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Revue de presse du 11 au 15 July 2016



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Half of rural population still without sanitation

By Times Reporters

Laos has met the Millennium Development Goal target of 54 percent access to improved sanitation but more than half of the rural population still remains without. Urban access to sanitation facilities increased from 66 percent in 2000 to 94 percent in 2015, while rural access to sanitation facilities is catching up, increasing from 17 percent in 2000 to 56 percent in 2015. According to a report published on the World Bank website recently, Laos has the second-highest level of open defecation in the region, after Cambodia. Almost 49 percent of rural children and 61 percent of the poorest children were stunted in 2011. Research indicates that practicing open defecation has negative impacts on health, especially for young children. The estimated economic loss due to poor sanitation in Laos is US\$193 million per year, or 5.6 percent of the country's GDP. Supported by the World Bank, Laos is making efforts to scale up rural sanitation and hygiene. The Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach combined with sanitation marketing tools in 266 villages led to a 32 percent increase in sanitation access, eight times faster than the national rural average of 2.6 percent per year from 2014 to 2016. A manual and sanitation marketing tools produced by the CLTS were adopted by the government and integrated into teaching curriculums with 469 provincial and district levels trained on sanitation topics. A total of 113 villages were declared open defecation free and almost 40,000 people gained access, while partnerships with the private sector helped to simplify latrine purchase for households. To meet the national access target of 80 percent by 2020, over 200,000

people would need to gain access annually from 2017 to 2020. The report provides recommendations to achieve the development of a national rural sanitation sub-programme with a dedicated budget line under the Ministry of Health. This translates into a minimum budget requirement of US\$2.3-2.8 million annually. This report includes the integration of the rural sanitation programme with the government's nutrition programmes to maximise the increased funding for nutrition from donors. It recommends high-level support and funding commitments through the Poverty Reduction Fund to scale up sanitation service delivery in the most remote and poorest districts. Director General of the Housing and Urban Planning Department under the Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Mr Khamthavy Thaiphachanh, told *Vientiane Times* recently that it was imperative that concerted efforts and coordination of a wide range of stakeholders are utilised to improve water and sanitation if the MDG targets for 2015 are to be met. Mr Khamthavy said the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy had identified sanitation as one of four priority sectors to be developed to meet the government's economic growth and poverty eradication objectives. According to the WHO, over the past year, diarrhoeal disease is cited as the second leading contributor to the global disease burden, causing a loss of 72.8 million disability-adjusted life years. Improving sanitation and hygiene are front-line actions that can prevent diarrhoeal and other water related, including water borne and water washed, diseases.

(*Vientiane Times* 11 July 2016)

EDL to buy electricity from Nam Neun 1 hydro plant

By Times Reporters

Electricite du Laos (EDL) has agreed to buy electricity from the Nam Neun 1 hydropower plant to augment its domestic energy supply. The Nam Neun 1 hydropower plant will be built in Xieng Khuang province and will have an installed capacity of 124 MW with a production capacity of 570 GWh annually. The developers expect construction to start this year with electricity generation to begin by 2022. The cost of construction is expected to be more than US\$300 million. A Tariff Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Vientiane on Saturday by EDL Deputy Managing Director Mr Bounma Manivong and the project developers. They comprised the President of Vangsub Development and Investment Co., Ltd., Ms Viengvanh Phommaly, President of the THB Group Sole Co., Ltd., Mr Tong Homsombath, and Director of the Khongsab Road-Bridge and Architect Sole Construction Company, Mr Sounthone Sabandith. The ceremony was attended by the Minister of

Energy and Mines, Dr Khammany Inthirath, Minister of Science and Technology, Prof. Dr Boviengkham Vongdara, representatives from the ministries of Public Works and Transport, Finance, and Natural Resources and Environment, and the Prime Minister's Office, along with senior government officials, and EDL and company staff. The developers say the project will create job opportunities for local people and provide infrastructure such as roads, schools, clean water, a hospital and electricity that will benefit the provinces of Xieng Khuang, Luang Prabang and Huaphan. It will also generate more revenue for government coffers for use in the country's social and economic development. The developers believe the support and cooperation between the government and development partners will result in minimal environmental impacts through the use of advanced technology, as well as the project targets being achieved.

