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- France provides 1 million euros for MRC
- Opium production in Laos, Myanmar remains 'stable': UN
- Five-year plan aims to raise Laos above LDC status
- Economic growth tops NA development debate
- Maternal, infant death rates declining but more work needed

France provides 1 million euros for MRC

(By Times Reporters)

The French government has contributed over 8.8 billion kip (1million euros) to the Mekong River Commission (MRC) to strengthen the Mekong hydro-meteorological network, a near-real time river monitoring system for flood and drought forecasting. The signing ceremony for the grant assistance took place in Vientiane on Friday, between the Regional Director in Cambodia and Laos for Agence Française de Développement (AFD), Mr Philippe Steinmetz, and the Officer-in-Charge of the MRC Secretariat, Dr Truong Hong Tien. The new funding made through the AFD supports the expansion of the Mekong-Hydro Meteorological Cycle Observation System (Mekong-HYCOS) for more accurate flood and drought forecasting, and the application of its analytical hydrological data for other areas such as fisheries, agriculture and navigation. "This grant will enable the MRC to continue to serve the member countries to provide timely meteorological data that is critical for flood and drought forecasting," Dr Truong Hong Tien said. The new funding is a follow-up to another 3 million euro grant for the first phase of the hydro-meteorological network project (2007-2012). During the first phase, the MRC established the Mekong-HYCOS

with 49 hydro-meteorological stations along the Mekong and its tributaries to collect near-real time data of water level and rainfall every 15 minutes and share them through the MRC database in Phnom Penh with the member countries of Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam for their own flood forecasting and river monitoring network. The data have been used by other users as well. During the second phase of 2016-2017, the MRC plans to expand the network with eight additional stations along the mainstream and to improve the understanding of river dynamics and the application of data for other areas of water resources management. France has been one of the major development partners of the MRC. It has so far granted about US\$6.3 million for various projects. The MRC is the inter-governmental organisation established to promote regional cooperation and facilitate dialogue on the sustainable management of the Mekong River Basin. Its members include Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The commission works across all sectors including fisheries, agriculture, navigation, flood and drought management, environment, climate change and hydrology.

(Vientiane Times 21 December 2015)

Opium production in Laos, Myanmar remains 'stable': UN

(By Times Reporters 22)

Opium poppy cultivation has stabilised at high levels in Laos and Myanmar, according to a new survey released recently by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). "The production of opium and two-way trade of chemicals going in and heroin coming out of the Golden Triangle remains a clear challenge to the rule of law

and stability of producing areas," said Jeremy Douglas, UNODC Regional Representative for Southeast Asia and the Pacific of the region straddling Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. The 2015 Southeast Asian Opium Survey shows that Myanmar remains that region's top opium producer and the world's second largest after Afghanistan, the survey

published on the UN News Centre's website on December 16 showed. Together, Myanmar and Laos produced between 731 and 823 metric tonnes of opium, most of which was refined into the equivalent of 73.1 to 82.3 metric tonnes of street grade heroin for regional and international drug markets, according to the report. "The region's demand for heroin remains at unacceptably high levels and transnational organised crime groups are making huge profits," Mr Douglas said. The report noted that Shan state in the north of Myanmar, which hosts a number of conflict areas and ceasefire groups, remains the centre of the country's opium and heroin trade, accounting for 91 percent of opium poppy cultivation in the Golden Triangle. Surveys of farmers in poppy-growing villages have found that money generated from poppy cultivation is essential for villagers threatened with food insecurity and poverty. Mr Douglas warned that the opium and heroin business threatens well-intentioned regional development plans. "The organised crime networks that benefit from Southeast Asia's illicit drug trade are very well positioned to grow their business alongside these rapid changes," he said.

"Both Myanmar and the Lao PDR need support to turn the situation around." Chairman of the Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC), Mr Kou Chansena, said Laos needs support from the international community to finance and run programmes that introduce alternative income-generating activities for opium growers to replace their illegal cultivation of the poppy. "Animal husbandry, cash crop cultivation and handicraft making are suitable alternative activities to help them quit opium poppy cultivation," he said, adding that knowhow trainings on these activities are also needed along with helping them find markets. To run the alternative programmes, he said, community funds should be set up where villagers could borrow to finance these activities. In addition, it is essential to rehabilitate opium addicts to prevent them continuing the habit. Mr Kou said the rising price of opium has continued to encourage villagers to cultivate the illegal crop, hindering the authorities' efforts to limit the area used to grow poppies. Statistics showed that raw opium is being traded at US\$1,800 a kilogramme and the price has trended to increase annually, according to Mr Kou.

(Vientiane Times 22December 2015)

Five-year plan aims to raise Laos above LDC status

(By Souksakhone Vaenkeo23)

The 8th national five-year socio-economic development plan (2016-2020) currently being drawn up sets annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth at not lower than 7.5 percent, which should drive Laos out of Least Developed Country status, the government told parliament yesterday.



Mr Somdy Duangdy presents the draft of the 8th national five-year socio-economic development plan.

