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## **Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance Network Signs New Memorandum of Agreement at World Health Assembly**

NEW YORK, May 15 (AScribe Newswire) -- A new memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the Mekong Basin Disease Surveillance Network (MBDS) was signed today at the Palais de Nation in Geneva. The original MOU among the six participating countries was signed in 2001.

Health ministers from the network's six partner countries -- the Kingdom of Cambodia, the People's Republic of China, Lao People's Democratic Republic, the Union of Myanmar, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the Kingdom of Thailand -- gathered at Palais de Nation, in Geneva, Switzerland, for the signing. Officials from the World Health Organization and the Rockefeller Foundation were also on hand to witness the ceremony.

The MBDS was established in 1999 with support from the World Health Organization, the Rockefeller Foundation, and other partners, to encourage sharing of information and biological materials on disease outbreaks and to develop the capacity to respond effectively. MBDS member countries share land borders crossed daily by tens of thousands of people and animals, making the control of communicable disease a major logistical challenge.

The activities of the MBDS include regular, cross-border information exchange; training of health workers in epidemiology and disease surveillance and response; and joint outbreak investigation and response. The MBDS provides a neutral mechanism for information-exchange and cooperation among six countries with different political structures.

In March 2007, with support from the Nuclear Threat Initiative's Global and Health Security Initiative, the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Rockefeller Foundation, the MBDS organized a table-top exercise to test the preparedness of the region. Using techniques similar to those in modern war-gaming, the exercise participants from MBDS member countries responded to a plausible scenario involving a flu virus that threatens to spread into a pandemic. The successful exercise helped to foster cooperation among members as well as identify gaps and weaknesses in systems for detecting, monitoring, tracking and containing the deadly disease.

The new MOU for the MBDS calls for the establishment of a coordination office for the

Network in Thailand. In addition, the MOU notes that the priority diseases for the MBDS include dengue fever, malaria, SARS, and HIV/AIDS, as well as other emerging infectious diseases, such as H5N1 influenza. In June, several representatives of the MBDS will travel to the Pacific Health Summit in Seattle to present their work and future plans.

"The trust and friendship that has been built from several years of close cooperation among the epidemiologists and outbreak investigators from the six MBDS countries has greatly increased the capacity and efficiency for cross-border disease control in the region," said Dr. Suwit Wibulpolprasert, Executive Board Chair of the MBDS. "This network is an excellent example of effective implementation of the International Health Regulations, with rapid formal and informal reporting of diseases of public health emergencies across borders. I am thrilled at the re-commitment of the MBDS leaders to protect the health of populations throughout the Mekong Basin region, and throughout the region and the world."

"The MBDS has already demonstrated plausible approaches to multi-country and cross-border collaboration in disease reporting and outbreak response," said Judith Rodin, President of the Rockefeller Foundation. "The Network proved to be crucial in the response to SARS in 2003, and to catalyzing pandemic preparedness for future outbreaks in the region. The Rockefeller Foundation is proud to support the work of the MBDS, which can serve as a model for building the capacity of pandemic preparedness in other vulnerable regions around the globe."

The Rockefeller Foundation was established in 1913 by John D. Rockefeller, Sr., to "promote the well-being" of humanity by addressing the root causes of serious problems. The Foundation works around the world to expand opportunities for poor or vulnerable people and to help ensure that globalization's benefits are more widely shared. With assets of more than \$3.5 billion, it is one of the few institutions to conduct such work both within the United States and internationally. Visit <http://www.rockfound.org/> for more information.

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