

13th Ministerial Conference Sets Future Directions of GMS Regional Cooperation Program

The 13th GMS Ministerial Conference was held in Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic on 14-16 December 2004. The Conference successfully accomplished its main objectives, namely, to: (i) review the progress of cooperation in the GMS Program, (ii) determine the future directions of the Program and prepare a Plan of Action that will guide its activities and initiatives in the next several years, (iii) dialogue with the development partners, including the private sector, to determine ways of increasing their participation in the Program, and (iv) prepare for the Second GMS Leaders' Summit to be held on 4-5 July in Kunming, People's Republic of China.

The Conference was opened by H. E. Mr. Boun-Nhang Vorachit, Prime Minister, Lao PDR, and was attended by the Ministers of the six member countries, namely, Cambodia, PRC, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Viet Nam, as well as by GMS Senior Officials and by 60 development partners, including representatives from the private sector. The ADB delegation was led by Mr. Liqun Jin, Vice President, Operations Group 1, who delivered a statement at the Opening Session and co-chaired the 13th Ministerial Meeting with H. E. Mr. Somphong Mongkhonvilay, GMS Minister, Lao PDR. Mr. Rajat Nag, Director-General, Mekong Department co-chaired the Senior Officials' Meeting and the Development Partners' Meeting.

In his opening and welcome remarks, Prime Minister Boun-Nhang Vorachit emphasized the necessity to create the conditions required for regional integration through physical and social infrastructure linkages, to narrow development gaps among member countries and to link the GMS cooperation framework with other regional cooperation mechanisms. He also acknowledged that environmental protection and human resource development are vital to ensure sustained development of the region. He likewise noted that numerous challenges, including the prevention of transboundary communicable diseases and human trafficking, also require committed stakeholder collaboration.

In his opening statement, ADB's VP Jin emphasized that to be able to overcome these challenges and move closer to the shared GMS vision, the GMS countries will need greater focus and stronger commitment in their cooperative efforts. He called the Ministers' attention to four important priorities for moving the GMS Program forward, namely, increasing financial resource mobilization and focused use of such resources; improving the "enabling environment" for private investment in the subregion; including all segments of the GMS population, particularly the poor, in the benefits of cooperation; and strengthening synergies with other cooperation programs in the region.

Given the results-oriented and proactive tone that had thus been set for it, the Conference was very well focused and productive. Apart from the traditional Joint Ministerial Statement, the Conference yielded a Plan of Action that provides a clear, time-bound and coordinated blueprint that will guide the Program's initiatives and activities in the next several years. With this roadmap, the GMS countries and their bilateral and multilateral development partners are expected to speed up the progress of cooperation in the priority sectors, implement the various projects more efficiently, and take advantage of synergies.

A Development Partners Meeting (DPM) held on 15 December 2004, was another important component of the Conference. The participating development partners, numbering 60 in all, agreed that the increasing complexity of the challenges facing the subregion necessitates greater efficiency, complementarity, and convergence of partnerships among the various GMS stakeholders. They also noted that an important area with potentially substantial benefits from convergence of partnerships is capacity building and human resource development. A third major subject is the aggressive pursuit of private sector development. In this regard, the GMS Business Forum (GMS-BF) represented the private sector and presented a report of the Forum's accomplishments, future strategic directions and recommendations.

The Ministers were also briefed during the Conference on the progress of preparations for the Second GMS Leaders' Summit, the theme of which will be: "A Stronger GMS Partnership for Common Prosperity." Emerging sub-themes are the need to focus on the 3 C's, namely connectivity, competitiveness and community, as well as a commitment to pursue sustainable development.

The Conference activities also included the signing by member countries of important documents, namely, Stage 2 Annexes of the GMS Cross-Border Transport Agreement (CBTA), and the Memorandum of Understanding between Lao PDR and Viet Nam on the initial implementation of the CBTA at the Dansavanh-Lao Bao border crossing. The Phnom Penh Plan (PPP) Top Development Management Program and the launching of the PPP Journal were also highlights of the Conference program.