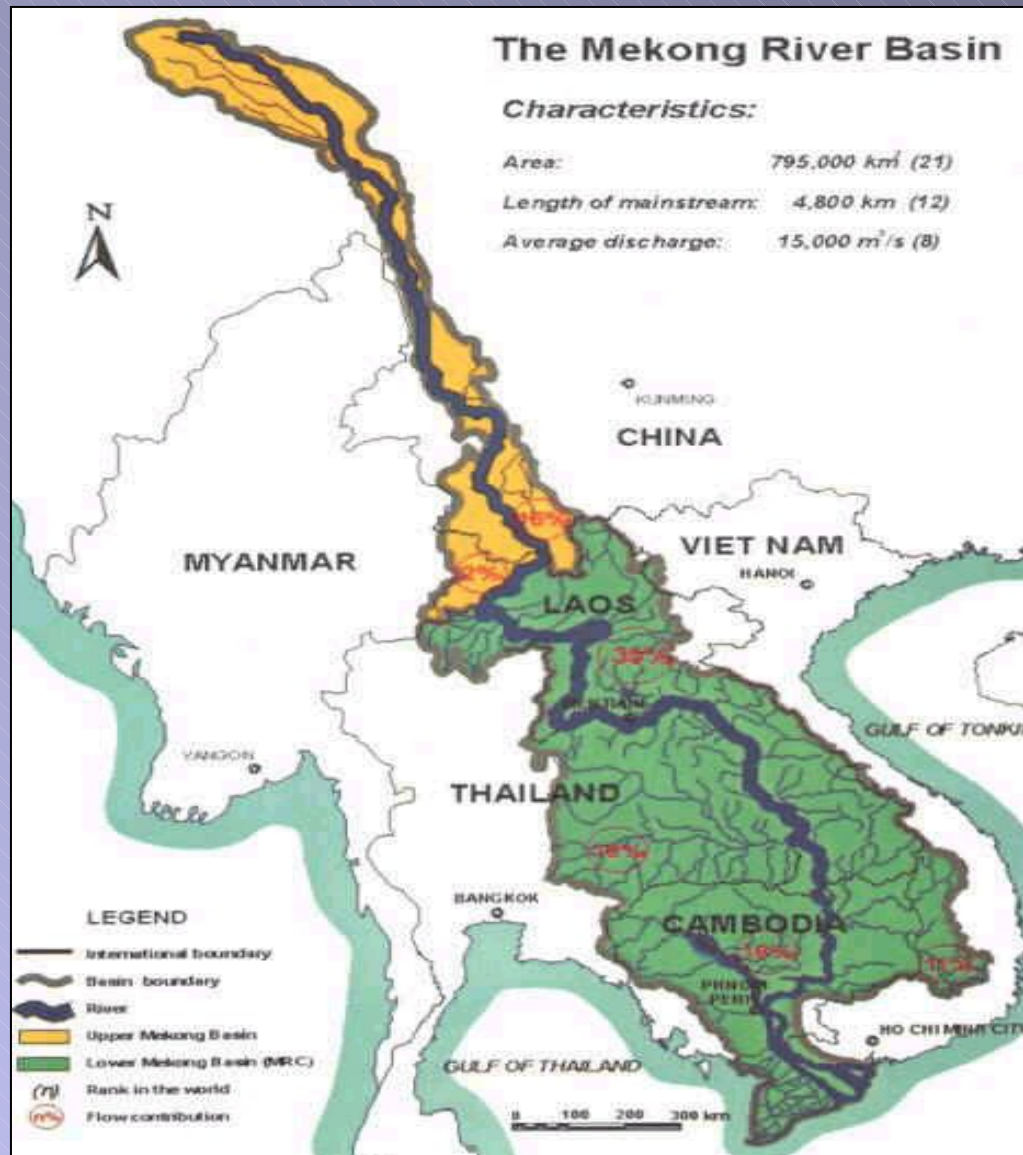


# **The Mekong River Basin: Lessons from Integrated Development Efforts and Trends**

**Prachoom Chomchai**  
**Emeritus Professor of**  
**Economics**  
*Chulalongkorn University*  
**Coordinator of MDRN**

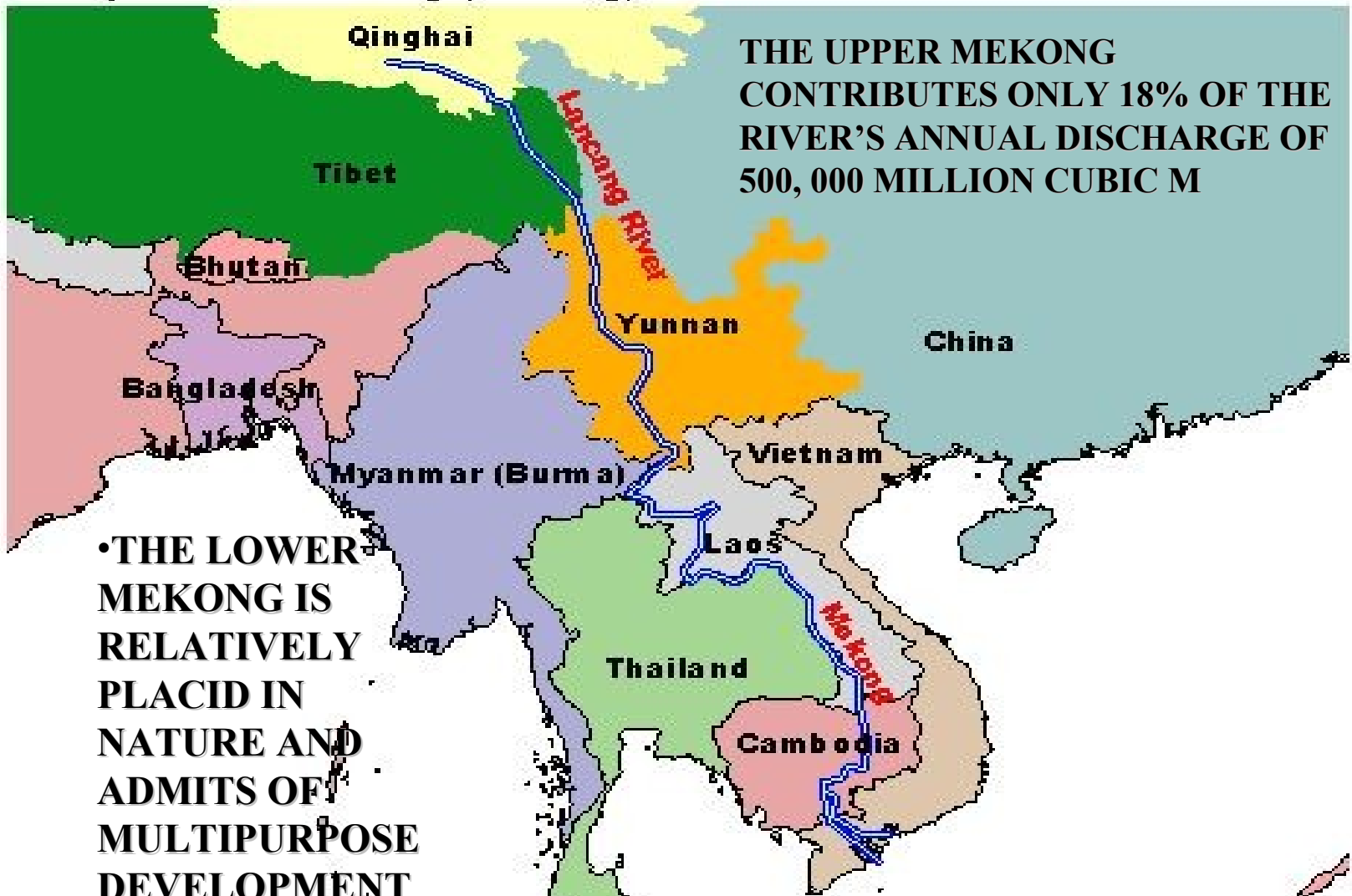
# Overview of the Mekong River Basin



# **SALIENT FEATURES OF THE MEKONG AND ITS BASIN**

- **THE INFAMOUS GOLDEN TRIANGLE SPLITS THE MEKONG INTO TWO EQUAL PARTS, EACH BEING ABOUT 2000 KM IN LENGTH**
- **THE UPPER MEKONG HAS A SHARP GRADIENT: FROM 5000 M ABOVE MSL IN TIBET IT DESCENDS TO 500 M ABOVE MSL AT THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE**
- **THE UPPER MEKONG IS KNOWN AS *THE LANCANG* BECAUSE OF ITS TEMPESTUOUS NATURE AND IS SUSCEPTIBLE SOLELY OF HYDROPOWER EXPLOITATION, THOUGH ITS TRIBUTARIES HAVE BEEN USED FOR IRRIGATION FOR SOME TIME**