(Vientiane Times 11 July 2016)

French government gives boost to regional agro-ecology

By Times Reporters

The Lao government and a French government agency have agreed to implement the Agro-ecological Change in Southeast Asia project after the French government approved 2.7 million euros in grant funding.



Mr Khamphone Rasachack (right) and Dr Michel Eddi exchange agreements after the signing ceremony.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed in Vientiane yesterday between the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry's Department of Agricultural Land Management Director General, Mr Khamphone Rasachack and the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development's (CIRAD) President and Managing Director, Dr Michel Eddi. The ceremony was attended by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Dr Bounkhouang Khambounheuang and French Ambassador to Laos, Mrs Claudine Ledoux along with ministry officials and CIRAD representatives. The project is a regional initiative aimed at promoting agro-ecological principles and practice in the GMS countries of Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. It is expected to provide institutional and operational backstopping to the Conservation Agriculture Network for South-east Asia (CANSEA) while enlarging its scope to cover the whole field of agro-ecology, with conservation agriculture being one component of the diversity of practices found under the term agro-ecology, Mr Khamphone said. The project will also assist the actors of agro-

ecology in the region to increase their visibility and impacts along the value chain including farmers, research and development agencies, private companies, donors and policy makers. The degradation of agricultural resources is a major concern, in particular soils, he added. To address this issue, scientific collaboration on agro-ecology need to be carried out to jointly address the problems with the most accurate and environmentally-friendly solutions. "Therefore, this agreement could serve as a solid basis for our fine continuing cooperation," said Mr Khamphone. A total of 2.7 million euros has been committed, of which 2.5 million euros is to be provided by Rural Development and Agriculture (AFD) and 0.2 million euros by CIRAD according to the project's Specific MoU. Nearly 14 percent of the cost components directly under its responsibility are distributed at a ratio of 1.2 million euros for the Agro-ecology Learning alliance in South East Asia (ALiSEA) component, Professionals for Fair Development (GRET), and 1.5 million euros for the Coordination and CANSEA component (CIRAD). This estimate is of the direct costs arising from implementing the project and does not take into account the various travel and other expenses of all participants other than the members steering and managing the project. A major part of this project will be in the contractual area involving payments to service providers, operators, and partners under grants. The project does not intend to provide compensation for work involved in establishing certain aspects of the network and this may result in significant expenditure for all participating institutions. CIRAD also participates through providing expertise and taking responsibility for some logistical aspects through Cirad funds for the CANSEA network.

(Vientiane Times 12 July 2016)

E-passport aims to better serve Lao citizens

By Somsack Pongkhao

Laos has introduced e-passports for diplomats, officials and ordinary citizens in a move to hasten the application and immigration processes. The new e-passport scheme was implemented on June 30 after being developed by the Lao and Russian governments and the Russian company International Book-Security. A senior official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Consular Department, Mr Daophet Chanthasini, told *Vientiane Times* on Monday that under the scheme, the passport application process will be shortened, saving applicants time and money. "The e-passport scheme aims to better serve the public as people won't have to submit their application forms to many offices or departments," he said. Previously, the application process required licences not only from village authorities but also from the district police office, Vientiane or provincial police headquarters, and the Consular Department. It took almost a month to complete the process. The passport fee charged by the Consular Department is 300,000 kip. Those who want to get their passport within one day must pay an additional 150,000 kip. Under the new e-passport scheme, the application form can be downloaded from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' website (<http://www.mofa.gov.la>). A completed application form with one attached photo is required for submission to village authorities and then the Consular Department, without going to district police offices or Vientiane/provincial police headquarters. It takes three days to complete the process. The passport fee charged by the Consular Department is 400,000 kip with no exceptions. Appli-

cants can be diplomats, officials or ordinary citizens. Diplomats and officials can request the money from their employers or pay the fees themselves. In the meantime, ordinary passports are still valid. Officials don't have to pay passport fees. They need only submit a letter to certify their status as a government official to the Consular Department along with the application form. According to the Consular Department, holders of an e-passport do not have to queue up to wait for inspection by immigration officials but instead can go through an electronic gate where their passports will be scanned by a machine. Current passports are still valid but passport holders are required to go through manual inspections by immigration officials as usual. An auto gate for travellers holding e-passports has been installed at Wattay International Airport. This is the only international gateway in Laos designated to handle e-passports. Consular centres have been built in the provinces of Khammuan, Savannakhet and Champassak and are expected to open soon. In the meantime, consular centres in Xieng Khuang and Oudomxay provinces are under construction. Local centres mean people in the provinces won't have to come to Vientiane to obtain a passport. Officials believe that once existing passports expire, passport holders will apply for an e-passport, citing the easier and quicker immigration process and better security. The introduction of e-passports is part of the country's efforts to integrate its systems with other countries in the region which have already introduced e-passports.