Minister of Planning and Investment Somdy Duangdy, representing the government, presented the draft five-year plan to the ongoing ordinary session of the National Assembly (NA). Per capita GDP is expected to reach US\$3,100 in 2020 when the Lao population is expected to reach 7.3 million. This means gross national income (GNI) per capita will be US\$2,450, Mr Somdy said. To achieve this rate of GDP growth, the government will strive for 3.2 percent annual average growth in the agriculture and forestry sector, which will account for 19 percent of GDP in 2020. Industry is set to increase by 9.3 percent on average representing 32 percent of GDP, while services should increase by 8.9 percent ac-

counting for 41 percent of GDP by 2020. To attain these goals, the government needs about US\$27 billion or 30 percent of GDP to finance the five-year plan. Of this, state investment will account for 24-28 percent of total investment, private investment by both domestic and foreign investors will represent 54-58 percent, while investment through bank credit will account for 19-21 percent of the total. It is expected that national revenue over the next five years will reach 23-25 percent of GDP including national revenue, which is set to reach between 20-22 percent of GDP, while expenditure is expected to reach not more than 28 percent of GDP, according to the draft. The government will strive to increase the value of exports by 15 percent or more annually, while foreign reserves should be able to cover the cost of imports for at least five months. The government will work to ensure that inflation does not exceed 6 percent and the exchange rate remains at a manageable level, and that money growth matches economic growth. In addition, the government will strive to lower the poverty rate to 15 percent by 2020, while net enrollment in primary school education is set to reach 99 percent, and the literacy rate among people aged 15 years and above is targeted at 95 percent. Child mortality among infants aged less than one year is set to fall to 30 deaths per 1,000 live births, while the goal for the maternal mortality rate is 200 deaths per 100,000 live births. The government will also strive to increase forest cover to 70 percent of the country's total land area.

(Vientiane Times 23 December 2015)

Economic growth tops NA development debate

(BySouksakhoneVaenkeo)

Exploring measures that would ensure sustainable and steady economic growth topped the agenda during debates at the National Assembly (NA) yesterday, as law makers shape the country's long-term development vision. The debates followed Tuesday's presentation of the government's draft of its development vision through to 2030, a draft of the 10-year socio-economic development strategy for 2016-2025, and a draft of the 8th national five-year socio-economic development plan for 2016-2020. The draft five-year plan aims to raise Laos out of Least Developed Country status by 2020, when per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to reach US\$3,100. The draft 10-year strategy sets an ambitious goal to double GDP per capita compared to the 2015 figure of US\$1,857. The government will strive to achieve its goal of making Laos a middle income society, according to the 2030 vision. To achieve these goals, Chairwoman of the NA's Economic, Planning and Finance Committee, DrSouvanphengBouphanouvong, suggested the government create a human resource development strategy, saying the quality of human resources was a prerequisite for development. She recommended that over the next five years Laos place the development focus on the manufacturing industry in order to diversify exports, saying Laos' product range is too small. Given that construction of a railway

linking Vientiane with the Chinese border is expected to be complete in five years' time, DrSouvanpheng said Laos should take the necessary steps to turn the country into a transit and logistics hub. "Border checkpoints must be modernised and computerised to offer quick services," she said. The sectors concerned also need to pay more attention to agricultural production both for domestic consumption and export through the railway, especially in the five northern provinces the railway will pass through. To raise Laos above Least Developed Country status, NA members said the government should focus on four indicators: reducing malnutrition in children; reducing the mortality rate in children under five; increasing net enrollment in secondary schools; and increasing literacy in adults. DrSouvanpheng said the focus of investment in the next five-year plan should be allocated to these areas. Chairman of the NA's Culture and Social Affairs Committee DrPhonthepPholsena agreed that human resource development was of great importance and deserved appropriate investment. He also stressed the need to address malnutrition among children. NA members advised the government to pay more attention to raising the standard of education, saying that while thousands of students graduate from universities and colleges every year they did not meet the required standards.

(Vientiane Times 24December 2015)

Maternal, infant death rates declining but more work needed

(By Phetphoxay Sengpaseuth)

Although maternal, newborn and children's death rates in Laos continue to decrease compared to other developing countries more needs to be done, according to a leading official. Pregnant women can now access more health services at hospitals and dispensaries nationwide, which is bringing down death rates particularly in newborns and children under five. Minister of Health Prof. Dr Eksavang Vongvichit, speaking in Vientiane yesterday at the national launch of the "Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Service on Reproductive Maternal, Newborn and Child Health", said the Ministry of Health was playing an important role in implementing the health policy for all people. However, he said free health checks for poor families, especially pregnant women and children were needed. Currently, the poor had to pay for all services offered such as health checks at hospitals and dispensaries across the country. "Many pregnant women and children in the target group cannot access health services because they are poor and hospitals and local dispensaries are not responding to the policy of the ministry," Prof. Dr Eksavang said. "Although maternal,

newborn and child death rates in Laos have continued to decline, many poor women living in remote areas of the country can't access health services because they don't have enough money to pay for a hospital visit," he added. Prof. Dr Eksavang explained that as many deaths of mothers were related to pregnancy, giving birth and post-delivery, it was essential to encourage all expectant women to receive health checkups at least four times before giving birth. This included encouraging them to give birth at a hospital. There are various factors causing the deaths. Having irregular health checkups of mother-to-be is one of many reasons that mothers and their children are dying in Laos each year. According to the Lao Social Indicator Survey in 2012, the death rate of birthing mothers was 357 out of every 100,000 births. Meanwhile, the death rate of children under one year of age was 68 out of every 1,000 live births, and for children under five it was 79 out of every 1,000 live births. The official (international) database showed the 2014 maternal mortality rate for Laos to be 220 deaths per 100,000 live births, while the figure for 2015 is as yet undeclared.

(Vientiane Times 24 December 2015)