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Revue de presse du 13 au 17 Juin 2016



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Leu woman weaving her way to success

By Features Desk

When Sengnuan Sengpanyavong was a young woman her life was one of a poor farmer but since 2000 she has established a growing reputation for weaving along with other women in Phieng district, Xayaboury province.



Ms Sengnuan shows some of the Leu long skirts which are proving popular with all Lao women.

Ms Sengnuan, a Leu ethnic woman in Saengchaleun village, Phieng district grew up poor as her parents only grew rice as their main job with some weaving on the side. Her family's life changed for the better in 2000 when they focused on weaving long skirts and clothes for sale. Now Ms Sengnuan has an established shop located in Saengchaleun village featuring handmade Leu handicraft products. There are many local ethnic items in her shop such as long skirts, table cloths, bed sheets, pillow cases, hand towels, sashes and other clothing, and they also make to customer orders. Ms Sengnuan learnt to weave from her mother and cousins when she was a young girl. "I had a dream when I was a child that I wanted to have my own handicraft shop one day," she said. When she was young she helped her mother weave clothing and long skirts for Leu women. This inspired her to create many of her own motifs, different from what other weavers were offering. Sengnuan said in the past she and her friends in the village used to weave clothing only for a few months after they finished planting rice. During this period of

two-three months a vast majority of women stayed home and weaved clothes for their family. This got Sengnuan thinking. Why don't I weave long skirts for sale? She began testing the market by weaving a few beautiful long skirts which generated keen interest from customers. In 2000, she opened a small shop to sell handmade handicraft products and stopped growing rice. Her focus now was solely on weaving long skirts and clothes for sale. With many customers from Laos and nearby countries showing strong interest in buying her products, she pays other Leu women in Phieng district to weave long skirts and clothing for her. Sengnuan explained she has gone from paying just one weaver in 2000 to presently up to 300 in peak times with a number of women working fulltime to supply her while others are part-time to supplement their farming income. Last year, her handmade handicraft items were approved to be One District, One Product of Phieng district, Xayaboury province. Her family has also become a model family for conserving the culture of the Leu ethnic group through weaving. She doesn't let on how much money her family now earns from weaving. "It's better than growing rice. If growing rice was better I would stop weaving," she said with a slight grin. Ms Sengnuan has also had the pleasure of assisting many other Leu women to earn extra income from weaving. Her efforts have created jobs for women at home and helped to improve their lifestyles. "I've helped give work to more than 200 women at home through this business of selling handmade handicraft products and Leu weaving is being conserved through the women. If nobody weaves, the weaving of Leu as Lao culture ends," she said. Promoting Lao culture, particularly that of the Leu ethnic group, is something Ms Sengnuan and her mother are

determined to keep alive into the future. “Leu Long skirts are now popular with Lao women for work and attending important cere-

monies. And they're being worn at fashion shows in the provinces and Vientiane,” she added.

(Vientiane Times 13 June 2016)

Nation losing more forests than it gains, minister says

By Somsack Pongkhao

Minister of Agriculture and Forestry Dr Lien Thikeyo has described forestry management in Laos over the past 10 years as a failure, further deteriorating the country's forestry resources. “What we gain is not equal to that of what we have lost in terms of our forestry resources,” Dr Lien told a nationwide forestry meeting in Vientiane on Friday, which was attended by forestry officials from all provinces. “We observe that localities [provinces] which feature an abundance of forestry resources will gain greater development in their areas,” he noted. Dr Lien called for all sectors to strictly follow the Prime Minister's Order No 15 issued on May 13 in a move to address illegal logging. The order bans the export of all types of unfinished wooden products including timber and logs but all sectors need to understand the order properly and strengthen their collaboration to implement the order. Forestry officials have said that forestry management in Laos over the past years was complicated and financial leaks were also reported in this sector, causing great losses to the national budget. “One of the main reasons for our forestry decline over the past 10 years was due to our management mechanisms. We have a policy to give timber quotas for veterans, retired officials and those who sacrifice for the nation,” he said. However they continued to sell to businesspeople who eventually cut trees far in excess of the quo-

tas granted by the government. Permission to collect dead or poisoned trees is one reason for illegal logging, given that this process has never ended as people continue to poison the trees and use that as an excuse to cut them from the forests. Worse, timber quotas have been given to people for one province only to be later used as a reference or claim to cut trees in another province. Dr Lien also highlighted the overall picture of forest decline, which was partially triggered by the expansion of commercial agriculture production areas, hydropower development, mining, roads and other infrastructure projects. Many officials misunderstood the devolution of responsibility between the central and local levels based on the ‘3-builds’ directive with some villages and districts approving a wood quota for entrepreneurs despite the fact that it was not their role to do so. Lao forests have declined over the past decades. In 1980, forest cover was 49 percent, declining to 41.5 percent in 2010 before increasing to 47 percent at the current stage. “Our Prime Minister has made a significant decision to issue this order so we have to help disseminate this order in the entire society and work in cooperation to enforce it so as to address illegal logging,” Dr Lien said. “If we fail to enforce this order, we will never accomplish our strategy of returning forest cover to 70 percent by 2020.”

