

**Greater Mekong Subregion
Twenty-third Meeting of the Subregional Transport Forum (STF-23)
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Opening Statement

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His Excellency, Mr. Chirute Visalachitra, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Transport, Kingdom of Thailand and Meeting Chair; Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank the government of the Kingdom of Thailand for graciously hosting this 23rd Meeting of the GMS Subregional Transport Forum. I wish to thank in particular His Excellency, Minister Saksayam Chidchob of the Ministry of Transport for sharing with us his precious time as well as his valuable ideas. My special thanks also go to Mr. Chirute Visalachitra, Deputy Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Transport for chairing our Forum, as well as other officials and staff of the Ministry for their excellent work in organizing this Forum.

I am very happy and honored to co-chair this important meeting. This is now my second time to participate in the Forum's annual meeting, and based on my experience the first time, I am quite sure that this meeting will also be fruitful and will further strengthen our cooperation.

The theme of STF-23 is "*Expanding GMS Transport Cooperation to Vital Multi-sector Concerns*". This is in line with the strategic thrusts of the new GMS Transport Sector Strategy, or TSS 2030, which was recently endorsed by all the GMS countries and welcomed by the GMS Leaders in their 6th Summit in March 2018. The Strategy recognizes that the achievement of the sector's long term vision of a "seamless, efficient, reliable, and sustainable GMS transport system" will need not only developing, completing, and improving the infrastructure base, but also giving sufficient attention to other multi-sector requirements.

In this Forum, therefore, apart from reviewing the progress of the mostly infrastructure-focused projects in the regional connectivity-related pipelines of the GMS member countries, under the GMS Regional Investment Framework 2022, we will also look into what is happening in some of the multi-sector activities and areas related to transport.

One of the key cross-cutting themes in the TSS 2030 is the participation of the private sector in GMS transport development. The private sector has important roles to play in this regard: first, in financing and constructing transport infrastructure; second, as provider of transport services; and third as the main users of transport infrastructure and services in carrying on their business activities. In our meeting today, we will be briefed on the activities of the GMS Freight Transport Association, or FRETA, who are key users of transport infrastructure as well as providers of important transport services. The GMS-FRETA was established in 2013 to support the GMS countries' efforts to eliminate the impediments and constraints to the smooth movement of transport and trade across borders in the region. It is made up of private sector transport operators, who have a significant interest in promoting efficient cross-border transport flows and have therefore been actively involved in the development and implementation of transport and trade facilitation measures in the region. In addition, they have been undertaking meaningful initiatives to improve the region's transport industry, in such areas as capacity building, harmonization and mutual recognition of industry standards, and other important related activities that will all contribute toward the successful implementation of TSS 2030.

Another important strategic thrust of TSS 2030 is facilitating cross border transport, which I have already mentioned. The GMS countries' main and pioneering instrument for this purpose is the GMS Cross-Border Transport Facilitation Agreement, or CBTA. Some progress has been made under the CBTA, with its partial implementation, for instance through various bilateral and trilateral memoranda of understanding between GMS countries involving exchanges of traffic rights. But due to technical, legal, institutional, physical capacity, and coordination issues, overall CBTA implementation has fallen short of expectations. Recently, the GMS countries launched an effort toward further accelerating implementation, the "Early Harvest" program, under which Road Transport Permits and Temporary Admission Documents are issued to trucks and

buses to allow them to cross borders unimpeded. In today's meeting, we will be briefed on the progress of this program, as well as on further activities moving forward.

The TSS 2030 also focuses on multi-modalism and inter-modal links, with particular emphasis on railway development and connectivity as an efficient, safe and environmentally sustainable transport mode. The key regional institution that has been established toward this goal is the Greater Mekong Railway Association, or GMRA. Since its establishment in 2013, the GMRA has done much work toward the ultimate goal of a wide-reaching, inter-connected and efficient GMS railway network. The Forum will also be briefed on the latest developments and plans in these efforts.

Another strategic thrust in TSS 2030 is enhancing road safety. We have dealt with this topic in our last STF, where the broad findings of recent studies on the status of road safety in certain GMS countries were discussed. The country delegations expressed great interest in the topic and in the pipeline of future efforts in this field. We will again look into this important subject, with a focus on further efforts and possible next steps, thus focusing on post crash activities.

Also in the discussions in STF-22 last year on the state of development of the GMS economic corridors, a few lessons from the experience of certain countries (particularly, the PRC) in expressway and highway development were mentioned. Following this discussion, the other countries expressed interest in learning more from the experience of the GMS countries that have a relatively more extensive experience and knowhow in this field. For this STF, we have thus requested certain countries, and they have agreed, to share their experiences and lessons learned in highway/expressway development, which we believe will benefit the other countries.

Toward the end of our meeting today, we will be briefed on a major GMS-wide undertaking that will impact on all sectors of cooperation in the GMS Program, including the transport sector. A new long term GMS Strategic Framework covering the period up to 2030 is now under preparation. This has been necessitated by a recognition that rapid changes and critical new trends are taking place in the regional and global

context. These present challenges as well as opportunities for the GMS cooperation program, requiring a refocusing and recalibration of our strategic directions and actions to ensure the continued strength and relevance of the Program.

The draft new Strategic Framework is being prepared in consultation with various government agencies, the private sector, and other stakeholders in the GMS countries. Some of you may have been involved in the in-country consultations that have taken place already. We hope that through this session, any further comments and suggestions from our sector could still be considered in the final draft of the Framework, which will be presented to and discussed at the upcoming 23rd GMS Ministerial Conference in October, and the GMS Ministers are expected to endorse it for the GMS Leaders' approval and adoption in their 7th Summit next year.

The transport sector will continue to play a critical role in this new Strategic Framework, as it also continues to stand on the strategic pillars of GMS cooperation – the 3Cs, namely, Connectivity, Competitiveness, and Community. Transport will still be the backbone of GMS Connectivity. The strategic thrusts in the sector remain consistent with TSS 2030, but involve a further deepening of initiatives toward realizing the new Framework's focus on environmental sustainability, integration, and inclusivity.

Substantial efforts will also be given to software development, policy and regulatory dialogue, with an enhanced role for the private sector and for modern technologies.

With these new thrusts and priorities in the new GM Strategic Framework, we in the transport sector have our job cut out for us. We will have to further strengthen our cooperation. This is just an advance notice on the need to further step up our efforts in the STF toward the attainment of the vision of a “seamless, efficient, reliable and sustainable GMS transport system”.

In the continuation of STF-23 tomorrow, we will have the opportunity to hear from some of our colleagues their respective countries' experience in an important area we are all interested in – highway and expressway development. I am sure we will all benefit from the knowledge they gained and the lessons they learned in the process, which they will so generously share with us.

Last but not the least, we will hear from our development partners on updates on their activities in the region's transport sector and hopefully also we will have the chance to explore further potential collaborations with them.

We therefore have a full plate before us. But I am sure we will be able to handle this substantive agenda quite well.

I therefore look forward to an interesting and productive STF-23. Thank you.