



PRIME MINISTER

**STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING, MP
OPENING OF THE MEKONG RIVER FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE, 8 APRIL 1994**

It is my great pleasure to present to the government and peoples of Thailand and Laos, the Mekong River Friendship Bridge - a gift from Australia.

We ask you to think of this bridge as a symbol of our friendship.

We hope that it will also stand as a landmark in a new era of relations between the countries which border the Mekong.

Above all, we hope that it will help to bring to people on either side of the river greater prosperity.

We are very proud that the skills and technology which built this bridge were Australian.

Not merely because it is a great bridge, but because it is a bridge to strengthen the traditional bonds between the Lao and Thai people.

Because it will create daily contact between them.

Because it will encourage cooperation between them.

Because it will encourage trade, promote development, boost commerce and raise the general level of prosperity.

The Friendship Bridge creates the first road link between Thailand and Laos in history.

It provides Laos with road access to the port of Bangkok. It provides Thailand with road access to Vietnam.

It establishes a land transport corridor from Singapore to Beijing, thus linking the dynamic economics of South-East Asia and southern China.

In these ways the opening of the Friendship Bridge is a real and symbolic contribution to the development of Laos and Thailand and the region.

There could be no more practical demonstration of the common interests uniting the countries of Asia than this bridge across the Mekong.

As the centrepiece of a new infrastructure framework spanning the region, it will help attract development investment and encourage economic development and growth.

It will complement the economic reform now underway in Laos and elsewhere in the region.

It is also a skills and technology bridge.

Fewer than twenty Australians were employed on this project, while about 500 Thai and Lao workers learned skills in such areas as environmental technology and engineering and construction techniques.

This in itself is a source of satisfaction for us - and another demonstration of the real and lasting benefits to be had from Australia's partnership with the countries of region.

It is a partnership which we want to strengthen and develop. Australia wants to play a positive and creative role in South-East Asia and through projects like this one we are proving that we can.

Before concluding I must congratulate the Australian companies involved:

Maunsell Sinclair Knight which did the preparatory investigation and design and supervised the construction phase.

And **John Holland Engineering and Construction**, the construction contractor.

I have no doubt that for the people associated with both these companies this is a very proud day.

And today we should also remember the role played by my predecessor, Bob Hawke who, in 1989, saw the potential of this project and gave it every support.

When people from Thailand and Laos cross this bridge I hope they will remember the Australian part in building it, and be assured that they have in Australia a good neighbour, friend and partner.

Australia hopes that you see in this bridge the way to a better future.

And we hope you see that we are part of that future.

We hope you see in the Mekong River Friendship Bridge the potential for many other rewarding projects and a relationship with Australia that grows ever deeper and broader.