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Laos, China agree on future cooperation

(By Times Reporte)

Laos and China have reached agreement on future cooperation with a number of documents signed in Vientiane during an official visit to Laos by China's Prime Minister Li Keqiang from September 8-9.



Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith (right) and Prime Minister Li Keqiang stand for their national anthems at the official greeting ceremony at the Prime Minister's Office in Vientiane.

Heads of the two governments, Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith and his counterpart Li Keqiang, witnessed the signing of 20 documents on cooperation, aimed at supporting the One Belt, One Road initiative, joint support for major production and investment projects, devising plans for comprehensive development, and electric power development plans. Cooperation agreements made after the bilateral meeting led by the heads of governments also related to formulating tourism and development plans along the Laos-China railway, Laos-China master plan on technical-economic cooperation 2016-2020, exchange of information on in-

ternal security law enforcement, cooperation in the cultural sector, customs facilitation, and banking cooperation. Aside from his attendance at the bilateral meeting with Prime Minister Thongloun, Prime Minister Li paid a courtesy visit to President Bounnhang Vorachit, met with President of the Lao National Assembly Ms Pany Yathotou, where they exchanged views and agreed on continuing to deepen friendship ties and other issues of mutual interest. After the bilateral meeting the two prime ministers held a joint press conference, where they reconfirmed the two countries adherence to socialist development, common ideology and goals, neighbouring amity and mutual trust. They agreed on accelerating the integration of Laos' 8th five-year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSED) with China's 13th NSED associated with the One Way, One Road initiative and the strategy on transferring Laos from a landlocked to a land linked country. The two sides will actively push forward construction of the Laos-China railway, accelerating primary phase preparations and associated works so that construction can begin within this year. Realisation of the Mahosot Hospital modernisation project, construction of checkpoint facilities, Road 14A upgrade, National Convention Centre canteen, and a project to build 10 schools, were included in the agreement between Laos and China. The two sides have agreed on upgrading cooperation in infrastructure, agriculture and forestry, energy, and telecommunications. In the social and cultural sector they will enhance vocational education cooperation associated with the main areas of collaboration between the two countries. In this, China will increase scholarships for Lao students, while Laos will continue supporting the operation of Chinese Cultural Centres in Laos and the Confucius Centre at the National University

of Laos. Future cooperation between Laos and China will also include the creation of consultation mechanisms at public security ministry level, arrest of suspected persons

hiding in one another's country and confiscation of associated property, transnational crime, and security along the Mekong River.

(Vientiane Times 10 September 2016)

Korea to provide surgery for Lao children

(By Times Reporters)

The Ministry of Health and Welfare of the Republic of Korea is providing free surgery for four Lao children who have congenital malformations of the legs or arms through the Medical Korea charity programme. The children will be operated on at the Korea University Guro Hospital in Seoul and then transferred to the Lao National Children's Hospital in Vientiane. Korea's Deputy Minister of Health and Welfare, Dr Bang Moon-kyu, on Friday presented the children with vouchers from the charity programme that will fund their treatment, at a ceremony held at the Lao National Children's Hospital in Vientiane. Also present on the occasion was Lao Deputy Minister of Health, Associate Prof. Dr Phouthone Meuangpak. The project coordinator explained that Medical Korea is the national brand that represents Korea's excellence and has given new life and hope to ailing children across the globe via a med-

ical charity programme with its state of the art medical technologies. The programme is supported by Korea's Ministry of Health and Welfare and Korean hospitals. Under this programme, from 2011 to 2015 a total of 310 patients from 25 countries have been filled with new hope. Nine Lao patients have benefitted, two in 2013, six in 2014 and one in 2015. This year, the four children chosen will have the opportunity to receive treatment in the Republic of Korea. Dr Bang Moon Kyu said that over past three years, the Lao National Children's Hospital and Korea University Guro Hospital have enjoyed cooperation in various fields. He told the children's parents not to worry while their children were in Korea because Korean doctors were expert surgeons and the children would enjoy better health after their operations.

