

Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand Magazine - 1st issue 2014

DATELINE BANGKOK



Year End Review 2013



invites you to our

Under the Sea Picnic

Saturday 1st February 2014

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Take a front line seat at world events and be part of the buzz in the region by joining the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand.

Found at the heart of Asia's news and providing a hub of conviviality and professional commitment, the FCCT is a must for anyone wanting to engage in our times.

Frequent programme nights reveal and explain current affairs. Meet friends, colleagues and leading figures from the region's business, government, diplomatic and media circles at the bar. Press conferences, film nights and international receptions all happen here.

Members have special privileges: exclusive Internet access; this unique quarterly magazine for free; a weekly bulletin detailing upcoming events; insight into path-breaking photography and art, Jazz on Friday nights, special gourmet nights, and more. For street cred and sustenance in these trying times, the FCCT is the only choice.

Feeding The Machine

Dateline magazine looks at the stories behind the stories. All offerings will be considered, from articles and photo essays to letters, analysis, gossip, etc. Soi Whispers was cut from this issue for space reasons but will return.

Please send material to editor (jimpollard_1999@yahoo.com). Submissions are paid for with glory and bar/ restaurant coupons.



Anasuya Sanyal,
President FCCT

Through thick and thin

Overseeing a club such as the FCCT is a difficult task at the best of times. And the Bangkok Shutdown has made that job even more tricky. But, as in 2010, during the red-shirts' protest, which also dragged on for many weeks, we are determined to continue operating and staging programmes that can shed some light on different aspects of the political divide, and many other issues of interest.

2013 was full of challenges for the board, but the year also featured an array of programmes that were popular and very well received. Some of them looked at thorny issues such as lese majeste and the threat of being prosecuted for criminal defamation – long-term concerns for correspondents and media people working in Thailand. Many more dealt with a host of other matters: Asean integration, looming at the end of next year, plus a range of rights concerns from all over the region; the disappearance of a highly respected Lao activist; abuses that continue to plague ethnic areas in Myanmar; dams; the long-running insurgency in the far South; to less serious but equally important matters such as finance and investment, networking and parenting. Meanwhile, our film nights continued to be very popular, as were Friday night drinks. Thanks must go to Lekha, our resident film buff, plus supporters in many foreign embassies, who suggested classic movies and provided national foods, not to mention our long-term members and dedicated staff for your continuing efforts and contributions.

Please remember, if members have ideas for events let us know – put them in an email to board members (listed on the contents page), or better still, help us organize a panel or a talk. As you know, the FCCT runs largely on volunteer efforts by a few dedicated media professionals, although they are often called away to crises such as the typhoon that hit the Philippines or other dramas around the region. So, if you have an idea for a discussion, or contact details for interesting speakers, please send an email to one of the board or Pear and the ladies in the office.

Even more vital, we will soon need new board members – fresh faces who can stand at the annual general meeting next month – to help arrange speakers and oversee the running of the club, so that we remain active and focused on events of the day.

Further changes are in the system: former president Paul Wedel has been collecting photos of many of the famous people who have come to the club to talk over the past few decades, so we hope that can brighten up the passage way near the front. We are also plan to remember the foreign journalists lost in the course of their work in Thailand – currently there are five on the list – with a plaque to name and honour their contribution to our profession. You will hear more on those things shortly.

Publication of Dateline was affected by uncertainty over sponsorship, as some of you may know, but we hope to resolve that problem in the very near future. If people know of possible sponsors for the magazine, or the club, please have a quiet word to board members and help us keep club activities running as smoothly as possible.

Finally, we sincerely hope the current political turmoil can be resolved without further bloodshed. Thailand has suffered division for too many years and this troubles long-term residents who care deeply for this country. We heartily encourage any moves that can resolve the crisis and bring about peaceful solutions – reform and an election in the not-too-distant future, with all major parties participating and all Thais retaining the right to vote and decide on the country's future. Keep safe.

Anasuya Sanyal
IndoChina Bureau Chief
Channel News Asia

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The FCCT gratefully acknowledges the generosity of our sponsors whose contributions to the Club's programs and activities have ensured we remain Bangkok's premier public forum. Please support our sponsors when you can, as they support us!



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The Tourism Authority of Thailand, whose generous and consistent support has made possible this year's publication of Dateline.



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- **Post Publishing Co., Ltd.**, for daily delivery of the Bangkok Post
- **TrueVisions Public Company Limited**, for premium cable television access
- **Star Alliance**, for our wi-fi internet service and air tickets supporting the FCCT's annual photojournalism contest
- **Maneeya Realty**
- **Mandarin Oriental Bangkok**, often voted "The Best Hotel in the World", for their consistent support, including, for the past 3 years, our Year-End Party.

Year End Review

2013

has ended on a rocky note, with foreign journalists caught up in the political crisis in Bangkok – including a physical attack on German photojournalist Nick Nostitz – and a legal claim lodged against the operators of Phuketwan, a website in the South much lauded for its coverage of matters related to “boatpeople” who arrive on the Andaman coast.

This has given a sombre feel to the end of a year which saw plenty of big stories across the region, once again. Aside from the unrest in Thailand, there was a “super typhoon” in the Philippines, which devastated the town of Tacloban and nearby areas, major rallies were staged in Cambodia over the hotly disputed election result (which the opposition claims was “stolen” by the long-running CPP regime), as well as concern in many countries over plans for a second dam on the Mekong by the Lao government. There

has also been also a stream of good and not-so good news in Myanmar – where new papers have opened and hundreds of political prisoners have been released, while serious strife and large-scale displacement drags on in Kachin state and a grave crisis continues for many thousands of Rohingya in Rakhine state, and neighbouring countries.

