

**Greater Mekong Subregion
Twenty-first Meeting of the Subregional Transport Forum (STF-21)
Luang Prabang, Lao People's Democratic Republic
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Opening Statement

By

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His Excellency, Viengsavath Siphandone, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Public Works and Transport of Lao PDR; His Excellency, Vongsavanh Thepphachanh, Vice Governor of Luang Prabang; Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am very pleased to co-chair this 21st Meeting of the GMS Subregional Transport Forum. This is the fourth and last time that I have the honor of co-chairing this important Forum. I have just been recently appointed as Country Director of ADB's Resident Mission in Thailand. In my four years of involvement in the GMS Subregional Transport Forum, I have had the privilege of witnessing significant progress in the GMS transport sector, which I believe is the premier and most advanced sector of cooperation in the GMS Program. But even in my new job as ADB Country Director for Thailand, I will still have opportunities to work with you, the transport officials of the region, with Thailand's renewed interest in engaging ADB support in the implementation of key projects in the sector.

I would like to thank the Lao People's Democratic Republic for graciously hosting this important event. I wish to thank in particular His Excellency, Deputy Minister Viengsavath Siphandone of the Ministry of Public Works and Transport for sharing with us his precious time as well as his valuable ideas on GMS transport development and cooperation. Our special thanks also go to Dr. Oulay Phadouangdeth, Director General of MPWT's Department of Planning and Cooperation for chairing our meeting, and to other officials and staff of the Ministry of Public Works and Transport for their support in organizing this meeting.

STF-21's theme is "*Toward an Efficient GMS Multimodal Transport System*". As we are all well aware, a good transport system is a main ingredient of development, both at the national and the regional level. What characterizes a "good" transport system, what are its key features? Efficiency is certainly one of them, but so are reliability and sustainability. How do we attain a transport system that has these attributes? This is one of the broad questions we will try to address in this meeting, particularly in the session on the new GMS Transport Sector Strategy, which is currently under preparation. To be sure, the STF is the first venue where the initial draft of this Strategy will be presented, and your views and inputs will certainly be important in further refining and finalizing the Strategy document. It will then be presented to the GMS Ministers at the 22nd Ministerial Conference to be held in September, and from there it will eventually be proposed for endorsement by the GMS Leaders at the 6th GMS Summit in March next year.

The Transport Sector Strategy, or TSS, however, is just a component of the overall GMS Strategic Framework, albeit a very important one, as transport development has been one of the pioneering, most productive, and well advanced areas of cooperation in the GMS Program. The overall GMS Strategic Framework, which covers 2012-2022, is itself undergoing a Midterm Review, to assess its continued relevance in a very dynamic regional and global environment. The Review tries to determine whether the Framework still provides the appropriate strategic thrusts and directions to address the more complex challenges and demands facing the GMS, as well as take advantage of new opportunities. Emerging from this assessment will be a set of strategic directions and operational focus areas, as well as process and institutional improvements, and a monitoring and evaluation system that all try to ensure that the effectiveness of the overall GMS Strategic Framework for the remaining years in its term, 2018-2022. This will be known as the "Ha Noi Action Plan", as it is targeted for approval and adoption by the Leaders at the 6th GMS Summit in Ha Noi in 2018. In this meeting, we will also be briefed on the key results of the Midterm Review and on the proposed key elements of the Ha Noi Action Plan, so that we will have a clear overall context for our own efforts in the transport sector.

We have strong reasons to believe, however, that even after the Midterm Review, economic corridor development will continue to have a central role in the GMS Strategic Framework. And, of course, transport will continue to be bedrock of the economic corridors, as it provides the vital links that enable the smooth flow of trade, investment, tourism, and other important economic values across and around the subregion as well as beyond it. This is why we have commissioned a study to assess the state of development of the GMS economic corridors. Its main purpose is to determine status and physical condition of the transport infrastructure, mainly the various road sections and bridges making up the corridors as well as cross border facilities, and thus pinpoint any remaining gaps to be addressed to ensure full connectivity. It also looked at other components of corridor development, such as cross border transport and trade and other indicators of overall economic potential of the corridors, including the presence of special economic zones, tourist attractions and other resource endowments. Today, we will also be briefed on the initial findings of this study.

Despite the fact that there are still gaps in the transport infrastructure to be addressed, it is still undeniable the GMS Program has had tremendous accomplishments in establishing an extensive network of road corridors. But as I mentioned, a key characteristic of a good transport system is sustainability, and therefore a key challenge is to ensure that the roads built will last long to benefit current and future generations. There is therefore a critical role for sound road asset management, and particularly for effective axle load control along the GMS road corridors. In STF-20, some countries shared with us their experience in road asset management and axle load control systems and enforcement. We also mentioned that ADB would be preparing a technical assistance that will study and prepare general recommendations on axle load control. We are pleased to inform you that this technical assistance project is already ongoing, and we appreciate very much the countries' inputs to this study. Again, in this meeting we will be looking into some of the key findings of this important study.

Another element of an efficient and reliable transport system, as reflected in our meeting's theme, is multimodality. In the GMS Program, we have focused much on roads and have

accomplished much in this particular mode. But with new emerging threats and challenges, such as climate change, as well as the need for greater efficiency in carrying out the burgeoning trade in the region, greater attention is being given to railways as a clean and efficient transport mode. The Greater Mekong Railway Association, which was set up as a result of the GMS countries' desire to develop greater railway connectivity among themselves, has made steady progress in the last two years since its establishment. The GMRA's work has resulted in the identification of nine railway links that are critical in achieving this connectivity. A new technical assistance is also underway to assess the feasibility of these priority railway links. We will also be briefed in our meeting on these developments in the railway sector.

As in previous STFs, an important part of our meeting is hearing updates from our development partners on their activities in the GMS transport sector and exploring further collaborations with them toward the development of the sector. They certainly have a crucial role in all efforts to achieve the efficient, reliable, and sustainable transport system that our meeting's theme has held up as a main goal, and which in turn is a key ingredient in the overall GMS vision of an integrated, prosperous and harmonious subregion.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

We therefore have very significant and challenging issues to address in this meeting. I am, however, confident that with our usual pragmatic and positive approach to our cooperation work, we will achieve all the objectives we have set for ourselves in this important meeting.

I look forward to your active participation and to a very fruitful STF-21. Thank you.