

BUSINESS

Regional tourism officials vow to protect environment

Greater Mekong Subregion members to draft comprehensive tourism development plan that highlights eco-tourism

BY KAY KIMSONG

REGIONAL tourism and environmental officials have agreed to better protect their countries' natural resources in a bid to encourage eco-tourism, Tourism Minister Thong Khon told the *Post* Sunday following a meeting last week of members from the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS).

"All beaches, mountains, protected forest areas, bird and animal sanctuaries are to be protected for a long-term and sustainable development," Thong Khon said.

He added that participants at the GMS meeting pledged to work together towards a comprehensive tourism development plan.

"As tourism continues to play an important role in the development of Cambodia, it is essential to secure a framework that allows for dialogue across the instrumental sectors of tourism, environment and the private sector," said Arjun Goswami, country director for the Asian Development Bank, which was present



Energy giant Sokimex is planning an expansive resort on the top of Bokor mountain, pictured here. BRENDAN BRADY

at the meeting.

"I am very encouraged to see that steps are being taken to further strengthen this collaboration," he said.

The Kingdom's tourism sector continues to post annual growth of around 20 percent, bringing millions of visitors and much-needed revenue to the country.

But some observers warn that rapid growth in the sector may come at the expense of Cambodia's natural attractions, which risk over-development if the sector is not properly regulated.

Some large resort projects

in protected areas or national parks have already raised the alarm for some.

However, their supporters say these can be integrated with their surroundings, while also bringing jobs and infrastructure to some of Cambodia's most isolated areas.

"Cambodia has so many untouched areas," Thong Khon said.

"Fifty percent of world travelers target natural areas, so eco-tourism must be promoted," he added.

"Angkor Wat remains Cambodia's most popular attrac-

tion, but there are many eco-tourism destinations in the coastal areas or in the provinces near Vietnam and Laos that need to be protected."

Om Pharin, vice president of the Cambodian Association of Travel Agents (CATA), said the private sector was working with GMS members to broaden the region's tourism sector to take advantage of all that the countries have to offer.

"Not every tourist loves temples or other cultural attractions," Om Pharin said.

"Nature tourism is more attractive" to many people.

The GMS is comprised of Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. ■

VAST REGION

The Greater Mekong Subregion includes about 320 million people, the vast majority of whom live subsistence lifestyles in rural areas. Officials hope that eco-tourism would bring both jobs and infrastructure to these communities and lift them out of poverty.