All this has meant busy days for correspondents in Bangkok. At year-end the flare-up in the country’s long-running political divide became problematic for foreign journalists – with Nick Nostitz bashed at a rally in late November, and bitter attacks on correspondents for their coverage of the anti-government protests led by former Democrat heavyweight Suthep Thaugsuban, similar to criticism of foreign news outlets during the reds crisis in 2010.

But the “surprise” news was a defamation

case in mid-December, lodged by a Royal Thai Navy captain under the Computer Crimes Act against Alan Morison and Chutima Sidasathian, who run the Phuketwan news website. Criminal defamation writs were also reported to be pending against Reuters over a report in July about the Rohingya by two of its writers in Thailand. This has spurred widespread concern and condemnation from rights and press support groups, as the issue at the centre of the Navy writ – the alleged sale of boatpeople to traffickers – is just one part of a flurry of scandals, that range from aided escapes from Thai detention centres, to alleged links with trafficking gangs running secret holding camps near the Malaysian border and the alleged killing of boatpeople on Thai soil or in Thai waters. These matters are of major interest to people all around the world, as well as the UN refugee agency, which called for a government inquiry.



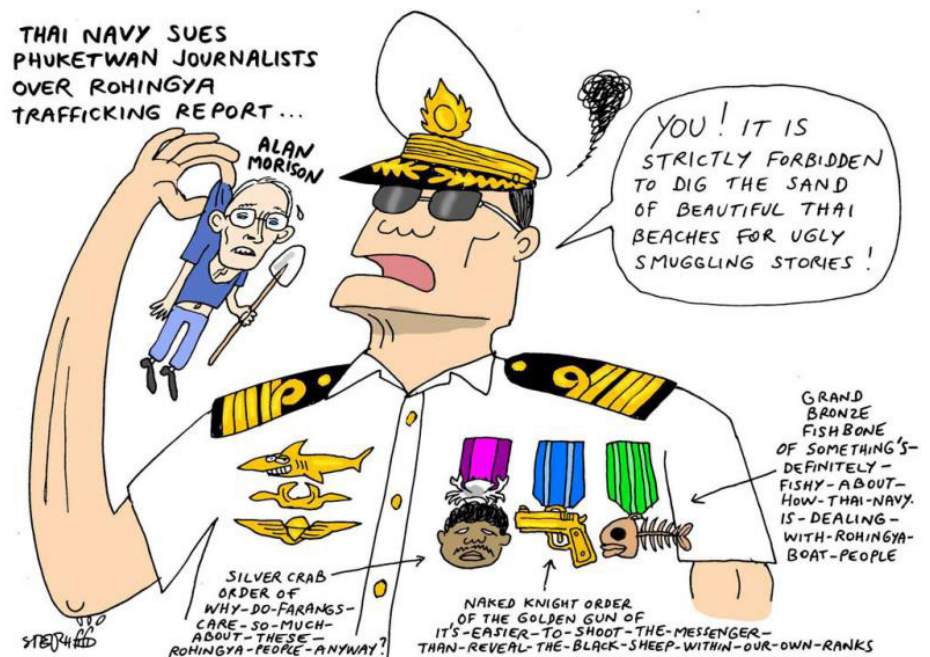
The South East Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) condemned the Navy writ as unjustified and "a form of intimidation against members of the media who publish critical stories against state authorities".

"If the Thai Navy wants to disprove its tolerance of the acts of its personnel described in the article, a better approach would have been to conduct or allow an impartial official investigation into the matter of complicity on the crime of human trafficking against Rohingya refugees," it said in a statement on December 19.

"Targeting a small online news outlet for publishing what is essentially a humanitarian story reflects a bully's strategy to silence critics, sending a strong warning that anyone who expresses something they disapprove of will be prosecuted. The Navy is thus using its authority for the wrong purpose of silencing critics instead of for upholding accountability of the conduct its forces and its overall duty to respect human rights."

News about Myanmar was generally positive this year, given the dramatic turnaround in the former pariah state, but Thailand endured a bleak final quarter which has left grey clouds over its immediate outlook. With public outrage over the highly contentious amnesty bill, and fears of a resurgence of the strife from recent years, tourist arrivals have slumped and cast a pall of gloom over economic predictions for the coming year.

There has also been little progress on major obstacles to reporting the news fairly and accurately. Concerns about libel, the lese majeste law and alleged 'abuse' of the criminal defamation law were discussed by two separate panels in November that included academic David Streckfuss, former senator Kraissak Choonhavan, rights monitor Sunai Phasuk and a range of people caught in such legal battles – British correspondent Andrew Drummond, telecom commissioner Supinya Klangnarong (who fought a major libel case against Thaksin), British researcher Wyn Ellis, Nation journalist Pravit Rojanaphruk, and Sukanya



Prueksakasemsuk – wife of Somyot, the 'Voice of Taksin' magazine editor jailed for 11 years under Article 112.

In April, hearings began on a criminal defamation case launched against Andy Hall, a British activist who has sought to expose serious abuse of Burmese workers in Thailand in recent years. Now based in Yangon, Hall has been a key figure helping journalists to learn about the entrenched trafficking networks supplying thousands of migrant workers to companies in Thailand (allegedly includ-

ing under-age workers and many without legal documents), plus brokers systematically rorting workers with grossly inflated fees for identity and work permit documents.