(Vientiane Times 12 September 2016)

agricultural products exported to EU must meet health standards

(By Times Reporters)

Farms, market gardens, packaging units and companies that export plants and other agricultural products to the EU are required to register with the relevant authorities. This will enable them to obtain certification from district agriculture and forestry offices, according to a recent announcement by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. Plants and agricultural products destined for export must also be examined for Maximum Residue Limits to ensure they do not exceed set standards. They also must not contain any microbes, especially *Salmonella* and *Escherichia Coli*, and be shipped with a laborato-

ry test document that verifies them as being ISO 1725 certified. Before issuing phytosanitary certificates, the authorities will inspect and randomly collect samples from products to prevent infection, as specified by the European Union. The announcement was issued to increase the stringency of phytosanitary checks in response to warnings from the EU. It aims to ensure that the export of plants and agricultural products to the EU takes place in a transparent manner that is consistent with the Union's phytosanitary requirements. Beginning this year, the EU banned the import of certain vegetables after the discovery of

pests and chemical substances that exceeded the safety levels. The order stipulates that officials should temporarily cease the issuing of Certificates of Origin to companies notified by the EU until they have improved and can fully comply with the phytosanitary measures. The order instructs the Vientiane Department of Agriculture and Forestry and its provincial counterparts to disseminate regulations and conditions for the export of vegetables and vegetable products to the EU, which will help to raise awareness, understanding and implementation accordingly. It also indicates that the inspection system and phytosanitary certification by technicians and phytosanitary officers needs to be examined, with a report compiled for examination by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. In light of the problem, the ministry recently issued an order instructing provin-

cial departments and relevant bodies to work together to improve the safety standards of vegetable crops. The ministry has told the relevant authorities to stop issuing quality guarantee certificates to companies who were warned by the EU. The suspension will be imposed until the quality of vegetables is improved to meet the EU's standards. The authorities were told to make sure quality guarantee certificates were not issued for vegetables grown outside the country but were claimed to have originated in Laos under the allocated export quota. District agriculture and forestry offices and planting divisions have been told to circulate the EU's conditions and criteria to agribusiness operators and exporters so that exported farm products meet the criteria. The EU has issued 130 warnings since 2012 followed by the ban.

(Vientiane Times 12 September 2016)

US pushes for closer ties with Laos

(By Somsack Pongkhao)

The United States is keen to strengthen its ties with Laos in areas ranging from politics to economics and socio-cultural affairs, based on mutual respect and benefits. US President Barack Obama spoke about growing Laos-US relations when he addressed more than 1,000 people at the National Culture Hall in Vientiane last week. As we continue to deal with the past, our new partnership is focused on the future. We want to be your partners as you invest in the well-being of your people, and especially your children, he said. We're joining with Laos to promote nutrition and bring more healthy meals to children in school so they can grow strong, focus in class, and realise their full potential. Mr Obama also said the US wanted to be a partner with Laos in improving education, pledging to bring more American teachers here to help teach English, and more Lao teachers to America to strengthen their English. With regards to economic cooperation, the US is keen to boost bilateral

trade with Laos and generate job opportunities for local people. We want to be your partners as Laos forges greater trade and commerce with the world. As Laos pursues economic and labour reforms, we'll work to encourage more trade and investment between our two countries, and between Laos and the rest of this region, Mr Obama said. Mr Obama is the first US president to visit Laos. During his historic visit, he announced new US assistance to help Laos achieve its development goals. This year, USAID will launch a new five-year basic education programme focusing on early grade reading, according to the US Embassy in Vientiane. The White House selected Laos as a Challenge Fund country for Let Girls Learn, which works to address the many challenges adolescent girls face to attend and complete school so they can reach their fullest potential. The US Department of Agriculture committed an additional US\$27 million to continue its school meals programme, bring-

ing its total contribution for school meal programmes in Laos to nearly US\$100 million over 10 years. Mr Obama also announced that the United States has committed US\$90 million over the next three years to conduct a comprehensive UXO survey of Laos and for continued clearing operations, and will continue to assist UXO victims in coordination with the Centre for Medical Rehabilitation under the Lao Ministry of Health. These efforts will ensure that UXO victims have better access to quality rehabilitation services, including orthotics and prosthetics to improve their lives. America is developing its engagement with the Asia

Pacific as the region becomes of greater significance in the global arena. The US is also working to deepen its cooperative relations with Asean to promote peace, security and development in the region. We've increased the trade and investment that creates jobs and opportunities on both sides of the Pacific. Since I took office, we've boosted US exports to the Asia Pacific by 50 percent, Mr Obama said. Our young leaders' initiative is helping more than 100,000 young men and women across this region to start new companies and ventures. So we're connecting entrepreneurs and investors and businesses in America and in Asean with each other.

