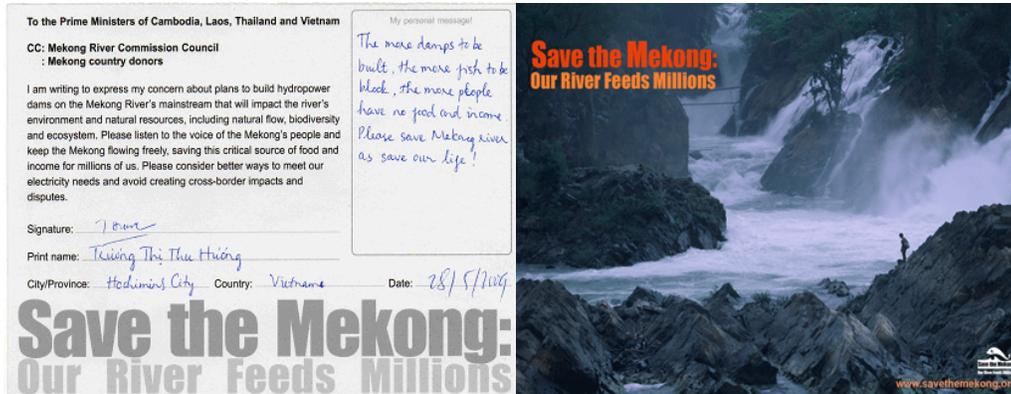




Press Release: Embargoed until 18th June 2009

**Mekong Citizens to Hand 15,000 Signature
“Save the Mekong” Petition to Thai PM**



In a bold outpouring of public concern for Southeast Asia’s Mekong River, more than 15,000 people from within the six-country Mekong region and around the world have signed a “Save the Mekong” petition urging governments to abandon plans for hydropower development along the river’s mainstream. The petition – written in seven languages - will be hand-delivered to Thailand’s Prime Minister H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva on 18 June in Bangkok, and sent to other government leaders within the region.

Despite strong government backing for dam building on the Mekong River, over 10,000 people from within the Mekong region have signed the petition addressed to the Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam urging them to keep the river flowing freely and to pursue less damaging electricity options. The petition is signed by fishers and farmers living along the river’s mainstream and tributaries, as well as by monks, students, city-folk and even some of the region’s well-known celebrities. Another 5,000 people around the world signed the postcards and an online petition.

Most postcard signatories wrote personal messages to the region’s leaders:

“Don’t let hydropower dams block our children's future!” *Wang Dezhi, Yunnan, China*

“Don’t build the Mekong dams. The existing dams in Thailand already make brothers and sisters fight against each other!” *Mak Vangdokmai, Roi et, Thailand*

“I love my country. I don’t want to see some people destroy my home country for greed. So I would like to do my best to protect our Mekong!” *Sneampay, Vientiane, Laos*

“If the dams happen, where will all of us go to live?” *Villager, Stung Treng province, Cambodia.*

"Saving us, saving our resources! Electricity is not everything!" Nguyen Thanh Hang, Hanoi, Vietnam

"I have traveled the Mekong River from Laos to Thailand to Cambodia and dams will destroy the river, environment and tourism." M. Higgs, London, England

In the lead-up to this week's Save the Mekong launch, citizens groups have organized a number of events over the past few months to rally public support for the river:

- Bangkok's Central World department store, Thailand, March 2009:
An exhibition by award-winning Thai photographer Suthep Kritsanavarin highlighted the threat to Mekong fishing from the Don Sahong dam planned for Southern Lao PDR. The exhibition prompted thousands of Bangkokians to sign the petition postcard.
- Phnom Penh, Hun Sen Park, Cambodia, June 2009:
A stall at the World Environment Week's eco-festival in Phnom Penh highlighted the risks from the mainstream dams to Cambodia's fisheries and urged hundreds of concerned citizens to add their signatures to the Save the Mekong on-line petition.
- Ubon Ratchathani province, Thailand, June 2009:
Local groups, students, academics and photographers organized a series of public events, dubbed "the Mekong weeks", and collected over 4,000 petition signatures. The events highlighted the value and natural beauty of the "Three Thousand Wells" stretch of the Mekong River, where it forms the border between northeast Thailand and Lao PDR. The area is an increasingly popular ecotourism destination that is now threatened by the proposed Ban Koum dam.
- Phnom Penh, Cambodia, June 2009
Local groups and fishing community leaders organized a national workshop about the importance of the Mekong's fisheries for local livelihoods and the environment, and to discuss the food security impacts that the Don Sahong mainstream dam could have on Cambodians.