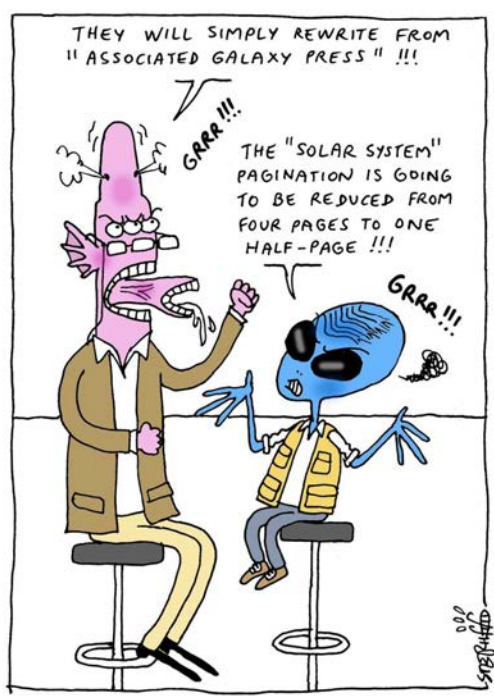
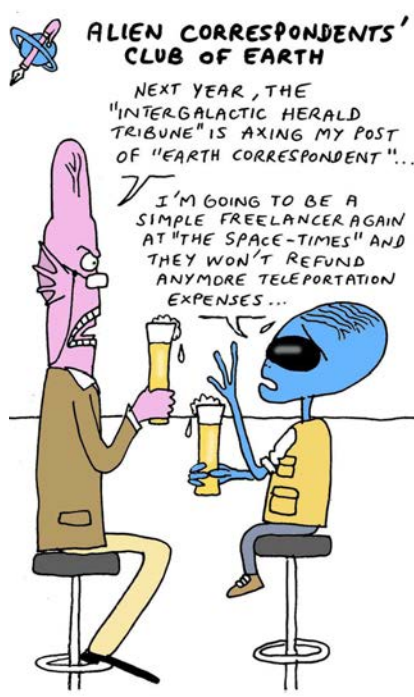
Meanwhile, some correspondents have moved to Yangon, and there has been the usual changing of the guard in Bangkok. Zoe Daniel, Southeast Asian correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, was one "high-profile" departure. A former club board member, Zoe returned to Melbourne with hus-

band Rowan (an ABC manager who will go back to work after spells in southern Africa and here) and their two kids.

Zoe had three and half years in Bangkok, arriving in the midst of the red-shirt crisis in April 2010 and departing as the “Yellows” – anti-Thaksin forces who were remnants of the PAD (People’s Alliance for Democracy), Democrat supporters, plus others – re-emerged on the streets in October. Zoe had been hoping for a quiet last month but the Lao Air plane crash at Champasak, was followed by the destruction of Tacloban and mass rallies at Democracy Monument. This meant a frantic final few weeks. She will be replaced by Samantha Hawley, another mother of two, due to fly in from Canberra in early 2014.

In other news, Al Jazeera correspondent Wayne Hay was detained, along with several colleagues, by Egyptian authorities in Cairo while covering the civil strife in late August. Conservatives in Egypt were unimpressed with the network’s reporting of the crisis, but Hay was released unharmed shortly after. Wayne and his family later left Bangkok for Bali, although Al Jaz had a swarm of people on the ground here recently, with Veronica Pedrosa and several crews to cover the protests led by Suthep.

The abduction of Laotian community activist Sombath Somphone in Vientiane late last year was the subject of several press conferences at the club, the most recent of which was attended by his wife Ng Shui-Meng. The regime’s year-long



silence about Sombath, who won the prestigious Magsaysay Award in 2005, has spurred talk that the totalitarian administration in Laos has overtaken Myanmar as the region’s most feared regime.

Vanida Thephsouvanh, head of the Lao Movement for Human Rights in Paris, was quoted by Denis Gray of Associated Press in December, as saying that lack of a strong foreign consensus in dealing with the Lao regime had allowed its hardline leaders to “harvest financial assistance from the international community for many decades” – while foreign aid groups were forced to stay silent, or leave. Laos, she said, “is a country where fear prevails, and the fear is much stronger and more palpable after Sombath’s disappearance.” We should not forget that two ethnic Hmong have been held in captivity for a decade for escorting foreign journalists to report on dramas in Saisomboon province in mid-2003.

Many other events were held at the club to explain the serious problems that continue in Myanmar – notably Rakhine, Shan, and Kachin states. Some press panels focused on fears that the Thai government would rush to return refugees in the border camps – similar to the sudden expulsion of thousands of Hmong by the Abhisit government in late 2009. However, the Yingluck government has shown admirable restraint in relation to the camp residents, who number close to 140,000 despite half that number being resettled in the US, Europe and countries such as Australia over the past seven to eight years.

Preparations have been underway for voluntary repatriation of refugees in the camps, to relocation sites in Karen State, although many have insisted that they will not consider a return till after the 2015 election. The Border Consortium, which provides food and materials to the camps, opened an office in Yangon several months ago, but there still appears to be a long way to go in terms of demining and a withdrawal of troops from border areas where thousands of ethnic Karen and others come from.

On a more positive note, several correspondents based in Thailand and reporting on Myanmar for many years published books in 2013. Two of these, by Nic Dunlop and Larry Jagan (with French academic Roland Egreteau) were unveiled at the club – launches which both drew good appreciative audiences. Another tome, titled ‘The Face of Resistance’ was published by Irrawaddy founder Aung Zaw, while former club president Bertil Lintner was able to get several of his older books published in Burmese and released in Yangon, a remarkable achievement given the military denied him entry for so many years.

Finally, Dateline has had problems with sponsorship this year, which is why this issue has come out in PDF form. We hope to resolve that issue in the very near future.

All the best to club members for the festive season and coming year,
Jim Pollard
 (Editor)



Sunai Phasuk from Human Rights Watch on a panel about lese majeste in November, with Nation journalist Pravrit Rojanaphruk, left, and moderator Dominic Faulder, on the right.