**Map 1 The Lancang (Mekong) River in China and Southeast Asia**



**THE UPPER MEKONG  
CONTRIBUTES ONLY 18% OF THE  
RIVER'S ANNUAL DISCHARGE OF  
500, 000 MILLION CUBIC M**

**•THE LOWER  
MEKONG IS  
RELATIVELY  
PLACID IN  
NATURE AND  
ADMITS OF  
MULTIPURPOSE  
DEVELOPMENT**

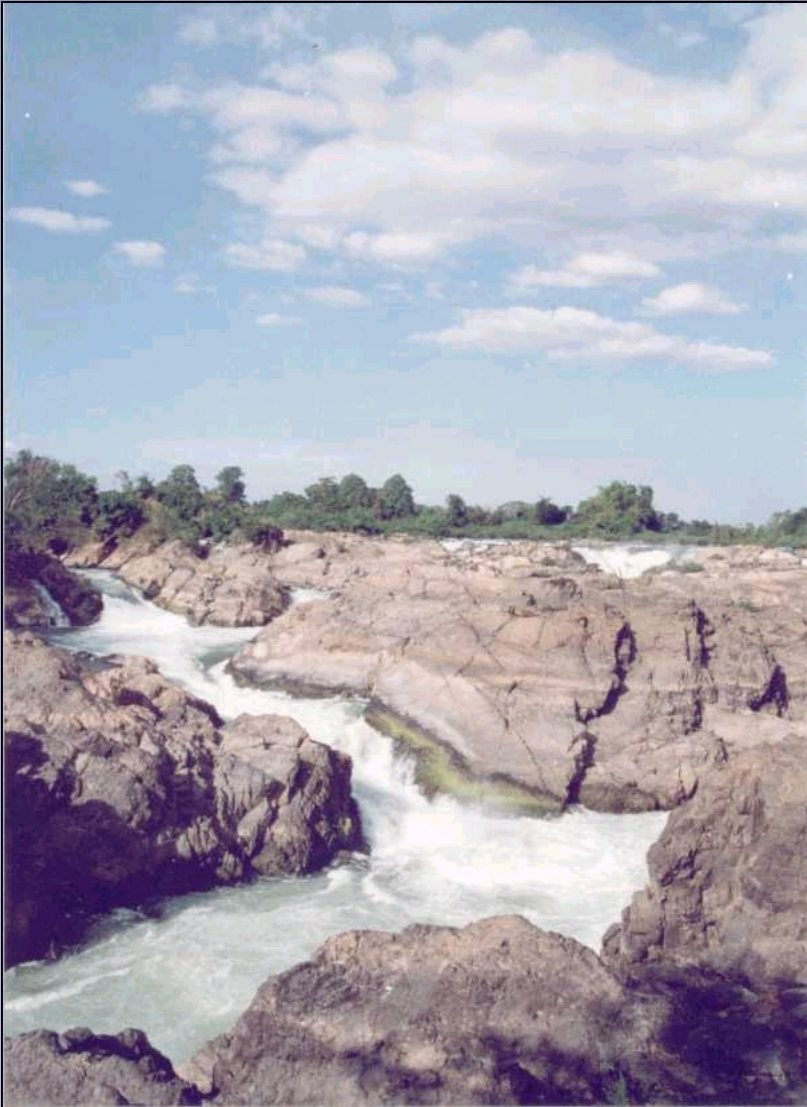


# Life in the Mekong Delta



- **LACK AND EXCESS OF MOISTURE EPITOMIZE THE MEKONG' S PROBLEM AND DEVELOPMENT POTENTIAL**
- **AT A PARTICULAR POINT IN CAMBODIA FLOOD FLOW COULD BE 50, 000 AND LOW FLOW 2,000 M<sup>3</sup>/ SEC**
- **ONLY 24% OF THE BASIN AREA OF ALMOST 800,000 SQ. KM. LIES IN THE UPPER BASIN**
- **NAVIGATION ALONG THE MEKONG IS CONSTRAINED BY NATURAL OBSTACLES**
- **THE MEKONG IS RICH IN FISHERIES**