(*Vientiane Times* 12 July 2016)

Electricity rates revised, households to pay lower bills

By Souksakhone Vaenkeo

The government has approved the revision of electricity rates which will see households pay less for the power they consume. The new rates come into force this month and will be reflected in the bills that are issued in August, a senior official of the Electricite du Laos (EDL) told *Vientiane Times* yesterday. The reduced charges will be subsidised by more than 8 billion kip per month, according to the official, who asked not to be named. In 2015, the EDL subsidised bills charged to poor families by as much as 150 billion kip nationwide, with impoverished households being charged less than the set rate. The new rates will be in effect from July 2016 to December 2017. Meanwhile officials are working on the long term revision of electricity charges, which are expected to come into effect in 2018. Electricity consumption will now be charged according to six rates: consumption of 0-25 kilowatt hours (kWh) will be charged at 348 kip per kWh, 26-150 kwh will be charged at 414 kip per kWh, 151-300 kWh will be charged at 799 kip per kWh, 301-400 kWh will be charged at 880 kip per kWh, 401- 500 kWh will be charged at 965 kip, and consumption over 500 kWh will be charged at 999 kip per kWh. The previous rates were as follows: 0-25 kilowatt hours (kWh) was charged at 348 kip per kWh, usage of 26-150 kWh was charged at 414 kip, while consumption in excess of 150 kWh was charged at 999 kip. The old rates, which came into effect in 2012, were previously set to be applied until

the end of 2017, but the government has decided to make an earlier revision. The decision was taken following recent complaints by consumers that electricity charges were too high, especially those charged in May, when many households saw their bills increase by two or three times. EDL said previously that charges could not be reduced to unreasonably low rates because, although several hydropower plants have been built in Laos, they are built by investors who have to comply with economic studies that take into account the investors' ability to repay the bank loans they borrowed. These are part of the loan conditions. Project concessions typically run for 25-30 years. When they end, the hydro plants fall under Laos' ownership and the country can make independent decisions with the public expected to benefit more from the presence of power plants, EDL said. As of 2015, Laos had 38 power plants built at a total cost of more than 81.7 trillion kip (US\$10 billion) with a total installed capacity of 6,265MW. Combined, they can generate 33,315 million kWh of electricity per annum, Minister of Energy and Mines Dr Khammany Inthirath said. Another 45 plants are under construction and more will be built in the future. Laos is aiming for a total installed capacity of about 12,000MW by 2025. So far, 90.6 percent of more than one million families across the country have access to electricity, according to the minister.

(*Vientiane Times* 12 July 2016)

World calls for urgent action to save “Asian Unicorn” in Laos, Vietnam

By Times Reporters

Saola experts from around the world are urging the Lao and Vietnamese governments, along with conservationists and corporations, to rally and commit to saving a species that is on the brink of extinction. The elusive saola, often called the “Asian Unicorn”, is one of the world’s most endangered and rarely seen mammals and was discovered 24 years ago in the dense jungles of Laos and Vietnam. Conservationists made the call on World Saola Day (July 9) with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Saola Working Group demanding urgent action to save the saola. The saola has only been recorded in the wild a handful of times by scientists since its discovery. Most recently, in November 2013, a camera trap took photos that gave renewed hope for its survival after 15 years since the last photographic evidence. It is threatened by poaching snares and destruction of its habitat from illegal logging. The IUCN designated the saola “critically endangered” and it was placed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species TM in 2006. Speaking on the day, Country Director of WWF-Laos Mr Somphone Bouasavanh said the saola may be small in stature but its importance to conservation in Laos and Vietnam is huge. “We have an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that the saola and its forest home survive, using cutting edge science, the world’s leading conservationists and cooperation across borders,” Mr Somphone said. WWF-Vietnam is