(Vientiane Times 12 September 2016)

Laos to benefit from extra Indian funding for scientific research

(By Times Reporters)

Laos will benefit from the Asean-India Science and Technology Development Fund (AISTDF) provided by the Indian government, following a substantial increase in funding. The Indian government last week confirmed that it will increase the size of the Fund from US\$1 million to US\$5 million. Any of the 10 Asean member countries can submit proposals to request funding to support their research activities. Deputy Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Houmphanh Intharath, recently attended the Fund's 5th Meeting of the Governing Council on the importance of supporting human resources in the Asean technology sector, including in Laos. The meeting was titled the 11th Asean-India Working Group on Science and Technology, with Mr Houmphanh attending in his capacity as President of the the Asean Committee on Science and Technology. He said Laos and other Asean member countries could submit a proposal for a technology project to request support from the Fund, to be provided to the applicant country's Ministry of Science and Technology. Increasing numbers of applicants from Asean have been registering each year, although only a small number have come from

Laos, Mr Houmphanh said. Secretary at the Indian government's Department of Science and Technology, Professor Ashutosh Sharma, said the new support will run from 2017 to 2020 under the AISTDF. The Fund is a multilateral arrangement between India and Asean member states supported by the government of India, with a focus on providing support for scientific research and development. It also exists to support development towards innovation in industry, training, and short courses in science and technology and innovation, as well as other activities involving researchers and students in Asean. Mr Houmphanh said the recent meeting in India reviewed human resource development in technology and partnership development activities through joint science projects between Asean and India. During the meeting, participants reported on the progress of their activities and discussed plans for the Asean-India Portal on Technology Information and Commercialisation and Intellectual Property Rights including Quality Systems in Manufacturing. There were discussions about the management of the Fund, and the sharing of experiences in science and technology between students from Asean and India. Special

fields of interest are the science and technology sectors, pharmaceuticals, food security, malaria control, and advanced materials. Mr Houmphanh said the meeting included an announcement by the Indian government that the number of scholarships for students in Asean countries would be increased from 30 to 100 annually from 2017 to 2020. The Indian government set up the Fund in 2006,

when it was agreed that India and Asean would undertake collaborative steps in technology development in areas of common interest including biotechnology and pharmaceuticals, agriculture for food security, and advanced materials through the creation of a common Asean-India Sciences and Technology Development Fund.

(Vientiane Times 12 September 2016)

Japan supplies safe water to homes in Laos

(By Times Reporters)

Japan, which has one of the world's highest rates of public water supply coverage, along with good reliability, has been supporting the development of waterworks in Laos. Laos has been developing dramatically, with an estimated average economic growth rate of 7.67 percent over the past five years. But currently only about 20 percent of the population have access to safe piped water and in rural areas people depend on water from wells some of which may not be safe, according to the Japanese government's 2016 report on 'Helping to Build Asia's Infrastructure' that was delivered at the 28th and 29th Asean Summits and Related Summits from September 6-8 in Vientiane. One example of the initiative is the construction of a water treatment plant in Thakhaek district, Khammuan province, completed in March this year with grant aid under Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, the report noted. In addition to the financial assistance, Japan has for many years been providing assistance in close cooperation with Japanese local authorities that handle the supply of public water in Japan. The report noted that the most active of such efforts currently underway is called MaWaSU. Launched in 2012 the project aims to provide operational support to all 18 provincial Water Supply State Enterprises (WSSEs) in Laos. To accomplish this in five years, the project chose three of the WSSEs to become mentors for the remaining