# Si Phan Don: The Mekong's Great Divide





**Si Phan Don, or Four Thousand Islands: an area of falls and rapids near the border of Laos and Cambodia**



# Mekong Giant Catfish return to the Mun River



**Mekong Giant Catfish, the world's largest scaleless freshwater fish, was caught by Pak Mun villagers on January 4, 2002 at Khoom Bok fishing area upstream of the Pak Mun dam**

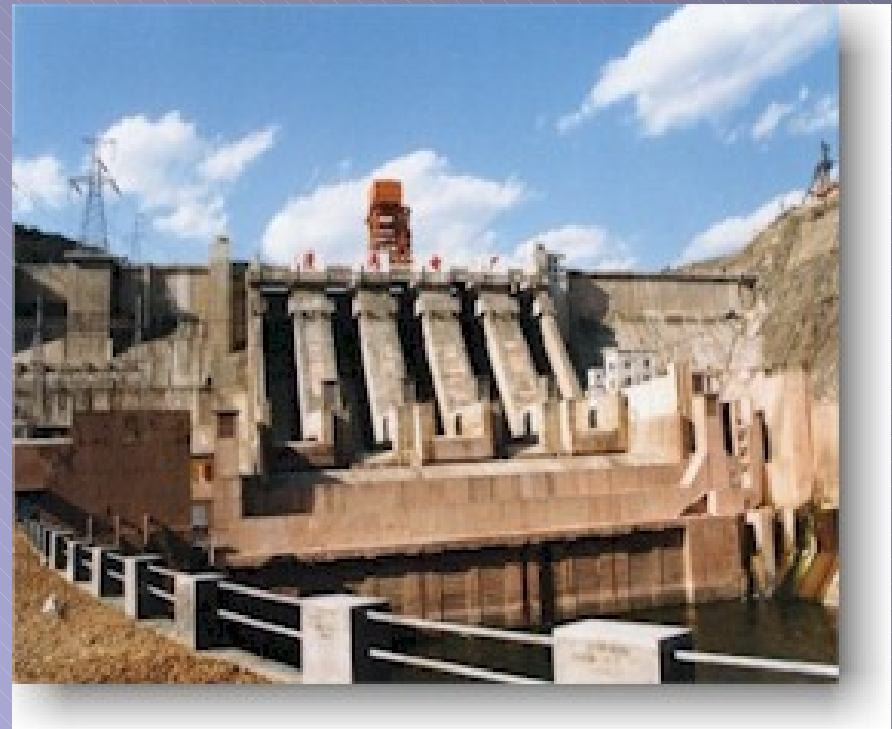
*Southeast Asia Rivers Network-Thailand Chapter* January 10/2002

# UPPER/ LOWER BASINS DIVIDE



- APART FROM THE EXPLOITATION OF THE LANCANG'S TRIBUTARIES FOR IRRIGATION, THE UPPER BASIN HAS FORGED AHEAD WITH MAINSTREAM DEVELOPMENT, 1,500 MW *MAN WAN* BEING THE FIRST IN THE CHINESE CASCADE TO COME ON STREAM WITH APPRECIABLE ADVERSE IMPACT ON LOWER RIPARIANS

- PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT MAY BE SAID TO CHARACTERIZE MEKONG BASIN EXPLOITATION



# **LOWER BASIN DEVELOPMENT**

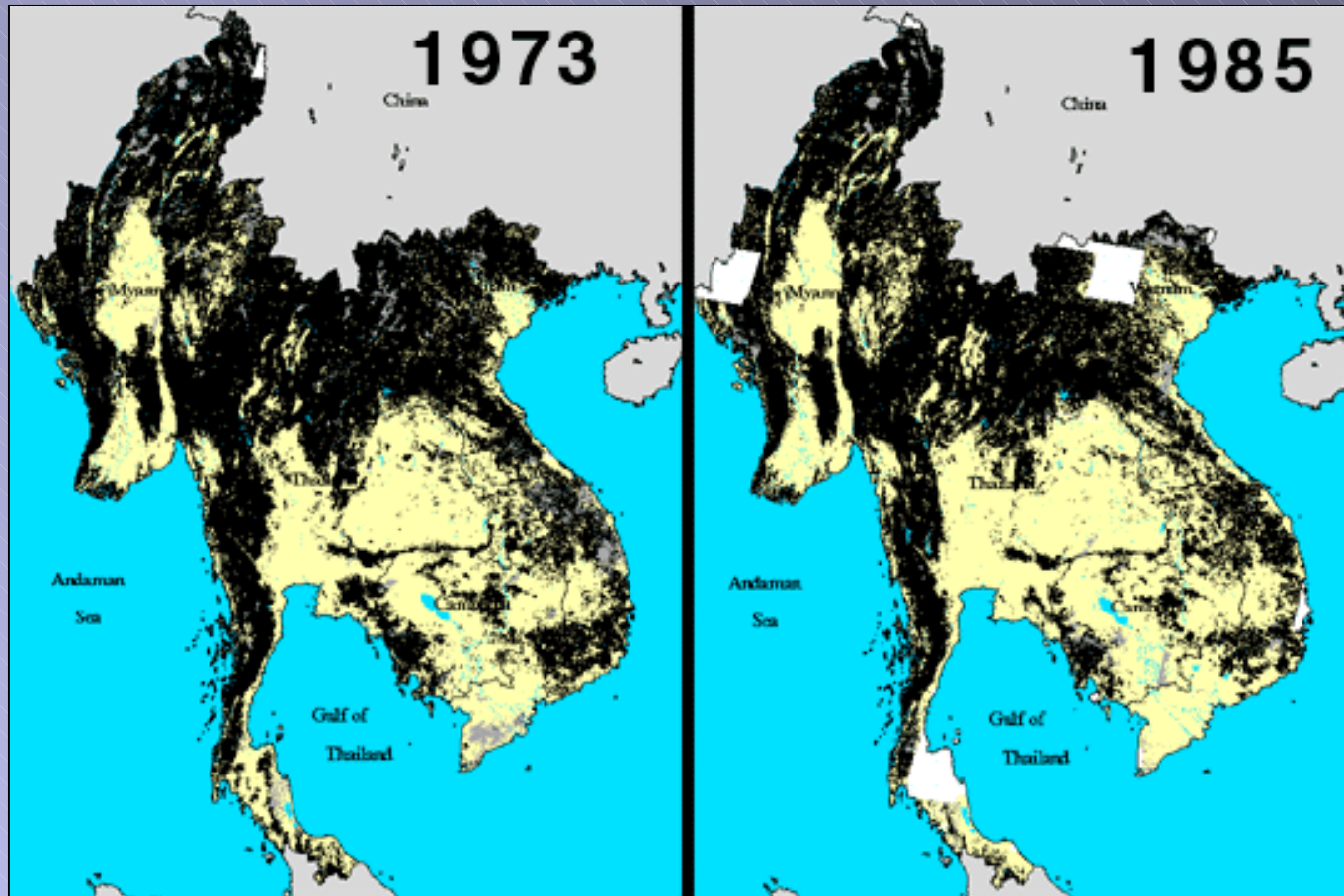
- **THE LOWER RIPARIANS BROUGHT INTO BEING THE MEKONG COMMITTEE IN 1957, IT BEING SUCCEEDED BY THE COMMISSION IN 1995 WITHOUT INVOLVING STATES IN THE UPPER BASIN**
- **INTEGRATION IN SUCH A CONTEXT ENTAILS LOWER RIPARIAN STATES' ACCOMMODATING THEMSELVES TO UPSTREAM REGULATION—NOT AN OPTIMAL SOLUTION FOR ALL CONCERNED**
- **HOWEVER, SHARED INTEREST IN NAVIGATION AND DEVELOPMENT AND MOVEMENTS OF GOODS AND PEOPLE HAVE HELPED BRING THE TWO BASINS CLOSER TOGETHER**