Mekong fisheries provide a critical source of food and income for millions of people along the river. Recent official estimates place the annual value of the river's wild capture fisheries to be worth up to US\$3 billion. Mainstream dams will block the massive fish migrations that count for up to 70% of the river's commercial fish catch and that ensure regional food security. Experience around the world demonstrates that there is no way to mitigate the fisheries impacts of such large dams.

Civil society groups in the Mekong region and internationally have been sounding the alarm about plans to build eleven hydro dams on the Lower Mekong mainstream for many years, in what is often described as an uphill battle.

China's dam construction on the Upper Mekong mainstream (Lancang) has already caused serious environmental problems, in the form of declining fish stocks, riverbank erosion, and hazardous water level fluctuations in downstream Burma, northern Thailand and northern Lao PDR. The Save the Mekong coalition and those that signed the petition are very concerned that similarly severe cross-border impacts could create cross-border disputes.

When meeting Prime Minister H.E. Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Save the Mekong coalition representatives will present him with the Save the Mekong petition and ask him to work with regional leaders to protect the Mekong River. Thai representatives will raise their concerns with the Prime Minister about the Thai-Laos Ban Koum and Pak Chom dams and ask for clarification on the government's position on these projects.

Thailand's Minister of Energy recently spent 60 million baht on a feasibility study for the Pak Chom dam and a feasibility study for the Ban Koum dam study has been prepared by Italian-Thai Company. In addition, in Lao PDR, Thailand's Chor Khanchang company and Charoen Energy and Water Asia company are the lead developers of the Xayaboury and Lat Sua mainstream dams respectively. Much of the mainstream dams' hydroelectricity is anticipated to feed into Thailand's power grid.

The largely donor-backed inter-governmental Mekong River Commission, meanwhile, has failed to disclose its assessment of the Don Sahong dam, prepared in 2007, despite repeated requests from civil society groups, and is now positioning itself as a "facilitator" among the region's hydro developers. The MRC has skirted some of the most critical issues, including on ensuring transparency and public participation, and protecting regional food security.

Despite the limited space for public debate, the Save the Mekong petition aims to make heard the people's voices for protecting the Mekong as a giant food chain and cultural lifeline for millions of people.

Schedule details

Meeting with H.E. Abhisit Vejjajeva, Prime Minister of Thailand

Representatives from civil society groups from the Mekong countries will meet H.E. Abhisit Vejjajeva, Thailand's Prime Minister and hand him the Save the Mekong postcard petition at 8 am, 18th June at Parliament House, Bangkok.

Press conference

A press conference will be held at 1:30 pm, 18th June at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand (FCCT) with Mekong Region and international representatives from the Save the Mekong coalition. They will announce the number of petition postcards collected and discuss the topic "*Fisheries, Food Security, and Livelihoods: Why the Mekong River Should Remain Free-flowing.*"

Trip to Ban Koum dam site (self support)

Travel by overnight VIP tour bus for a field trip to visit the villages close to the proposed Ban Koum mainstream dam site. For those interested, a trip can be arranged (for journalists only) to the current protest at the Rasri Salai dam, Srisakhet province where thousands of people have gathered to call on the government to solve the project's outstanding problems and for future projects planned under the Khong-Chi-Mun mega-irrigation scheme to be abandoned.

Journalists are invited to join the press conference and trip to Ban Koum and are requested to register at mekong@savethemekong.org or by contacting:

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More information on the Save the Mekong initiative and government-backed plans to dam the Mekong is available in English, Burmese, Chinese, Khmer, Lao, Thai and Vietnamese on the coalition's web site www.SavetheMekong.org.