



GMS TOURISM MINISTERS' MEETING
Bangkok, Thailand, 21 January, 2008

JOINT MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Preamble

1. We, the Tourism Ministers from the six GMS countries, namely, the Kingdom of Cambodia, the People's Republic of China (PRC), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Union of Myanmar, Kingdom of Thailand, and Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, met in Bangkok, Thailand, on 21 January 2008. We are pleased to be joined in our discussions by the Director General of the Southeast Asia Department of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and representatives from other development partners, international organizations as well as the diplomatic corps.

2. The tourism sector is one of the priority sectors under the GMS Economic Cooperation Program and continues to offer significant opportunities for socio-economic development. (We note the statement by the Second GMS Summit that the continued growth and development of the tourism sector is essential to poverty reduction). Now that physical infrastructure linking the GMS member countries are largely developed, tourism has become one of the indispensable instruments for achieving our collective aspiration for poverty eradication, sustainable development and well being of our peoples.

Achievements

3. We are pleased with the continuing positive outlook for the tourism sector in the Subregion. We have noted that annual tourist arrivals in the GMS have more than doubled from about 10 million in 1995 to about 24 million in 2007, with corresponding increase in tourism revenues. Clearly, we need to manage these large increases in tourism arrivals and revenues so that the pattern of growth is more equitable, environmentally sustainable and sensitive to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, particularly women and ethnic communities, and contributes substantially to poverty reduction and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

4. We commend the efforts of the GMS Tourism Working Group (TWG) for putting in place a GMS Tourism Sector Strategy that provides a solid framework for sub-regional cooperation in this important sector over the next decade. We support the goal of the Strategy "to develop and promote the sub-region as a single destination, offering a diversity of good quality and high-yielding sub-regional products that help to distribute the benefits of tourism more widely; add to the tourism development efforts of each GMS country; and contribute primarily to poverty reduction, gender equality and empowerment of women, and sustainable development, while minimizing any adverse impacts." We are eager to receive regular status reports from the TWG on the implementation of the Strategy.

5. We sincerely appreciate the financial and technical support provided by ADB towards the preparation of the Strategy as well as the implementation of some of its key priority programs and projects in collaboration with other development partners such as PATA, UNESCAP, UNESCO, UNWTO, SNV, NZAid, GTZ, etc.

6. The tourism sector in the GMS has indeed matured to a level that we can be proud of. We have established and continue to support with our own budgetary resources a Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO) based in Bangkok to actively position and promote the sub-region as a single tourist destination and to coordinate the implementation of the key priority programs under the Tourism Sector Strategy. We sincerely appreciate the assistance of the French Government towards strengthening the staff of the MTCO by seconding a tourism specialist through ADB, to assist in coordinating and implementing the priority programs and projects.

Emerging Issues and Challenges

7. We can see excellent opportunities for the future of the GMS tourism sector with a growing level of physical connectivity to and within the sub-region, increased number of flights, and an increasingly vibrant tourism industry.

8. While substantial achievements have been made, there remain much more to be done in the face of many new challenges. We need to face up to increasing competition from other regional destinations due to increased globalization, issues of standards and pricing, imbalance in the distribution of benefits of tourism between and within the GMS countries, escalating energy costs, and the threat of transboundary diseases such as HIV/AIDS and avian flu, and impact of global climate change.

9. We need to look at innovative approaches to sustain and streamline the operations of the MTCO over the longer term to transform it into a self-sustaining institution that promotes the sub-region as a single destination, with the active participation and support of the private sector, and coordinates the implementation of the Tourism Strategy.

Our Commitment to Strengthen Sub-regional Cooperation in Tourism

10. In line with the GMS Leaders' pledge at the Second GMS Summit to support a more holistic and coordinated approach to tourism development, and in anticipation of the Third GMS Summit in March 2008, today we have formally endorsed the (i) the GMS Tourism Marketing Plan; and (ii) the GMS Tourism Development Plan. We commend the efforts of the MTCO in developing these guideposts for implementing the GMS Tourism Sector Strategy through realistic and feasible priority projects. We look forward to seeing the concrete and positive results of these initiatives for the benefit of the people of the sub-region.

11. We call on the TWG and the MTCO to mobilize the required financial, intellectual, and human resources and to further expand mutually beneficial partnerships with development partners, including bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, the private sector, and civil society to carry out these priority initiatives.

12. We look forward to further strengthening our partnerships with all relevant entities to ensure the continued development of the tourism sector in the GMS.

13. We express our sincere appreciation to the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand for hosting this First Meeting of the GMS Tourism Ministers, and the Asian Development Bank for the efficient organization of our meeting today.