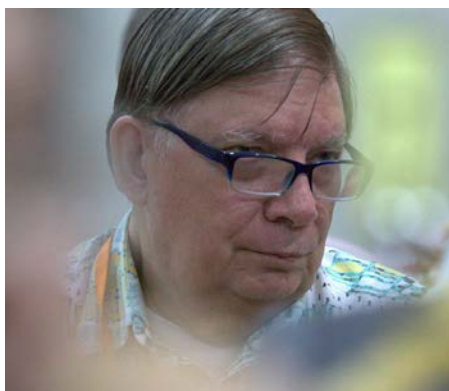
The criminal defamation panel in November with, from left, Andrew Drummond, Wyn Ellis, Supinya Klangnarong and David Streckfuss. Photo by Mick Elmore.



A press conference about human trafficking in this region held in October.



Film-maker Joshua Oppenheimer, talking to the club via Skype about his documentary 'The Act of Killing', about the massacre of suspected communists in Indonesia in the mid-60s.



Lance Woodruff, a long-time club member. Photo: Matt Jasper.



Journalism students and club member Stuart Saunders listen to a panel at the club in November. Photo: Matt Jasper.



A journalism student asking a question at the club. Photo: Mick Elmore.



British academic and researcher Wyn Ellis at the criminal defamation panel in November. Photo: Matt Jasper.



FCCT president Anasuya Sanyal with Nico Sepe, one of 3 Filipino photographers who exhibited historic news photos in October.



Board member Pailin Wedel plus Nat Sumon at an event in early October.

CRISIS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Missionaries of Charity

Story by Josephine Reynolds, with photos by Piyavit Thongsa-ard

Recipe for this story: mix one free-spirited English woman with a deep love of Southeast Asia, together with a seasoned Thai photographer; before you know it, we're in Tacloban reporting on the aftermath of typhoon Haiyan.

Decades of living and working in Asia finally find me based in Siem Reap, supporting a Cambodian-run NGO, their projects become my passion.

It's all change, and I quickly discover that an independent journalist preparing to head off to a disaster situation takes a great deal of research, and time. Planning travel arrangements, equipment, and the crucial local fixer, who can make or break your efforts – it's difficult to plan and organise much ahead of time – and building great relationships with local journalists was one of the keys to us being able to work successfully in such a physically hostile environment.

Arriving in Tacloban one week after the typhoon had passed, the airport, the gateway to the city, was madness. Among the crowds, are doctors, NGO workers, journalists, hunting short-temperedly through the enormous luggage heaps piled high on random broken trailers, for their very valuable and essential equipment. It was telling of what we were about to experience.

The scene was so dramatic, I had never



Nurturing Survivors

been to a disaster zone before, the scale of tragedy impossible to absorb.

The town was just recovering from widespread looting, and there was a sense of danger in the air. To keep citizens and property safe, a curfew was in place. The very few available hotel rooms had been seized by international journalists and NGO workers. Being an independent it was almost impossible to find a place to sleep until a sympathetic, big-hearted



local businessman opened his house up, renting rooms, our base of operation.

Although a big beautiful concrete house, safely situated on the top of a hill, it lacked electricity, had very limited water. Our meals from cans, pilchards, and cold rice prevailed, breakfast, lunch, and dinner. No power, just a noisy, smelly generator, and the constant pressure to work in the field, and rush back to very limited electricity and to try to connect to the world through a little 3G Internet device – constant stress, as the owner of the house wouldn't run the generator at night, nervous of having his house looted by local people, if they heard it running. Outside in the street below our base, the barangay – district – where the huge container ships were thrown onto shore, were thousands of little fishermen's shanty homes, destroyed by the typhoon, streets still blocked with mountains of twisted metal, smashed wood, typhoon debris, and pale dead bloated smelly bodies waiting to be collected. At night local people try to reduce the mountains of debris by making small fires, also creating light and heat to cook. The toxic, deadly fumes from these fires fill the air and poison our lungs.

On one particular day driving out of Tacloban I feel that I am part of one of the



more unusual aid conveys. We are in the region which has suffered so badly from that most extreme force of nature, typhoon Haiyan, headed south to Barangay Tuanuan, to meet Father Abraham, who is managing the spiritual and welfare needs of 15 devastated villages falling under his care.

Today's desperately needed aid delivery has been organised by "active" Sisters from the Missionaries of Charity at their base, a house in Tacloban city. It

makes for an incongruous sight, the two immaculately dressed Sisters sitting in the front of the old Philippine Navy truck, next to their uniformed and armed navy driver. The back of the truck is heavily laden with aid, and more guards with big guns. Our precious cargo: carefully counted sacks of rice, water containers, blankets, flip-flops, cooking pots, biscuits, tinned food, water, cooked eggs, and a small bag of crucifixes.

To ensure fair aid distribution, a survey





is done a couple of days prior to the delivery, with each family given a numbered card, showing their name, date, time, and distribution location. As the family receives these aid parcels, a record is kept. I had been disturbed to see terribly organised aid distribution before in Tacloban. Here it was a relief to see how well the Sisters made a complex task simple, and equitable.

The previous evening I had asked my host where all of the orphans might be found, as many families had been torn apart. She suggested that I visit the Sisters, as they had been taking care of many orphaned and disabled children prior to the typhoon. I arrived at the Sisters' house the next morning, expecting to spend time with children, but it turned out they had been evacuated to safety ahead of the typhoon. Now, sadly, two families were being sheltered there, both young women, one heavily pregnant, both with many young children. Their husbands had left them in the care and protection of the Sisters, and their strong concrete house. So, they all survived, but the men hadn't returned; they are assumed dead.

