

# Mekong Project is the pathway to peace

by Linda de Hoyos

In all the hundreds, if not thousands, of hours expended by Moscow, Washington, and Beijing in diplomatic wrangling over the conflicts in Southeast Asia since World War II, very few have been spent on the economic development of the region, specifically the training and harnessing of the Mekong River. However, in 1990, as negotiations were proceeding for a comprehensive settlement in Cambodia, plans for developing the Mekong were given new impetus in diplomacy coming from Thailand.

The initiative came from then-Thai Foreign Minister Subin Pinkhayan during an October visit to Vientiane, Laos, where the Thai official called for the revival of the Interim Mekong Committee, a multinational body which has directed the feasibility studies on the Mekong Project since 1957. Behind Subin's proposal for the Mekong was then-Thai Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan's idea to turn the Cambodian "battleground into a marketplace."

In October and November, Subin consulted with both Phoun Sipaseut of Laos and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach on proposals for a joint dam and reservoir project on the Mekong along the Thai-Lao border. Subin, who is a hydraulic engineer, told the *Bangkok Nation* Nov. 2, "I am very interested in these projects, which were mapped out back when I was a student. Later, I studied these projects at university and I was also involved as an adviser to the Mekong Interim Committee."

Thach's blessing, reported the *Nation*, for Mekong projects was solicited to "make Laos feel comfortable about entering into Thai-Lao power development cooperation, which far surpasses Thai-Vietnamese cooperation within the framework of the Mekong Interim Committee." Thach was reportedly "enthusiastic and open-minded," describing the long-shelved major power development projects as "Sleeping Beauties and Thailand as Prince Charming." The two projects immediately in question are the Pa Mong dam on the Mekong River and the Nam Theum dam project in a Mekong tributary inside Laos.

As the *Nation* further noted, "Foreign Ministry sources familiar with Subin's thinking said that the minister sees hydropower as the 'cheapest and cleanest' source of energy as an alternative for Thailand to import crude oil imports. Thailand now imports about 60% of its crude, which has risen markedly since the advent of the Gulf crisis." Subin had also brought up the Mekong Project in a visit to Beijing in mid-November.

Prime Minister Chatichai, in discussions with his Lao coun-

terpart Kaysone Phomvihane in November, also called for the construction of two to three more bridges to link the countries across the Mekong. One bridge is now slated for construction this year, with Australian funding, and will contain a railway link. It must be hoped that despite the February military coup against the Chatichai government, the Thai military's promise that foreign policy will not change includes a continued commitment to the Subin initiatives for the Mekong.

## Who is interested?

At the end of November, the Mekong Interim Committee met for its 32nd annual session. Under the leadership of the Canadian-born Chuck Lankester, the committee is focusing on four projects: the Low Pa Mong, the Luang Prabang, Chiang Khan, and Nam Theum I. In early November, Lankester toured Europe looking for funds. The meeting also became a focal point for pulling together the regional unity needed to carry out the dam projects. Cambodia has not been represented on the committee since 1976, when the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh. The Interim Committee now includes Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. In a press conference held Nov. 27 after the session, Vietnamese president of the National Vietnam Mekong Committee, Dinh Gia Khanh, called for the inclusion of China and the Union of Myanmar (Burma) in a program for Mekong-centered regional development. It was high time, Khanh said, that all six countries sharing the Mekong coordinate efforts to utilize its potentials to capacity.

Beijing has agreed only "in principle" to participate in Mekong projects, a Thai Foreign Ministry spokesman reported Feb. 8, and China has agreed to exchange technical information with the Interim Committee. However, the projects are not likely to be welcomed by Beijing's subsidiary, the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge has rejected the plans by Thailand to begin the reconstruction of Cambodia, making the full acceptance and implementation of the Permanent Five plan for a U.N. takeover of Cambodia a precondition. This stance derives not only from the perceived advantages handed to the Khmer Rouge in the U.N. plan, but also from the Pol Potist Maoist ideology.

At international meetings in the last 10 years, the Khmer Rouge has feigned rejection of the nihilistic tenets which led to the deaths in 1975-79 of nearly one-half of the Cambodian population, either through murder or starvation. However, in February, it was revealed that the anti-human Pol Pot has banned the killing of animals in territory it controls. With this, Pol Pot joins with the World Wildlife Fund of Britain's Prince Philip, for whom economic development is anathema.

The Mekong is the pathway by which the Southeast Asian nations can join efforts in achieving mutual benefits that can end the persistent degradation of its people, who have long suffered as pawns of the superpowers. Far from being a non-issue in negotiations on the Cambodian conflict, the attitude toward the vast opportunities it presents is the litmus test to see who wants peace and who does not.