



Press Release

For Immediate Release

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World Water Day, 22 March 2009

“Shared Water – Shared Opportunities” with a special focus on transboundary waters

Vientiane, March 22, 2009: With its theme of “Shared Waters, Shared opportunities”, World Water Day 2009 has special relevance for the millions of people who live along the banks of the Mekong River - one of the largest transboundary river basins in the world.

In all, six countries share the waters of the Mekong, underlining the vital need for transboundary cooperation and sustainable water management throughout the region as a foundation for sustainable development. In Laos, where 35% of the river’s water volume originates, many families are wholly dependent on the river for their livelihood and survival.

This year’s World Water Day calls for collective action to tackle the issue of access to safe drinking water and water sharing. It also aims to increase global understanding about the need to manage water resources in an integrated manner to support the sustainable use of water resources for all people.

Today, some 87% of the global population, or approximately 5.7 billion people, are now using drinking water from improved sources. However, it is a sobering fact that globally more than 1 billion people, which includes 125 million children under five years of age, live in households without access to an improved drinking-water source. More than 2 billion people are without access to improved sanitation.

UN agencies actively support communities and people throughout the Lao PDR to ensure and improve access to water and sanitation. They also work with the Government and other partners to achieve sustainable watershed and wetland management, which has the potential to make a vital positive impact on development within the whole region.

Watershed and groundwater management and the multiple uses of water resources including agriculture- aquaculture integration are promoted in Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) projects, where expertise in environmental impact management including wastewater treatment and reuse, drainage and salinity control is also provided. The recently drafted national Fisheries and Aquaculture Bill aims to ensure effective fisheries and aquaculture management and development and sustainable utilisation of aquatic resources.

Climate change as well as human activity pose a great threat to the people of the Mekong and are already affecting people across the region as both the intensity and

frequency of extreme weather events, such as flooding and drought, increase. UNDP is supporting integrated wetland management, the preparation of the National Adaptation Programme of Action for Climate Change (NAPA), and – together with ADB - the elaboration of the National Strategy and Action Plan on Climate Change for Lao PDR.

UNICEF helps plan, install and maintain safe drinking water and sanitation systems in rural communities. It also provides materials that educate primary school children about hygiene and about the importance of protecting their local water sources and promoting sanitary environmental conditions.

UN-HABITAT projects covering 18 small towns support the Government in providing people with access to improved water services and sanitation, and the UN-HABITAT Mekong Region Water and Sanitation initiative (MEK-WATSAN) and Water for Asian Cities (WAC) programme have developed strategic partnerships with communities, governmental agencies, NGOs and educational institutions throughout the region.

The recent floods on the Mekong and its tributaries in August 2008 resulted in a nationwide emergency that UN agencies were quick to respond to. Drinking water sources and schools were rehabilitated in affected villages along with provision of emergency supplies to the families most at risk.

“Inaction on water issues is not an option,” said Sonam Yangchen Rana, UN Resident Coordinator in Laos. “Access to clean water and sanitation are fundamental to every aspect of life – from health to survival and dignity”.

UN agencies and people around the world are celebrating World Water Day. It will be marked in Lao PDR with ADB, FAO, UNDP, UN-HABITAT, UNICEF and WSP involved in events over two weeks, from a painting activity with the Lao Youth Union at Patuxay on March 21 to a mini-walkathon with WREA in the first week of April.

Notes for editors:

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The United Nations Country Team in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) is committed to supporting the efforts of the Government to improve the life of all citizens, especially those most vulnerable. We shall continue to work closely with the Government and all development partners for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Our collective endeavour is to assist the people of Lao PDR to achieve progress and better standards of living for all.