I arrived at the Sisters' house unaware that they were delivering aid, and was

hastily invited to join the aid convoy as it was just leaving. Among my fellow passengers in the two mini-buses were more Sisters from the Missionaries of Charity in Tacloban, as well as three volunteers, visiting Sisters from Manila – "Adorers Of The Blood Of Christ", as well as three boys who had watched their father drown as their homes were flooded, victims of the intense storm-surge caused by Typhoon Haiyan.

As we drive the sisters are chanting gently "Holy Mary, Mother of God... Pray for our sinners". Others move their rosaries through their fingers. Their chant gains intensity as we pass the utterly beautiful, now roofless 15th century Cathedral Palo – they are horrified by everything they are seeing; there are no words that can describe that moment.

The Sisters ask me about my religion. "I don't have one," I explain, but find it fascinating being with them, as I am so used to the Buddhist culture in Thailand, and Cambodia, familiar with the flash of orange robes, and monks not eating after noon. The Sisters are completely alien to me, I confess to them. It makes them smile. It's a sad, but good humoured journey.

When we arrive in Tuanuan, Father Abraham and the nuns exchange information, and make plans. His priority to create jobs, to re-build, and most importantly, provide physiological support for the thousands of living victims. He urges the Sisters to take time, to listen to the people, especially the children. His tally of the dead from 15,000 people is 1,200, with 800 still missing.

Today, our aid is delivered to two locations, directly on the coast, where people had been confident that their large concrete houses would be adequate to protect them, as they had for hundreds of typhoons before. Their usual preparations and experience would guide them to know how to ride out this typhoon. The tragedy is that this was no usual typhoon, where the water would come down the hills, and maybe lie a few inches in their homes, for a short while. Typhoon Haiyan and the storm-surge had not been explained properly to the people in Leyte province; they had no idea what was about to happen.

People who want to send aid to the victims of typhoon Haiyan can email Jo at: josephinereynolds815@gmail.com or visit: www.gofundme.com/5ww9lw

KILLING The Mekong

Southeast Asia's greatest river sustains tens of millions from its abundant fisheries and floodwaters, which both irrigate and fertilise. But as Tom Fawthrop reports, nature's bounty, and beauty, are at risk from a series of 11 dams that threaten fisheries, agricultural fertility and food security



Photo: Tom Fawthrop

The Khone Falls in the dry season.

Approaching the Cambodian border in the Laos's southern region of Siphandon lie the spectacular Khone Falls, where the river becomes braided into channels, with a glorious panorama of spectacular waterfalls and swirling rapids.

These rapids create endless islets – the famous Four Thousand Islands that give Siphandon its name, set apart by a maze of narrow channels and rapids.

This uniquely beautiful and biodiverse habitat is just upstream of a colony of

Irrawaddy dolphins that also draws many visitors – sustaining a growing eco-tourism industry which directly benefits local communities.

Abundant resources

The Mekong hosts the largest inland fisheries in the world, over 900 species of fish (and more still being discovered) providing nutrition and food security for over 60 million people. These include the iconic Giant Catfish, the world's largest catfish species, which can reach more

“ The Don Sahong Dam will only push Cambodia and Vietnam closer to a food crisis. The project is next to Cambodia's border. Have they forgotten that fish are our lifeline and the backbone of our economy? Fish are central to our diet and our main source of protein. ”

Dam By Dam



Photo: Tom Fawthrop

The Xayaburi dam site.

than 3 metres in length and weigh over 300kg.

A Mekong River Commission (MRC) consultant in a 1994 report described the Khone Falls as “an ecologically unique area, so rare in nature that every effort should be made to preserve all of Khone Falls from any development”.

This eco-tourism paradise has all the credentials to qualify as a World Heritage site – with all the tourism benefits that designation would bring. It is also eligible to become an internationally designated Ramsar wetland.

The total value of fisheries, tourism and other benefits has been estimated at \$2-3 billion per year.

Will it become another sacrifice on the altar of hydropower?

But the Malaysian hydropower company Mega First, backed by the Laos government, has an entirely different plan to eco-tourism development: Their entire focus is to construct a huge hydroelectric dam project at Don Sahong only a few kilometres away from this great tourist attraction.

On September 30, Laos notified the Mekong River Commission of its plan to begin construction of the 260-megawatt Don Sahong dam from this year (2014).

This dam is the second in a hydropower programme approved by the Laos government to build a cascade of 11 dams. The first dam at Xayaburi was launched in November 2012 in the face of fierce opposition from non-government groups in three Mekong countries, plus many scientists, and two MRC states – Cambodia and Vietnam. It is currently under construction (see photo).

The Xayaburi also provoked a fierce conflict inside the MRC, which has lasted from 2011 until the present, with no sign of coming to an end. Thailand with its massive investment from Thai banks in the dam predictably lined up with Laos in support of the dam, while Cambodia and Vietnam continue to cite the need for more scientific studies to be completed prior to construction.

Now the prospect of the Don Sahong dam has triggered a new flurry of opposition across the Mekong region. A coalition of 103 Thai NGOs, drawing support from eight provinces bordering the Mekong,

have demanded that the Thai government take immediate action to block the dam project.

One of its most immediate impacts would be on the Irrawaddy dolphins. Changes to the hydrology of their habitat just below the Don Sahong dam could lead to the colony's extinction.

What about the fisheries?

Chhith Sam Ath, executive director of the Phnom Penh NGO Forum Cambodia warns: “The Don Sahong Dam will only push Cambodia and Vietnam closer to a food crisis. The project is next to Cambodia's border. Have they forgotten that fish are our lifeline and the backbone of our economy? Fish are central to our diet and our main source of protein.”

Scientists are warning of grave consequences for food security in the region if fish migration is blocked by a dam across the Sahong channel, according to Dr Ian Baird, a Mekong specialist at the University Of Wisconsin Madison in the US.

“The dam would cause serious nutritional problems throughout the Mekong region.

