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Mekong countries promote regional drug strategy at UN General Assembly

New York (USA), Tuesday 19 April 2016 – Mekong countries and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have held a high level briefing on the margins of the UN General Assembly to update the international community on the current drug situation in the region, and the relevance of the Mekong MOU on Drug Control – a framework that incorporates law enforcement, criminal justice, alternative development, and health responses. The six countries – Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam – stated that more needs to be done given the scale of illicit drug production, trafficking and use they are confronted with.

The region – incorporating the well-known Golden Triangle – has long been known for opium and heroin, and significant levels of cultivation and production still occur in Myanmar and Lao PDR. However, it has also become one of the largest synthetic drug markets in the world, where methamphetamine in pill and crystal forms are common place. The diversion and trafficking of precursor chemicals, and the emergence of new synthetic drugs are also a challenge.

The Mekong MOU has become recognized as a relatively effective framework for achieving some degree of success in combating the transnational threat of illicit drugs. Its direction going forward was subsequently discussed at a high level private meeting between UNODC Executive Director, Mr. Yury Fedotov, and Le Quy Vuong, Deputy Minister of Public Security, Viet Nam; Guo Shengkun, Minister of Public Security, China; Myint Htwe, Minister of Health, Myanmar; Paiboon Koomchaya, Minister of Justice, Thailand; Kou Chansina, Chairman of Lao National Commission for Drug Control; and Ry Tuy, Permanent Representative of Cambodia to the United Nations.

"The Mekong MOU's comprehensive vision for drug control cooperation provides an important practical contribution to the debate on the need for a balanced approach", said Mr. Fedotov. "Inputs by the six MOU countries define the shared future direction to address the regional drug challenge, ultimately benefitting the international community as well."

The varied types and sheer volume of illicit drugs being trafficked highlights in the Mekong the scale of the problem being faced. "The Mekong is a distinctive drug market, with multifaceted challenges that require multifaceted solutions", said Mr. Jeremy Douglas, UNODC's Regional Representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. "It is encouraging to engage policy makers as they reflect on how well past plans have worked, considering data and formulating responses."

Importantly, the Mekong MOU promotes a balanced approach to addressing drug threats – utilizing a programmatic strategy that encompasses several thematic areas: law enforcement cooperation; legal and judicial cooperation; sustainable alternative development; and drugs, health and HIV.

The mechanism has also started a review process to ensure MOU partners and UNODC identify challenges as they arise. This allows the countries to adapt and respond to the changing dynamics of the regional drug market, and is an integral element of the Mekong MOU going forward.

"The evolution of the Mekong MOU into an effective multilateral framework for cooperation and collaboration is underpinned by an understanding of the need for solutions with nuanced geographical considerations," said Mr. Douglas. "This includes recognition that effective solutions need to go beyond

transnational law enforcement initiatives and incorporate judicial, development and health considerations.”

“We are working to improve responses”, said Mr. Tun Nay Soe, head of drug analysis and programming at UNODC’s Regional Office for Southeast Asia and the Pacific. “But importantly, these improvements have consistently and increasingly incorporated community and individual health considerations, and stem from the viewpoint that enforcement alone has not yielded the desired results.”

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<http://www.unodc.org/southeastasiaandpacific/en/what-we-do/toc/mou.html>