



**FOURTH GMS TOURISM MINISTERS' MEETING
Vientiane, Lao PDR, 20 January 2013**

JOINT MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

Preamble

1. We, the Tourism Ministers of the Kingdom of Cambodia, the People's Republic of China, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, the Kingdom of Thailand, and the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam, met in Vientiane, Lao PDR, on 20 January 2013. We were joined in our discussions by the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO), representatives from the diplomatic corps, our development partners, and other international organizations.

2. We are pleased to note that developing and promoting tourism in the Mekong subregion is prioritized in the GMS Strategic Framework 2012–2022 and a pipeline of projects to catalyze tourism development is being prepared under the GMS Regional Investment Framework, which is expected to be completed later this year. We are aware of the substantial opportunity that tourism presents for boosting socioeconomic development, accelerating regional integration, and promoting friendship and cross-cultural understanding. Now that the physical infrastructure linking GMS member countries is nearly completed, tourism has become an indispensable instrument to help us achieve our collective vision of a more integrated, prosperous and equitable subregion.

Progress in GMS Tourism Cooperation

3. The 20th anniversary of the GMS Program in 2012 marked a major milestone for subregional tourism cooperation. We are pleased that the GMS Tourism Working Group (TWG) is currently meeting twice annually and acknowledge the role that MTCO is playing as Secretariat to the TWG and coordinator of the Explore Mekong single destination marketing campaign. We recognize that the collective effort of the TWG and other GMS Tourism stakeholders has helped to significantly improve the sustainability and competitiveness of tourism in the subregion.

4. We renew our support for the primary goal of the refocused GMS Tourism Sector Strategy 2011–2015, which is “to develop and promote the subregion as a single destination, offering a diversity of good quality and high-yielding subregional products that help to distribute the benefits of tourism more widely; add to the tourism development efforts of each GMS country; and contribute to poverty reduction, gender equality and empowerment of women; and sustainable development, while minimizing any adverse impacts.”

5. We are pleased with the continuing positive outlook for tourism in the GMS. International tourist arrivals in the GMS have risen from about 10 million in 1995 to approximately 40 million in 2012, with corresponding increases 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 vulnerable groups – particularly women and ethnic communities – and contributes substantially to poverty reduction and the attainment of the UN Millennium Development Goals.

6. We note that ongoing developments in Myanmar have helped to draw positive international attention to the subregion and given a boost to our efforts to promote multicountry tour programs. We applaud Myanmar's recent initiative to prepare a tourism master plan that is aligned with the GMS tourism sector strategy.

7. Continual easing of tourist visa requirements coupled with the opening of more and more intra-regional border crossings has greatly facilitated the movement of tourists between the GMS countries, boosted trade in goods and services, and added value to physical improvements in transportation networks. Adoption of cross border transport agreements and exchange of traffic rights, together with increased frequency and coverage of air services has made intra-GMS travel more convenient and affordable than ever.

8. We greatly appreciate the Asian Development Bank's role as the lead development partner, neutral advisor, and overall coordinator and secretariat to the GMS Program. We are also grateful for the support of other development partners such as GIZ, Luxembourg Development, NZAid, PATA, SNV, USAid, UNESCAP, UNESCO, UNWTO, and many others, to help us implement subregional projects and programs to improve tourism related infrastructure, facilitate public-private partnerships, strengthen human resources in the tourism sector, and develop pro-poor tourism products and services. Concurrent with formulation of the GMS Regional Investment Framework, we will coordinate closely with other ministries in our respective countries to ensure that potential synergies between tourism and related sectors are maximized.

9. We are pleased that the Mekong Tourism Forum (MTF) has been successfully organized three times since 2010. The event is once again a key feature in the expanding lineup of subregional tourism events. We also congratulate GMS members for hosting conferences and events on the sidelines of TWG meetings, such as the recent *Conference on Tourism's Role in Poverty Alleviation* in Ninh Binh, Viet Nam, as well as the *Travel Leaders' Symposium on Sustainable Tourism*, held in Bagan, Myanmar during November 2011. We welcome the opportunity to continue promoting our distinct cultural industries during the MTF and related gatherings.

10. Subregional tourism cooperation in the GMS has indeed progressed to a level that we can be proud of. Going forward, we will continue to support the Bangkok-based MTCO and trust that ADB and other development partners will consider providing continued support for the implementation of the refocused subregional tourism sector strategy. We appreciate the generosity of Thailand's Ministry of Tourism and Sports to host the MTCO and reaffirm our current commitments to finance MTCO's core operational expenses.

Emerging Issues, Challenges and Future Directions

11. While substantial achievements have been made, there remains much more to be done to address many new challenges. We need to face up to increasing competition from other regional destinations due to globalization, issues of standards and pricing, imbalance in the distribution of benefits of tourism between and within the GMS countries, escalating energy costs, the threat of trans-boundary diseases, and impacts of climate change.

12. To help tackle these challenges we call on the TWG to further expand mutually beneficial partnerships with bilateral and multilateral agencies, the private sector, and civil society. We encourage the TWG and MTCO to create a centralized tourism knowledge management platform for the GMS and further advance subregional marketing efforts. This includes representing the GMS at travel and tourism events in the Asia region and beyond, improving visibility of the “Mekong” brand on the global stage; upgrading the www.ExploreMekong.org and MTCO’s institutional websites; and creating partnerships with the private sector, media, and academic community. Innovative approaches and active participation of the private sector are needed to help scale-up MTCO operations, as we seek to transform it into a self-sustaining institution.

13. Going forward, we look forward to further strengthening our cooperation with all relevant entities to ensure that the GMS remains on track to transform itself into a single tourism destination. We will take advantage of improved and expanded subregional infrastructure, connectivity, and human capital to continue promoting tourism growth that is sustainable and socially responsible.

16. We express our sincere appreciation to the Lao People’s Democratic Republic for hosting this Fourth Meeting of the GMS Tourism Ministers and for ensuring our pleasant stay in Vientiane. We also thank the MTCO and Lao PDR’s Ministry Information, Culture and Tourism of the efficient organization of our meeting.

Endorsed in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 20 January, 2013.