Decreasing availability of fish in the marketplace would lead to higher prices, reducing fish consumption, especially by poorer consumers,” he said.

The Hou Sahong channel is the only channel allowing migratory fish to bypass the Khone Falls and rapids, and continue their journey into Laotian waters. It is used by an estimated 80-90 percent of migratory fish entering Cambodia from Laos.

To locate a dam precisely to block the only viable channel for large-scale fish migration on this stretch of the Mekong appears perverse, to say the least.

Jeremy Bird, former chief executive officer of the MRC, stresses the imperative to safeguard the Mekong’s fisheries. When considering building dams on the Mekong, he told me in 2011: “Fisheries are the number one issue that has to be solved. And the onus for demonstrating that this can be solved rests with the owner of the project.”

But Mega First airily dismisses concerns that the dams threaten fisheries as “unfounded”. The Malaysian company’s senior environmental manager, Dr Peter Hawkins, claimed in the Vientiane Times that “environmental impacts can be mitigated by using other natural channels adjacent to the Hou Sahong”.

However, UK fisheries expert Terry Warren, a consultant on the first Don Sahong dam EIA in 2007, warned: “If these fish can complete this migration, it means Cambodian fisheries will continue to flourish. Stop a migration (with the dam) and within a few years everything will start to collapse and eventually cease to exist. I see disaster looming for the fisheries of Cambodia and southern Laos, if this project goes ahead.”

Fisheries experts also doubt the possibility of using any other channel. They point out that fish ladders and fish pass technology has only been widely tested and practised in the cold climates of North America, Norway and Switzerland.

Can fish ladder technology be transferred? Critics also say the fishery studies are being rushed. A 2011 study by Northwest Fisheries Science Centre in Seattle concluded that it would take decades of research “to ensure that specialised fish passage facilities actually meet the needs of these diverse fisheries of the Mekong”.

The approach adopted at the Xayaburi dam gives little cause for confidence. Eric Baran, a leading fisheries expert working with the World Fish Centre in Phnom Penh, visited the dam site in 2012. He later said that fish mitigation has never been adapted to the huge fish diversity of any tropical river in Asia, and remains untested on the Mekong.

“There has never been a successful fish-pass built for a dam the size of Xayaburi, anywhere in the tropics,” he said.

During the recent visit to the Xayaburi dam site, a Poyry senior project manager was perhaps a little too frank when he told a guest: “Whether the fish get across (the dam), you’ll only see when it is built.”

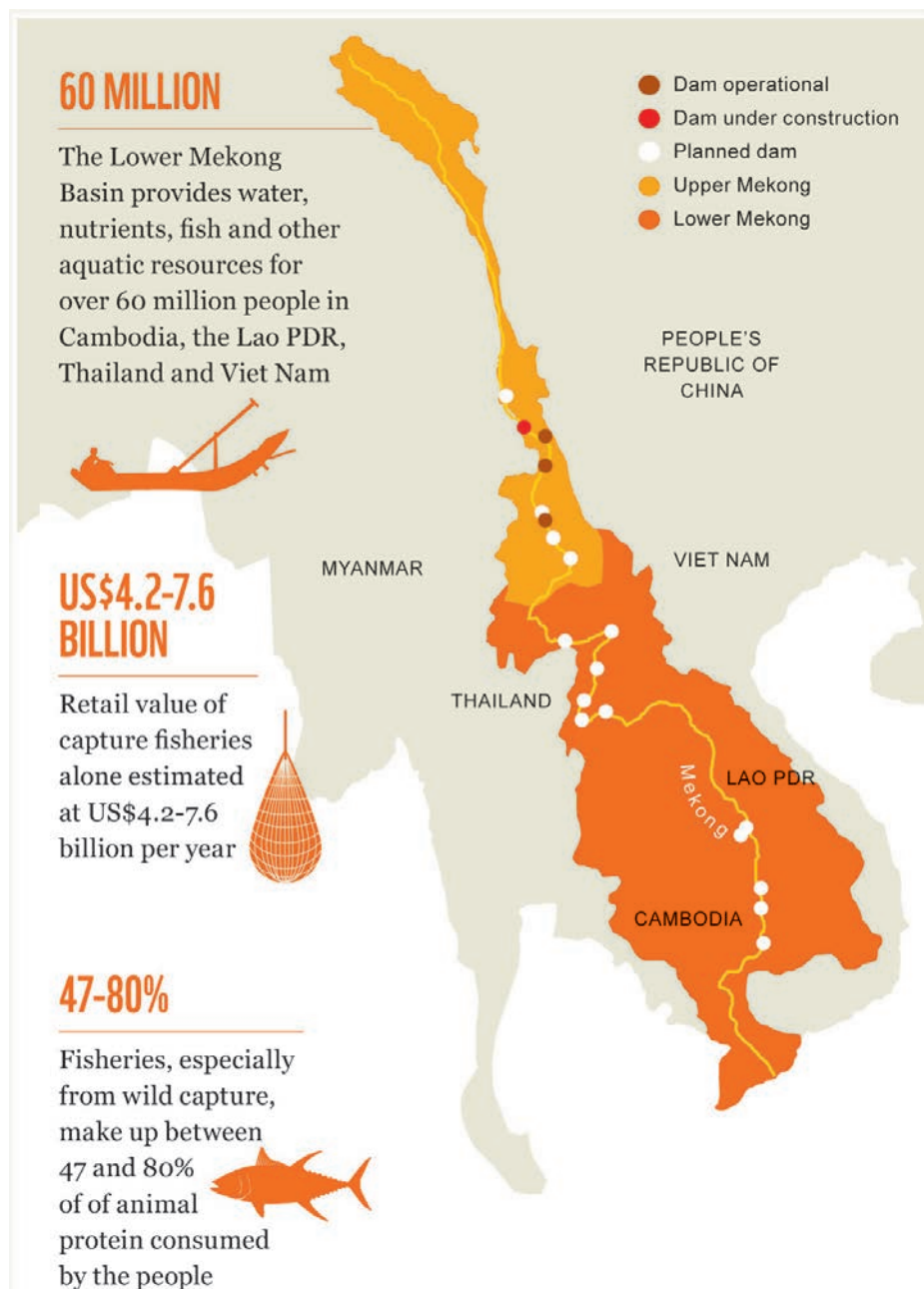
Poyry Energy Zurich a subsidiary of Poyry, a Finnish multinational corporation, was

brought before a Helsinki tribunal last year for “violation of corporate social responsibility” based on OECD rules.

