



Japanese experts and volunteers are helping health services in Myanmar (far left), Viet Nam (left) and Laos (above).

(from page 6) impediment where bureaucratic and administrative procedures in many developing countries can take hours or even days and weeks.

A gleaming new bridge, no matter how prestigious, will be of little economic use if such hurdles persist and though it might be considered the least glamorous of programs, JICA has been encouraging the streamlining of frontier procedures and the training of skilled officials together with infrastructure development.

Airports and ports have received priority including Bangkok's gleaming Suvarnabhumi International Airport, gateway to millions of visitors each year, airports at Yangon, Vientiane and Ho Chi Minh City and a string of ports ringing the entire region at Hai Phong and Cai Lan in Viet Nam, Sihanoukville Port in Cambodia, Map Ta Phut and Laem Chabang in Thailand and Yangon in Myanmar.

Human Security Concept

IF PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE is the bedrock of economic progress, JICA has been engaged in a myriad of other projects to strengthen cultural, educational, health, economic and judicial systems in line with one of its basic principles of ensuring 'human security' for millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

The human security concept is that local communities should both participate directly in and receive direct benefit from field projects to allow them to build better lives.

Though regional cooperation and shared infrastructure are key, the five Mekong countries are in different stages of political and economic development and thus have individual priorities. Thailand has become a so-called 'medium developed' country with a per capita GDP of some US\$3,841, while the other four Mekong nations stand at less than US\$1,000.

After years of desperate warfare, Cambodia needed not only virtually its entire infrastructure rebuilt, but also assistance on reconstructing its judiciary system, which JICA participated in.

Though work has been in progress since the mid-1990s to upgrade the country's water supplies, still less than 30% of the population has access to clean and safe water. A new US\$30 million project is planned to provide an additional 1.7 million people direct access by 2015 (see page 12).

Too Little, Too Much Water

WATER, too much or too little of it, is also a problem in neighboring Myanmar, one of the world's poorest countries, particularly in the dry zone around Bagan. Working closely with government partners and non-governmental organizations, JICA has helped sink or rehabilitate dozens of new wells in rural villages in addition to reforesting thousands of acres of bare landscape to bring a better standard of living to the one-third of Myanmar's 56 million people who live in the area.

But when Cyclone Nargis struck ferociously in May 2008, killing at least 130,000 people and submerging huge areas of the country, JICA undertook a series of projects, rushing emergency supplies to the country, helping Yangon clean up its port area of sunken vessels and continuing the replanting of sections of the coast with mangrove trees which help alleviate natural disasters and coastal erosion.

In northern Myanmar Japanese experts are involved in programs to replace opium harvests with other, more acceptable, crops.

To help project the region's culture, Japanese experts have helped in restoration work at Ankor and also in such places as the tiny Vietnamese port of Hoi An. Urban experts spent three years developing a master plan for the future development of Hanoi, just in time for its forthcoming 1,000th anniversary (see page 14).

Tourism can play a vital role in revitalizing entire regions. But whereas Thailand recently completed one of the most dazzling new airports anywhere, which will act as a gateway for the entire region, Viet Nam's old imperial capital of Hué, which was heavily damaged during the Viet Nam war, has been devel-

oping a much more modest, grass-roots program to improve hotel and tourist management and restore its monuments.

In the health field, Japanese financial and expert assistance has helped in the construction of major city hospitals, rural clinics, the training of doctors and nurses and helping lepers and deaf children in Myanmar or disabled people in Viet Nam.

"The rich history of the Mekong offers encourage-

ment for the future," says Fumio Kikuchi, director general of JICA's Southeast Asia division and a former resident representative in Viet Nam. "There have been upheavals in the last few decades, but it has become clear that despite the current world economic turmoil, with the right encouragement and backing, the Mekong countries have both the natural resources and skilled populations capable of lifting the region onto a new economic and social level."

where have all the forests, water gone?

WHEN CYCLONE NARGIS SLAMMED INTO MYANMAR in 2008, one of the minor casualties of the disaster was the destruction of a mangrove forest regeneration project which JICA had launched a year earlier.

Ironically, the catastrophe, in which at least 130,000 persons were killed and huge swathes of the coastal delta were inundated, illustrated in the most dramatic fashion the urgency of that and similar programs.

Mangrove forests throughout the world

RICH IN NATURAL RESOURCES

Southeast Asia is rich in both resources, but burgeoning populations and industrial and farming overexploitation are causing major problems in many areas.

JICA projects in Myanmar, Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia emphasize several targets: areas must be reforested wherever possible and existing cover must be developed in a sustainable manner. Local people must be expertly trained to eventually run

good news for the approximately one-third of Myanmar's 59 million population who live in the region.

JICA experts and officials from the government Dry Zone Greening Department recently spent four years recovering some 4,000 acres of bare landscape with 760,000 trees ranging from acacias to eucalyptus to help combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought.

THAT SINKING FEELING

Equally, the agency had helped provide training and advanced technology and techniques to sink dozens of new wells and rehabilitate old ones throughout the region.

In Wetlu village a new well had been sunk to a depth of nearly 300 meters and water was pumping to the surface for some 1,600 villagers. It will help transform their lives, offering them for the first time clean and safe water and saving them many hours per day in transporting water from fataway water points. "Water has always been scarce here," one villager said, as he hastily filled his personal water cart. "Before, we bathed maybe twice a week, to save water. Now we can bathe four times a day if we want to."

The lives of many people in Cambodia are also being slowly transformed. The country's entire water system was virtually destroyed during nearly three decades of conflict and Japan and other international donors have been involved in a series of long-term projects to restore the infrastructure in the capital, Phnom Penh, and regional areas such as Siem Reap, site of the famed Ankor temple complex.

New plans will provide a US\$35 million loan to help to construct a water treatment plant, water mains and sewers to provide safe water to hundreds of thousands of people living on the outskirts of the capital.



Replanting mangrove forests in Myanmar to reduce natural disaster.



Repairing Cambodia's water system.

the projects. The latest technology such as satellite im-

aging is being employed to develop forest baselines, the potential use of land and ecological potential.

Wherever possible, the Mekong countries are encouraged to cooperate and integrate programs on a regional basis and coordinate their information. Laos, for instance, is establishing a forest resource information center through Japanese grant aid which should provide valuable information on such subjects as capacity development and forest baselines.

Forestry and water often go hand in hand. Near the dramatic ruins of Bagan and only a few miles from the Irrawaddy River, Myanmar's central dry zone has become increasingly hot and denuded of most cover—not

have been severely depleted and it is only in recent years that the adverse effects have been fully realized — increasingly severe coastal erosion, increased exposure to natural disasters such as Nargis and depletion of natural habitat and fishery stocks.

Experts now believe that thriving mangrove forests would, among other things, reduce the impact of severe natural disasters.

The project, which runs from 2007 through 2013 at a cost of US\$7.4 million, has been restarted and is one of many JICA programs in the Mekong region which concentrates on forestry, climate change and water.