(Vientiane Times 14 June 2016)

Vientiane-Hanoi highway via Borikhamxay still an option

By Times Reporters

A 145 km section through Viengthong district linking the Laos-Vietnam traditional border to Pakxan in Borikhamxay province is still a distinct possibility to form part of a future Vientiane-Hanoi highway. An official from Borikhamxay provincial Public Works and Transport Department MrKhaythongKhamsounthone told *Vientiane Times* on Monday that currently only a narrow unsealed road extends 10 km out from Pakxan district where it ends. There is no road after that. However, he noted if the project went ahead it would have enormous benefits for the two nations. "If this route is developed the two capitals of Vientiane and Hanoi will become much closer by road," he said. Laos and Vietnam have been conducting preliminary surveys of three possible routes for the proposed highway. Based on the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, the first route to be surveyed ran from Vientiane on Road No. 13 South via the upgraded road in Borikhamxay province and on to Viengthong district where it would link to highways in Vietnam. The other route uses Road No. 13 North to Vietnam through

Xiengkhuang and Huaphan provinces. Currently, most people driving from Vientiane to Hanoi use the road that crosses the Namphao-Cau Treo border between Laos and Vietnam in Borikhamxay province. Information on the surveys appeared on the ThanhNien News' website on December 24. The manager of the highway project estimated the cost of the 707-kilometre route at US\$4.52 billion. In its latest plan submitted to the transport ministry, manager of the project (titled Unit 85) said the six-lane highway would pass through Vietnam's central province of NgheAn, allowing vehicles to travel at 80-120 km per hour. Another option would see the highway pass through the central province of Ha Tinh, with a total distance of 720 kilometres and a cost estimate of US\$7.1 billion. Unit 85, run by the ministry, dismissed the option as too costly, even though it would connect more Vietnamese and Lao localities. The Vietnamese and Lao governments are working on eventually creating links between the capital cities of Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.

(Vientiane Times 14 June 2016)

Province, district authorities have no right to approve logging

By SouksakhoneVaenkeo

Provincial and district authorities have no right to approve logging and the export of timber, but many local authorities have reportedly granted permission in the past, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry said last week. MrThongphatVongmany told a meeting held at the ministry on Friday that the Forest Law's Article 49 only gives the government the right to approve logging. And only the government has the right to approve the export of timber, according to

the law. Officials from Vientiane and provincial agriculture and forestry departments across the country attended the one-day meeting where they received an explanation about Prime Ministerial Order No 15 issued on May 13 that details measures to address illegal logging and improve domestic timber business operations. Given that many local authorities violated the Forest Law in the past by approving logging and permitting wood exports, MrThongphat highlighted that

their actions breached the law. He added that provincial officials in charge of agriculture and forestry affairs must fulfil their advisory role when the leadership [provincial governors or Vientiane Major] were considering the approval of logging. "The leadership might not know what the law stipulates, so the officials in charge are required to give recommendations so that they [the leadership] will observe the law," he told the meeting. Most of the logging approved by local authorities was in exchange for infrastructure development projects including road construction in which the exchanged trees were used to finance construction. Such schemes were reportedly leaving a loophole for massive illegal loggings. Reports emerged that many local authorities permitted businesses that funded infrastructure projects under the scheme to carry out logging to make way for a new road for instance, but more trees than needed were reportedly felled. Worse still, in many cases

most of the trees cut down to make way for a new road through a natural forest appeared to be the most expensive trees. Mr Thongphat stated it was an unbelievable coincidence that only expensive trees, such as Mai Dou (*Ptericarpus indicus*), grew where these new roads were planned, saying the trees grew randomly in natural forest and not a plantation. This indicated it was a tactic applied by logging businesses. The deputy minister pointed out that businesses were not permitted to carry out logging, but the Forest Law allows only state officials in charge to carry out the logging then sell the lumber through bidding process. In light of the issue, Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith on May 13 issued the Prime Ministerial Order No 15 prohibiting all state bodies from exchanging wood with development projects. The PM also instructed that all businesses are not allowed to carry out logging as it must be done by state officials in charge.

(Vientiane Times 14 June 2016)

Laos, China to ink further tourism cooperation initiatives

By Phaisythong Chandara

Kunming, Yunnan province, China: The Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism of Laos and China's National Tourism Administration will sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on 'Development of Quality Standards for Tourist Attractions' in the near future to boost bilateral tourism cooperation between the two countries.



Prof. Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara addresses the 4th China-South Asia Expo Cross-Border Tourism Cooperation Forum.