A coalition of Finnish NGOs argued that Poyry, hired as an international consultant by the Lao government, deliberately misled stakeholders and energy companies in their MRC compliance report and failed to launch any serious environmental impact study.

‘Mainstream dams’ and the MRC prior consultation process

Laos, one of the poorest nations in the region, has long been encouraged by the World Bank to develop hydropower as its prime avenue for earning foreign exchange by supplying electricity to its energy hungry neighbours, especially Thailand.





Many rivers and tributaries have already been dammed. But the 1995 Mekong Treaty stipulates that any country building a dam on the main stream of the Mekong must either find agreement by consensus with the other three Mekong states, or seriously address their objections to the dam project before construction begins.

The Don Sahong dam appears to have re-ignited the bitter divisions in the MRC set off by the Xayaburi dam. Laos surprised almost everyone with its declaration that Don Sahong was not a “mainstream Mekong dam” – but rather one to be built on a “tributary” – and tributaries are not subject to the prior consultation process.

This would benefit the authoritarian Lao regime which would therefore escape serious scrutiny by the affected downstream countries and the public forums mandated by the MRC that would take place in other countries where opposition voices and grassroots communities could be heard.

However, neighbouring Cambodia, Vietnam and even Thailand have rejected this bizarre claim. The Laos government may have to accept some scrutiny after all.

Poyry Energy Asia have argued that the environmental impact studies for the dam

should be carried out during the period of construction, which flies in the face of routine engineering and precautionary principles of construction.

Fisheries expert Terry Warren questions the rationality of the Don Sahong dam, given its potential “to ruin extremely important Southeast Asian fisheries and the livelihoods of thousands”, and its relatively modest electrical output. As he asks: “Why risk it?”

The impact of a series of Mekong dams

It should be remembered, we have so far examined the impacts of just two dams on the lower Mekong, each threatening devastating damage to fisheries, biodiversity, natural beauty and tourism. But for the Lao government this is only the beginning of an 11-dam cascade.

So far, only one major study has taken place on the potential loss of fisheries from the dams: the Strategic Environment Assessment of SEA, commissioned by the MRC and released in 2010.

The SEA concludes that the dams could inflict economic havoc on Cambodia and Vietnam, and strongly recommends a moratorium on building all mainstream dams on the Mekong for at least 10 years in order to complete further research on dam impacts.

Meanwhile, technological breakthroughs in renewable electricity, solar energy in particular, are undermining any economic rationale for building the dams. Of course Laos has a legitimate need for electricity but this could be provided at much lower cost by solar power – located much closer to power demand in the major cities – as its cost continues to decline.

Scientists and NGOs insist that in 2014 all MRC countries should respect the moratorium called for by the SEA report – and dam construction be suspended while proper studies on its impacts are carried out.

But without a major international outcry, the scientists are likely to be ignored by the Lao government, and riparian peoples are all too likely to become the angry witnesses to the slow death of the Mekong.

Tom Fawthrop was the director of ‘Where have All the Fish Gone? Killing the Mekong Dam by Dam’, a Eureka Films production that has been screened at the FCCT, broadcast on Thai TPBS TV and also works for many international media including The Economist.

☞ Last year, Thomas Fuller writing in the *International Herald Tribune* stirred controversy with a story about Skype, internet frontiers and prime ministers. Although some senior government people oddly failed to see the story's relevance to Thailand, it set others thinking. Sad to say, there have been whispers in dark places that the FCCT is smug, feckless, cowardly and out of touch--and that's only the complimentary stuff. It has also been accused of being too yellow, except by those who accuse it of being too red. Its critics say the club could do with an infusion of hot fresh blood. A feasibility study has therefore been under way at the club's top secret skunk works beside the main Heineken tap. The plan is to introduce a Skype FCCT president who could be based anywhere *except* Thailand. Clever stuff this new technology. Among the clear advantages, a Skype president can be switched off the minute he or she starts to drone, sermonize or dribble. Secondly, he or she cannot be arrested in Thailand for criminal offences, such as telling the truth. The most obvious contender for the top post has been assigned the codename 'Bravehack' to honour his Scottish origins and utterly fearless coverage of treacherous topics from afar. Indeed, scathing observations on Singapore, his former bolthole, from the safety of his new drone-proof cyber bunker in Phnom Penh are breathlessly awaited.

☞ When Michael Gorman, a former editor of the *Bangkok Post*, died last September, the paper ran an obituary in its online edition stating incorrectly that "he was jailed briefly in the early 1980s after offending the military autocrat Gen Kriangsak Chomanan". Kriangsak was in fact long out of power when Gorman was sent to prison in mid-1982, and General Prem Tinsulanond was already well established as prime minister. The writer of the piece appeared to have muddled the names Kriangsak with Kraisaak, though the two personalities could not have been more different in age, temperament and occupation. The real story lives on.