also launching the “Save Saola” campaign to provide a platform to raise awareness and increase commitment from both the public and private sectors to conserve the saola. “The saola symbolises everything that’s at stake for us. If we can save it, we can save our forests, wildlife and the ecosystem services such as freshwater that the people living here depend upon. So for us, this is not just a fight to save one endangered species. It is a fight to save what it represents,” said WWF-Vietnam Country Director Dr Van Ngoc Think. Under the Carbon and Biodiversity (CarBi) Project – supported by the German Development Bank KfW -- a network of protected areas had been created across the saola’s core range in Laos and Vietnam, covering more than 200,000 hectares of Annamite forests. The forest guards that WWF-Vietnam recruited from local villages had by the end of 2015 removed 75,295 snare traps and dismantled 1,000 poaching operations and illegal logging camps. Despite heroic efforts by the forest guards, the level of poaching and snaring remains high in saola habitat, threatening its future survival. If the saola is to survive in the wild, improved transboundary protected areas and increasing collaboration between Vietnam and Laos are urgently needed to protect the remaining intact forest and prevent poaching. In addition, demand reduction programmes for wild meat and medicinal needs, especially in Vietnam, could reduce the poaching pressure that leads to saola deaths.

(Vientiane Times 12 July 2016)

PM mulls forestry protection for sustainable hydropower

By Times Reporters

Prime Minister ThonglounSisoulith has stressed the need for forestry protection to ensure the long term sustainability of hydropower development, which promotes economic growth and poverty reduction.



MrThonglounSisoulith

According to the Ministry of Energy and Mines' strategic plan, Laos has the potential to produce about 10,000MW of electricity by 2020 and 20,000MW by 2030. But Laos will not meet the target if forestry resources continue to be destroyed each year, MrThongloun warned at a meeting on energy and mines development from now until 2020, the strategy to 2025, and the vision to 2030. Speaking at the meeting in Vientiane yesterday, he advised the ministry and other sectors to pay more attention to feasibility studies and to estimate the societal and environmental impacts of hydropower development projects together with developers before approving any more schemes. Local people should also participate in and benefit from project development through agricultural promotion and livestock breeding for sustainable income in order to reduce slash and burn cultivation, he added. Laos should be receiving greater benefits from hydropower projects to improve people's living conditions as well as generate more revenue for government coffers for use in the country's social and economic development, MrThongloun said. He observed that some hydropower projects have been highly bene-

ficial to local people and contributed to socio-economic development while others have suffered from limited investment funding, or a lack of experience and technical expertise. He believed that the feedback and experience gained from these projects would help to increase the capacity of Lao leaders and technical staff in negotiations and discussions with investors to ensure greater benefits for the nation. MrThongloun said hydropower development should focus on three goals, those being improvement of people's living conditions, the industrial supply of electricity, and electricity for export earnings. In previous years, the energy and mines sector has been the main contributor in terms of socio-economic development contributions, especially towards Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Over the last five years from 2011-2015, the value of energy and mines products reached 94.3 trillion kip. Compared to 2006-2010 this represented an increase of 9.22 percent and comprised about 12 percent of GDP, Minister of Energy and Mines DrKhammanyInthirath reported. A total of 40 hydropower projects have so far been completed in Laos, which have a combined installed capacity of 6,304 MW and are valued at around US\$10 billion, he said. About 91 percent of the country's households now have access to electricity. Meanwhile power is also exported to neighbouring countries notably Thailand, Vietnam, and Cambodia, with the network currently being expanded to Myanmar, DrKhammany said. Electricity exports last year increased by a factor of four compared to 2010, generating revenue of more than US\$300 million per year for the government budget, a trend which is expected to increase. Renewable energy developments such as solar power, biomass and wind were also carried out by the ministry. Currently, some

12,789 families in remote areas far from the grid have access to solar powered electricity.

(Vientiane Times 13 July 2016)

World Bank approves loan to Poverty Reduction Fund

By Time Reporters

The Poverty Reduction Fund Project will continue to improve livelihoods and upgrade infrastructure for residents of 150 rural villages in over 40 districts of 10 target provinces.



Deputy Minister of Finance, Ms Thipphakone Chanthavongsa and Country Director of the World Bank for Southeast Asia, Mr Ulrich Zachau shake hands after signing the agreement yesterday.