The cooperative platform will serve as part of capacity building to enhance the technical areas of the tourism sector to meet international standards of tourism service in the two countries. The initiative was revealed in a statement made by Lao Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism Prof. Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara during the 4th China-South Asia Expo on Cross-Border Tourism Cooperation Forum, held on June 14 in Kunming. The forum was part of sideline activities of the 4th China-South Asia Expo and the 24th China Kunming Import and Export Commodities Fair being held from June 12-17 with the theme of 'Promoting amity, sincerity, mutual benefits and inclusiveness for win-win cooperation'. During recent years, the tourism sector in Laos had made very significant achievements as reflected statistically,

Dr. Bosengkham said in his speech to the forum. Dr. Bosengkham noted that the country received more than 4.6 million international arrivals in 2015, a 13 percent increase compared to 2014 with most growth coming thanks to visitors from neighbouring countries. Meanwhile the number of Chinese tourists visiting Laos in 2014 was 422,440 and rose to 511,436 in 2015, with more expected in 2016, representing another significant and impressive increase year on year. Dr. Bosengkham also told the forum that travellers benefited from efforts to ease movements across shared borders between Laos and China with two international border checkpoints and six local checkpoints in use. Development of those facilities provided good potential to smoothly increase the flows of visitors among the two countries. Moreover, Laos has several cross-Mekong friendship bridges connecting to neighbouring countries and has improved road links to China and elsewhere.

For this reason, the country is increasingly considered as a transit hub between China to other Asean member nations. People can enjoy increasingly comfortable commutes overland as well as improved goods/cargo transportation services. More importantly, China and some Asean member States have already agreed upon the Kunming-Singapore Railway Project for a high-speed train being built and expected to be complete in the near future. This innovative and advanced technology should provide more comfortable and smooth linkage to attract the flow of more investment businesses and cross border tourism between China and Asean nations. An alluring prospect for cross-border tourism cooperation, Laos actively participates in various Expos and Fairs activities hosted abroad including in China. These fairs offer many countries and destinations that promote uniqueness and richness of their own

cultural tourism attractions with the aim to ensure mutual benefits and achieve common targets by seeking and expanding new tourism markets and supporting collaborative networks, not only within the region but also across the world, Professor DrBosengkham said. Yesterday's forum was attended by the

Member of Yunnan Provincial Government Party, Leadership Group Senior Provincial Counselor of Yunnan province Mr Liu Ping, the Director of China National Tourism Administration Mr Shao Qiwei and other invited guests.

(Vientiane Times 15 June 2016)

Govt concerned by depletion of aquatic life

By Times Reporters

The use of destructive methods, pollution and the rising population are among the main causes for the depletion of aquatic life in Laos, a senior government official has noted. Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry DrBounkhuangKhambounheuang told *Vientiane Times* yesterday that many people continued to catch aquatic life including fish, frogs and other animals in a destructive and unsustainable manner in response to market demand. "Worse still, many people catch fish and frogs during breeding season despite our law prohibiting this behaviour," DrBounkhuang said. "I acknowledge that the enforcement of our law is weak, causing people to carry out destructive forms of catching aquatic life, notably fish by using explosives and electric shocks." One villager from Bolikhamxay province said 20 years ago she could find fish easily while harrowing rice fields, but now even fingerlings were hard to see. Moreover she said this year she didn't hear frogs' singing as they were in the previous year. Similar reports have sparked concerns over the diminishing aquatic life in Laos which is considered the main source of food for local people. DrBounkhuang said the management of fishery resources and other aquatic life was ineffective as authori-

ties failed to control over-fishing and restricting the use of destructive methods.

"We have held a discussion with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce to agree on whether we should confiscate all destructive gear on the market. If we can stop this process, it will help us to better conserve our aquatic life," he said. Over the years, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has encouraged the establishment of fish conservation zones in various provinces in a move to sustain fish resources. The fish conservation zones are mostly managed by local authorities with participation from villagers. This means local people are not allowed to catch fish in the zones, but they can catch some in other areas outside the conservation zones, and those who fail to follow the rules will be fined. Critics say the fish conservation zones under the development projects are effectively managed, but the zones under the management of local authorities are not always successful. DrBounkhuang said it was vital to review the effectiveness of fish conservation zone management and discuss how to better conserve the fish resource. He said his ministry is also discussing ways to establish conservation zones for other aquatic life including frogs, crabs, snails and shrimps. "At the initial stage, we have to conduct a survey to identify which areas are

suitable for establishing the conservation zones and explain to local people the significance of the zones for them. If villagers understand what benefits they will gain from this project, they will be willing to take part

in it,” he said. One of the important features to note is that all relevant sectors need to increase cooperation to better conserve aquatic life for future generations.

(Vientiane Times 17 June 2016)