OPENING A NEW WATERWAY FOR INTERNATIONAL SHIPS TO ENTER THE MEKONG DELTA

Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung on December 27, 2009 gave the kick-off signal for work to start on a project in Tra Vinh province to open a new waterway for large ships to enter the Hau River in the Mekong Delta.

This is a national project aimed at constructing on a steadier basis a waterway for fully-loaded 10,000 dwt ships and half-loaded 20,000dwt ships to enter the ports on the Hau River, thus helping to reduce transport charges on goods from the provinces in the Mekong Delta.

AN IMPORTANT PROJECT
The big waterway construction project intended for heavy-tonnage cargo ships to enter the Hau River in Tra Vinh province is one of the major projects specially important to the socioeconomic development of the Mekong Delta provinces. The detailed plan for Port Group 6 in the Mekong Delta, which was approved by the Prime Minister in Decision 1024/QD-TTg, dated September 27, 2005, defined the project to upgrade a waterway for large ships to enter the ports on the Hau River as a top priority. It is a precondition for the development of ports on the Hau River into larger ports able to accommodate 10,000dwt ships and 20,000 dwt half-loaded ships.

Following the Prime Minister's favourable comments on the project, the Ministry of Transport approved the said project in November 2007 which consists of the main 40 km long waterway, a breakwater, an embankment, a ferry terminal, a barge terminal for barges of 500 dwt, a bridge leading to Kenh Tat canal (short-cut canal -- this canal is so called because it is cut through the mainland), and a system of river traffic signs and maritime communications equipment.

This waterway is 40 km long from the Hau River to the sea, of which the river section is 6 km, the Quan Chanh Bo canal section is 19 km, the Kenh Tat (short-cut canal) section is 9 km long and the seaway 6 km long. The entire project is located in the area of two districts of Duyen Hai and Tra Cu of Tra Vinh province. Total volume of mud from the digging of a new canal and the dredging of existing canal sections to reach a depth of -6.5 metres in accordance with a naval chart is 28 million cubic metres.

To guarantee the stability of the waterway once it is in operation, consultants proposed building 36 km of embankment to protect the two banks of the canal. At the estuary where the Kenh Tat (short-cut canal) flows into the sea there are two 2,500m breakwaters designed not only to stop the force of the waves, but also to prevent sand from sifting up the estuary. All these elements will guarantee the smooth and efficient operation of the new waterway.

By Chu Vinh Hai & Pham Anh Tuan
Since the project will cut highway No 53 which is the main artery of Duyen Hai district, a ferry terminal will be constructed called Ta Ni ferry and a bridge will be constructed later.

Roads will also be constructed along the two banks of the waterway. The 5km southern road linking highway 53 with provincial road 913 will be constructed first, the other will come later. A 500 ton ferry terminal will be constructed downstream from the Quan Chanh Bo canal for use in importing and exporting goods into and from local areas and it will also be in support of the maintenance of the waterway.

A GATEWAY TO DEVELOPMENT

The project, with investment capital coming from the proceeds of government bonds amounting to VND5,000 billion ($270.27 million), is expected to come into operation by the end of 2011 with a capacity of 22 million tons/year.

The investor in the project is the Vietnam National Maritime Bureau (Vina marine) under the Ministry of Transport. The representative of the investor responsible for the control of the project is the maritime projects management unit No.3 with designing consultancy provided by Portcost (Vietnam) in partnership with Nippon Koei (Japan) and subcontractor DHI (Denmark). The building contractor is in partnership with Vinawaco, MCC, East Mekong Trade, Construction and Manufacturing Company (DMK) responsible for Bid Package 6A of the project.

The process of site clearance and resettlement of displaced inhabitants has been completed, including the disposal of unexploded bombs and shells.

While the project was in preparation, many domestic and foreign scientists sent in their opinions and suggestions about the project. Vinamarine on November 24, 2009 held a scientific seminar in Ho Chi Minh City with the participation of many scientists and representatives of agencies concerned. After discussion, the project to dig a short-cut canal through Quan Chanh Bo canal for large ships to enter the Hau River was chosen.

At present, the quantities of imports and exports into and from the Mekong Delta are around 15 million tons/year while Can Tho Port and Cai Cui Port – two largest ports in the region – are able to accommodate ships of only 3,000-5,000 dwt because of the Dinh An estuary often silt ing up leaving a depth of only 6-7 metres at high tide and 3-4 metres at low tide.

Vina marine has to spend VND14 billion-15 billion ($810,800) a year on the dredging of the Dinh An estuary, but the place silts up again only 2-3 months later. That is why 70-80 per cent of goods for export from the Mekong Delta must be transported by road to Ho Chi Minh City’s ports and to the ports in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province. This causes heavy traffic pressure for Highway 1, 51 and roads in Ho Chi Minh City which results in traffic accidents leading to serious consequences for society.

Also, as imports and exports must go through intermediary ports as points of transit, the cost of goods to and from the Mekong Delta becomes higher ($170 - 180/ container, or $7-10/ton) due to additional transport and warehousing charges.

Additional expenses and longer transport time handicap the Mekong Delta agri-products in terms of competitive prices and product quality.

Expert say the waterway to the Hau River project will create favourable conditions for the transport of goods in the Mekong Delta instead of passing through the port in Ho Chi Minh City, which adds to transport charges and thus causing the costs of products to rise and hindering the region’s exports. Once completed the project is expected to become the gateway to international trade from a region famed for its unique agro-products and seafood.