The Ministry of Finance yesterday signed a US\$30 million agreement with the World Bank aimed at continuing to finance Laos' Poverty Reduction Fund. The agreement was inked between Deputy Minister of Finance, Ms Thipphakone Chanthavongsa and Country Director of the World Bank for Southeast Asia, Mr Ulrich Zachau, and witnessed by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, Mr Somdy Duangdy. The programme represents the third phase of World Bank funding for the Poverty Reduction Fund, which is one of the main initiatives to address rural poverty in Laos. The funding will help to improve the rural poor's access to basic infrastructure such as roads and clean water, and help improve livelihoods with good nutrition in the target villages. Ms Thipphakone Chanthavongsa said the sup-

port was in line with the government's key objectives as highlighted in the 8th National Social-Economic Development Plan which recognised that improving access to basic education, infrastructure, safe water and roads was critical to address rural poverty. Despite rapid economic growth in the last few decades, poverty remains high in Laos, especially in rural areas and among ethnic groups. Many people who escaped poverty in the recent past have fallen back into poverty again. About 19 percent of people are undernourished, and 44 percent of children below-five are stunted. Mr Zachau said the Poverty Reduction Fund was a successful programme and the World Bank was pleased to help fund its expansion. "We welcome in particular the focus on improved nutrition, which is so critical to help all Lao children realise their potential and lead good productive lives," he said. Director of Poverty Reduction Fund, Mr Bounkouang Souvannaphan highlighted the success of the programme's first phase from 2003-2011 and second phase from 2008-2016 which had organised about 1,400 projects including the construction of schools, dispensaries, irrigation schemes, clean water systems and roads in the 10 target provinces. "The project has focused on the promotion of productivity, building development and model villages, from which local communities have received better livelihoods and have escaped from poverty," Mr Bounkouang said. The new World Bank financing comes from the International Development Association, the World Bank's fund for the poorest develop-

ing countries, in response to a request from the Lao government. It will allow the Poverty Reduction Fund to scale up some of the results from earlier project phases. In the new

phase, the majority of project beneficiaries will be poor ethnic minority groups who live in remote mountainous areas with limited access to infrastructure.

(Vientiane Times 14 July 2016)

PM advises expansion of hydropower feasibility studies

By Times Reporters

Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith has directed the concerned sectors to continue feasibility studies in relation to hydropower development as this energy resource has offered significant benefits in terms of socio-economic development. The country has rich natural resources which include a variety of rivers with the potential for hydropower development, the PM noted at the meeting on energy and mines development in Vientiane on Tuesday. The numbers of hydropower plants and their installed capacity might be higher than what has been planned and studied, Mr Thongloun commented. "However we have to choose experienced and famous companies from throughout the world to join the feasibility studies, designs and social and environmental impact assessments for sustainability," he warned. The energy sector should follow key measures and mechanisms to stabilise the national macro-economy, create resilience and protect the country from the risk of economic setbacks, the PM advised. The government also needs to focus on expanding productivity and markets while moving towards modernisation and industrialisation, Mr Thongloun said. "In addition we have to strongly promote SMEs, creating favourable conditions for people and farmers in local areas to access funding and markets." "We have to promote domestic and foreign investment by launching breakthrough approaches in addressing inappropriate mechanisms. We already have good

investment promotion laws but we also have to improve administrative mechanisms, ensuring quick, transparent and accountable services for entrepreneurs," he noted. "We have to try to address bureaucracy and irresponsibility among government officials and build a spirit of serving the nation and people among officials and ensure that most people get involved in national development." "We have to pay attention to regular and effective inspection affairs and focus on transferring knowledge and lessons to one another so that our society becomes a caring society with people willing to strengthen unity and cooperation," Mr Thongloun stressed. "We have to strictly follow the constitution and laws. The National Assembly assessed that in recent years law enforcement in our country was still weak." "We should also to set up a scientific research institute to promote research aiming to provide in-depth, analysis and credible information to the party and government organisations so that they can use it in issuing policies and legislation." Meanwhile renewable energy resources development such as bio-fuel, solar, biomass, biogas and wind should make more assessments on investment capital required and potential profits, he suggested. Some renewable energy resources require large amounts of capital for investment but offer a lack of profit, while some have low viability due to the lack of raw materials

(Vientiane Times 15 July 2016)