- **THE MEKONG COMMITTEE HELPED RAISED FUNDS FOR NATIONAL PROJECTS AND PSEUDO-REGIONAL PROJECTS ESPECIALLY FOR POWER EXCHANGE**
- **HOWEVER, AGAINST ELITIST, EXPORT-AND GROWTH- DOMINATED AND PATERNALISTIC BACKGROUND CIVIL SOCIETY HAS NOT TAKEN PART EVEN IN THE CONCEPTUAL STAGE OF THESE PROJECTS**

- **THE DEVELOPMENT PATTERN IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE OPEN ACCESS SYSTEM AND POOR NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT HAVE IMPOSED LIMITS ON GROWTH IN THE FORM PARTICULARLY OF LANDLESSNESS IN CO-BASIN STATES LIKE THAILAND AS WELL AS ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION AND GENERATED OPPOSITION TO WATER RESOURCES PROJECTS**
- **BY CONTRAST, INDIGENOUS SYSTEM OF NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IS ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY**



# Deforestation



**The black areas represent forest cover, while lighter ones deforestation impact**



**Erosion caused by  
deforestation sends  
a stain of sediment i  
nto the sea off the M  
ekong Delta in Vietn  
am**

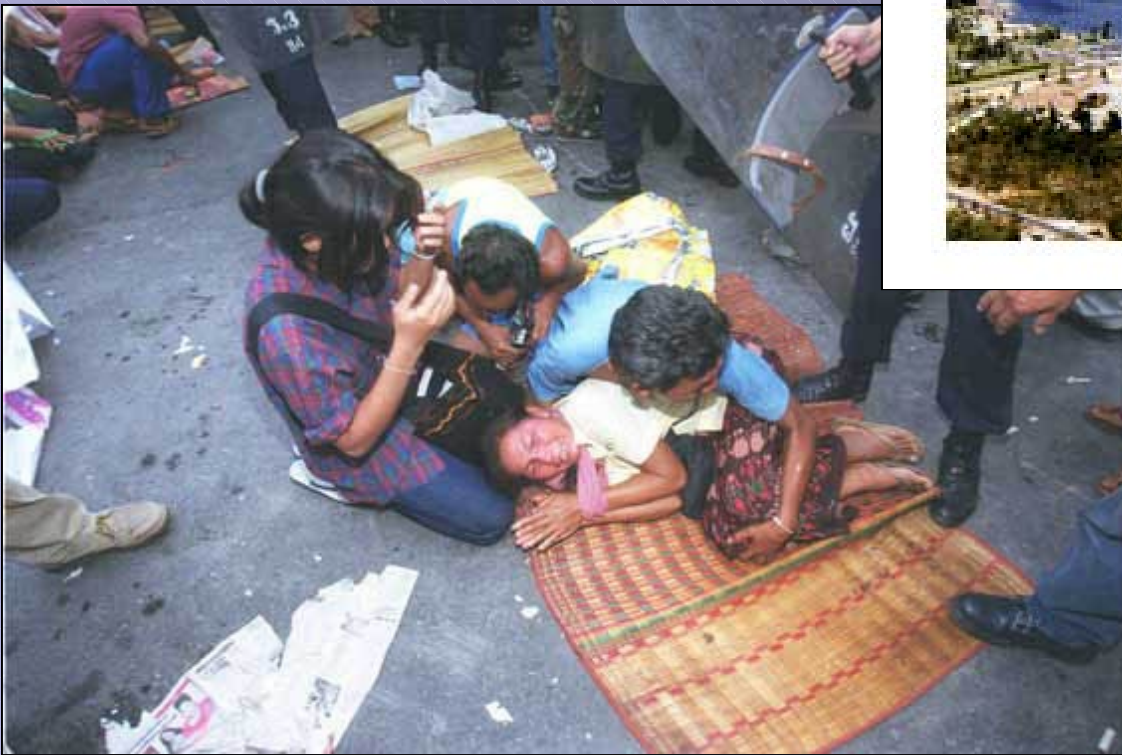
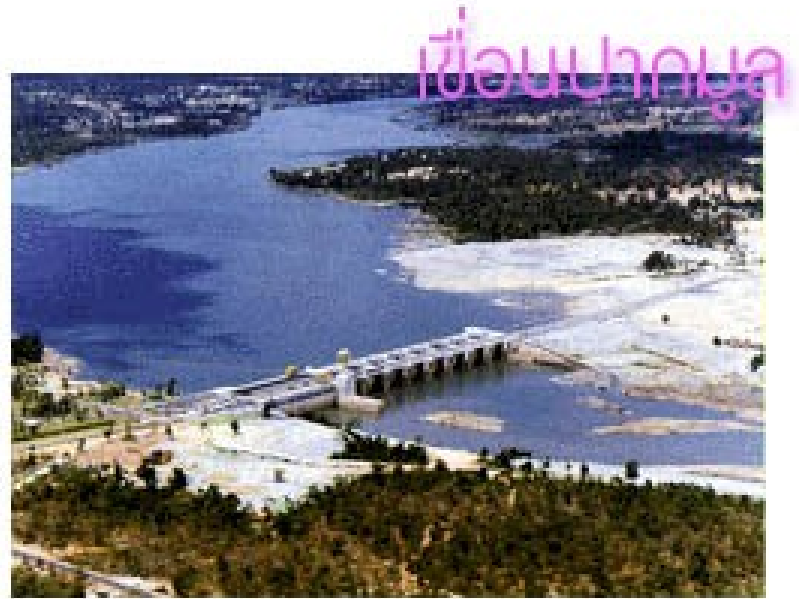
**(Photo courtesy National  
Aeronautic and Space Administ  
