

Older forms of transport in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar.

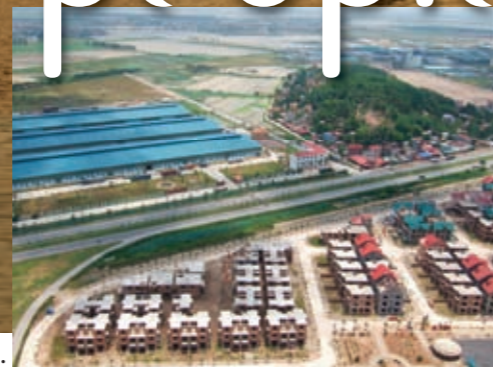


New immigration procedures speed passengers.

roads, bridges, ports and people

The International Bridge links Thailand and Laos.

New roads spur industrial development in Viet Nam.



New port facilities in Viet Nam



Bangkok's new airport

DURING THE INDOCHINA WAR, parts of Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia suffered the most severe aerial bombing in history.

The objective was to destroy roads, bridges and, further afield, ports, to disrupt the flow of goods and personnel onto the battlefield.

Today, in a dramatic reversal, the construction of new regional highways, bridges and other infrastructure has been key to the economic regeneration and future growth of the whole Mekong area.

The 1,450 kilometer East-West economic corridor linking the port of Mawlamyaing in Myanmar with Danang in Viet Nam via Thailand and Laos is a vivid example of progress at work.

When the 1,600-meter-long Second Mekong International Bridge over the Mekong River was opened in late 2006—JICA conducted a detailed survey design for the bridge and provided a yen-loan for its construction—it signaled not only the virtual completion of the road network itself but

also the transformation of the entire region.

Exports between the Thai capital of Bangkok and the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi used to take two weeks by sea. The new land route has slashed that time to three days.

The bridge directly links the Thai border town of Mukdahan with the Lao city of Savannakhet, which has ambitious plans to transform itself.

ALL CHANGE

Until three years ago there was only a desultory river ferry service between the two river banks. Movement was limited. That has all changed. Shuttle buses now cross regularly. Lao nationals go to Thailand to work. Thai businessmen and tourists move in the opposite direction.

Old timers remember the carpet bombing of the war years, but based on a JICA proposal, Savannakhet is now planning to establish three economic zones for factories, warehouses and cargo terminals and hopes

to attract both domestic and foreign investment with attractive financial and trading incentives. Ground breaking has already begun.

The Logitem Laos GLKP company established a hub in 2007 to develop an international cargo transportation system and company official Keiichi Sugiyama said recently, "Minerals from Laos and demand for cargo transport from Thai sugar factories have been increasing remarkably."

Savannakhet is a pretty *mélange* of French colonial buildings and Buddhist temples and there are plans afoot to develop tourism with JICA providing advice on developing tour guide manuals and promotional websites, pamphlets and posters.

OTHER COMPONENTS NEEDED

New roads and bridges are only one component in an efficient transportation network.

Government officials in some developing countries estimate that bureaucratic and

administration bottlenecks at border crossings can add several weeks to transportation times, effectively throttling the rapid movements of goods and people the infrastructure was supposed to facilitate.

The Friendship Bridge linking the Lao capital of Vientiane with northeastern Thailand is daily thronged with trucks, shuttle buses and long lines of people waiting at customs and immigration.

The customs point at Nong Khai in Thailand was chosen in 2008 as a JICA pilot project to streamline and improve the flow of people and goods and also to put into place a 'risk management' process to more effectively uncover such things as drug smuggling and illegal 'copycat' products such as CDs which are both rife in the region.

Officials from Thailand, Cambodia and Viet Nam also undergo regular training. Longtime Japanese customs official Etsuji Uno and a JICA chief advisor who coordinates the JICA program said, "As ties among the Mekong countries become stronger and the number

of people and goods increase, we need to carefully monitor all of these movements—allowing all the legal movements to pass swiftly but also being able to detect the illegal elements efficiently."

PORTS AND AIRPORTS

In addition to helping build a land-based transportation network Japanese finance and expertise have also helped to rebuild a series of terminal points—airports and ports throughout the Mekong through which all the region's exports, imports and passengers move.

One such example is Cambodia's largest port, Sihanoukville, which handles virtually all of the country's container and cargo traffic. Though Cambodia's recent economic growth rate topped 10%, Sihanoukville itself failed to keep pace with the needed expansion.

Starting in 1996, JICA began a survey to revamp the port and in subsequent years yen-loans were provided to expand the

container wharf and equip it with the latest cranes and computer systems.

A special economic zone to promote exports is planned next to Sihanoukville and an improved road system linking the port area with the capital, Phnom Penh.

Local personnel are being constantly trained in new management techniques. "Everything still takes too long," says Kazutoshi Sakata, a JICA port administration and technology expert said. When he helped develop a plan for a new container yard with local officials it took three months to arrive at a decision.

Patience, however, is a necessity in such work, to both win Cambodian confidence and develop their long-term ability to handle the port themselves.

"I let the port staff make the final decision because I want them to have a sense of responsibility and ownership," the Japanese said. "There will be trial and error, but they will learn," he added, breaking into a wry smile.

hanoi—putting on a new face

The old city (below)



The old (left) and the new (above). Tourists invade Hanoi (above right).



The city desperately needs new roads and railroads (left). The French colonial opera house in downtown Hanoi

WHEN THE VIETNAMESE CAPITAL OF HANOI celebrates its 1,000th birthday next year it hopes to be wearing a new face.

For much of its existence, Hanoi was little more than a small town and then a sleepy colonial outpost. During

the war with the United States it suffered terribly and even by the 1990s its most distinctive features were the wonderfully ornate French colonial Opera House, the maze of narrow streets and shops in the ancient quarter and a placid series of lakes whose banks

offered families and lovers their only recreational facilities.

In the intervening years, Hanoi has undergone a metamorphosis. A new airport was constructed along with highways, bridges, high-rise hotels, apartment blocks and sophisticated restaurants.

The wartime population doubled to three million. Some four million tourists drop by annually. The concentration of motorcycles to residents is the highest in the world.

As Hanoi virtually exploded in its efforts to catch up with other Asian cities such as Bangkok, relays of Japanese experts in 2004 began working with city and government officials on a three-year US\$59 million project financed by JICA to draw up a master plan for the city's future development.

That has been completed and several components are already underway, including the construction of the first two lines of a new urban rapid transit system.

In a separate program other JICA experts continue to work with city officials to try to tame the city's chaotic roadways by training local officials and helping

reshape key intersections to relieve heavy congestion, particularly at peak periods.

The officially named Hanoi Integrated Development and Environmental Program (HAIDEP) is the most ambitious urban planning project ever undertaken in Viet Nam and covers every aspect of the city's development.

The new transportation network will be key in just keeping the city moving. As the population spreads into surrounding districts, an extra 600 kilometers of urban roads must be built and the number of bridges across the Red River and Duong River increased from two to eight.

A rapid transport system incorporating four major rail lines and various branches and a subway system is envisaged at a cost of several billion dollars.

The environment has already suffered dramatically, and Hanoi will need all the help it can get as it moves into its next millennium.

The population is expected to nearly double to around five million by 2020 and the number of tourists to explode from four to 23 million people. ■

Hanoi's population is expected to double within the next 10 years

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The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the world's largest bilateral development organization, operating in some 150 countries to help some of the globe's most vulnerable people.