Not for the last time, the *Bangkok Post* had lost a libel case. This one involved Kraisaak Choonhavan, the son of General Chatichai Choonhavan, a former foreign minister and future prime minister. Kraisaak had visited Vietnam, and the piece wrongly inferred he had communist sympathies. To the Thai legal profession's utter amazement, Gorman decided not to appeal the verdict and to take some time out at taxpayers' expense. He wanted to make a point. Although Gorman had not written the offending article mentioning Kraisaak, as the registered editor and publisher of the newspaper he was liable for anything printed. Gorman ended up spending a month behind bars in a low security facility with labour. His prison job was cutting a not very large patch of grass belonging to the prison governor beside a lotus pond. Although a set of prison shears was provided for the job, a powered lawnmower was procured soon enough by Gorman's driver--who then adamantly refused to allow his boss to do any manual work. Thus the driver mowed the grass supervised by Gorman sitting in a thatched sala. Beside him was a telephone which had also been thoughtfully provided by the governor. In an earlier life, the handset had evidently resided in a hotel since the dial was ringed with the numbers to call for room service, laundry, reception, the barber and so forth. The prison was in Rangsit, and the highlight of Gorman's morning was watching the lotus blossoms close as the sun climbed higher in the sky. Geoffrey Goddard, a young sub at the *Bangkok Post* at the time, was also stringing for London's *Daily Telegraph*, and filed a diverting story. Gorman's displeasure was communicated from the edge of the lotus pond to the impudent Goddard soon enough. There Gorman was trying to suffer for his principles, and irresponsible journalists made it sound as if he was taking a carefree sabbatical at some meditation retreat.

☞ Bangkok lost one of its most accomplished foreign photographers in 2013. Luca Tettoni (Invernizzi), a

native of Turin, had been capturing exquisite images of Asian culture and architecture since the 1970s. But for the intervention of an alert editor, Luca's early passing would have been marked by an unfortunately phrased notice in *The Bulletin*: "Cremation followed by an informal wake at the FCCT." The gaff would have appealed to Luca's mordant sense of humour. In an interview with a magazine in Bali, he shared some lessons from a lifetime in photography. Extracts:

- "Any donkey can take a photo."
- "The only difficult thing about photography is getting paid for it."
- "The most common way a photographic shot is ruined is by listening to clients, art directors or passers-by."
- "'Photo editors' murder creativity-- they are the tombstone of culture."

And Luca's parting shot to young photographers? "Learn how to cook Italian food. It's better for you!"

☞ Lucy Kellaway of the Financial Times has for eight years been doling out her Golden Flannel awards to "the finest, freshest examples of corporate guff" from the previous year. She credited Reuters with one of the best euphemisms for firing people. Instead of being fired, canned or sacked, employees were "transitioned out of the company". She found other businesses which "disestablished" or "completed" roles. Her top prize went to HSBC which has rather sinisterly been "demising" its managers. "In 'demising', it has done the impossible and invented a euphemism that is harsher than the real thing," Kellaway observed. "It made it sound as if it were not merely sacking staff -- it was exterminating them." If she visited Bangkok, she would discover that HSBC has actually gone further. In 2012, it 'demised' most of its hapless customers when it completely 'disestablished' its retail banking business here.

☞ As the newspaper industry flounders in richer economies, it is going gangbusters

in Myanmar with new titles flooding an already cut-throat market. This has not been to the advantage of Ross Dunkley, the chippy Australian managing director of Myanmar Consolidated Media (MCM), which publishes the *Myanmar Times* weekly in two languages and employs some 300 people. Dunkley has so far been unable to take the English edition daily, reportedly because of a long running feud with Dr Tin Tun Oo, the 51 per cent majority shareholder in MCM along with his wife, Khin Moe Moe. Dunkley has recently been in court over an application by Dr Tin Tun Oo to liquidate MCM, and is also involved in another case with the majority shareholders over an angry confrontation with Khin Moe Moe in the

Myanmar Times office in January last year. It has resulted in Dunkley being charged with “outraging a woman’s modesty” and assault. Dunkley has filed counter charges of trespass and abusive language. Hearings in that case are continuing but a Yangon court in early January dismissed Dr Tin Tun Oo’s application to liquidate MCM. Dr Tin Tun Oo is a close associate of a former information minister, Kyaw Hsan, and his majority shareholding in MCM has always been controversial. It was acquired after the previous majority shareholder, Sonny Swe, was detained in November 2004 and sentenced the following April to 14 years’ imprisonment for censorship offences. Sonny Swe, who was released

under amnesty after serving eight years of his sentence, returned to MCM after his release in April 2013 but resigned in September. He resurfaced in October as CEO of the Mizzima Media Group. In an epic and very public feud involving full-page ads, Dunkley has been battling his estranged local business partner to prevent him closing down the *Myanmar Times*. Although he won the case in early January, Dr Tin Tun Oo has said he will appeal. Dunkley described his partner as “a reptile” in the 2011 documentary ‘Dancing with Dictators’. His own nickname in some quarters is Uncle Fester after the similarly bald character in the Addams Family. Things have not been going Dunkley’s way for some time, but he gets full marks for tenacity. Apart from an earlier spell inside the infamous British colonial era Insein Jail, Dunkley is said to have been the victim of an embarrassing incident involving the theft of a large amount of cash that went missing from a safe in his bedroom. He has been unable to leave the country for about a year while he is on trial over the confrontation with Khin Moe Moe at the *Myanmar Times*. Following his long absence from Cambodia, he was recently replaced as publisher of a sister publication, the *Phnom Penh Post*, by Chris Dawe. If nothing else, Dunkley will emerge with ample material for a riveting book. One enthralled observer describes these Burmese press shenanigans as the “Hunter S. Dunkley saga” and reckons nothing short of a mini-series can do it full justice.

*Remember,
you heard it
here first.*