ration) -- ENS**





**Protest at Rasi Salai Dam**





**Pak Mun Protest July 2000**



**Flood and protest at Rasi Salai Dam May 2000**

# **LESSONS FROM THE MEKONG EXERCISE**

- **COMPLETE INTEGRATION IS AN IDEAL TO BE AIMED AT IN THE LONG RUN**
- **IN THE SHORT RUN DELICATE BALANCING OF INTERESTS COULD PAVE THE WAY FOR ATTAINMENT OF THE IDEAL OF INTEGRATION**
- **WITHIN THE LOWER MEKONG BASIN THERE HAS BEEN LAID THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT IN THE FORM OF PUBLIC-GOOD COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS OF BASINWIDE DATA FOR CONTINUING MONITORING OF CHANGES AND ELABORATION OF RULES FOR THE JOINT UTILIZATION OF MEKONG WATERS**

- **WITH LONG YEARS OF SUSTAINED COOPERATION THERE HAS EVOLVED THE *'MEKONG SPIRIT'*, WHICH IS NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH THE NO LESS FAMOUS AND INTOXICATING NAMESAKE FOUND IN BOTTLES**



- **AFTER MORE THAN 3 DECADES OF EXPLORATION THE MEKONG COMMITTEE FAILED TO COME UP WITH A MODERN PATTERN OF DEVELOPMENT CONSISTENT WITH CONSERVATION**
- **THE FUTURE ROLE OF THE MEKONG RIVER COMMISSION ALSO CONSISTS IN EVOLVING ENVIRONMENT-FRIENDLY DEVELOPMENT AND ENFORCING RULES AND STANDARDS**