WSSEs. The project's full English title is Capacity Development Project for Improvement of Management Ability of Water Supply Authorities while the short name derives from the Japanese verb *mawasu*, meaning 'cycle' or 'circulate'. The report noted this bilingual pair of names refers to the project's aim of enhancing the operational management capacity of WSSEs and implementing the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Mr Masahiro Shimomura, serving as a long-term expert advisor for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) in Laos, explained the distinctive approach taken under this project. Unlike a project where the donor country simply builds waterworks infrastructure, MaWaSU focuses activities aimed at autonomous development by local authorities five to ten years in the future. Mr Shimomura had local waterworks employees draw up their own operational manual based on advice from the Japanese team. Putting it together themselves made them think concretely about future operations and maintenance management, he said. After the waterworks network is constructed with technical and financial assistance from the outside, it's important for them to develop it at their own initiative. And for this purpose it's necessary for a sense of self-reliance to take root, he added. Economic considerations are also a crucial part of waterworks management. Mr Shimomura offered advice on the importance of finding leaks and introduced Japan's

water supply volume analysis and other technology. He conveyed the mind-set required to take proper advantage of technology and systems using a grassroots approach tailored to those on the receiving side. In areas where tap water has become available, women and children have been freed from

the task of drawing water from wells, and living conditions have improved. Japanese waterworks experts are continuing to work with pride to increase the coverage of the water supply system in Laos and elsewhere, seeking to help create a world where safe tap water is a matter of course, the report noted.

(Vientiane Times 13 September 2016)

Eight priorities to provide lasting benefits for Asean Community building: Minister

(By Times Reporters)

The eight priority deliverables determined under Laos' Asean Chairmanship this year will yield longlasting benefits in pushing forward the realisation of the Asean Community Vision 2025 and regional development, a minister has said. Minister to the Prime Minister's Office and Asean Senior Officials' Meeting Leader of Laos, Mr Alounkeo Kittikhoun, made the comment when addressing the media yesterday after Laos successfully hosted the 28th and 29th Asean Summits and related summits that were held back-to-back in Vientiane last week. As Laos chairs Asean in 2016 following the establishment of the Asean Community at the end of last year and the adoption of the Asean Community Vision 2025 - Laos' chairmanship set priorities for realising this vision, he said. The theme Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic Asean Community under Laos' Asean chairmanship reflects the importance attached to realising this vision. Mr Alounkeo described the eight priority deliverables under Laos' Asean chairmanship as longlasting assets that would drive regional development. The eight priorities cover critical areas of trade facilitation, food safety, access to finance for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), an enabling environment for MSMEs, tourism, special economic zone development and collaboration, and narrowing the development gap among the Asean member states. The minister welcomed the

adoption of the third Work Plan of the Initiative for Asean Integration (IAI Work Plan III), in which the leaders of the founding Asean member countries committed to help lessen the development gap between all Asean members. He said Laos prioritised trade facilitation because of the fact that there was room to improve and facilitate cross-border trade in order to boost trade and investment in the region. Given that MSMEs have been fundamental to the Asean economy, especially in Laos where MSMEs account for more than 90 percent of all registered business units, Laos has prioritised the sector as one of the drivers of regional growth. The concept, he said, is to facilitate the MSMEs to access finance. Enhanced regional growth requires a strong network of connectivity and Asean leaders have adopted the Vientiane Declaration Plan to push forward connectivity, he said. The minister added that a number of documents had been compiled to translate and realise the eight priorities, and documents concerning trade facilitation had been adopted by the Asean leaders. The framework document (on trade facilitation) will be in use for a long time, Mr Alounkeo said. Prioritising special economic zone development will enable Asean member countries to work together to develop uniform guidelines to regulate and manage the zones to maximise their development and cooperation among the Asean member countries. Mr Alounkeo hailed Laos' success-

ful Asean chairmanship and the country's hosting of the summits, during which a

number of joint statements were issued.

(Vientiane Times 13 September 2016)

Laos-China railway construction to begin in December

(By Somsack Pongkhao)

Construction of a historic railway linking Vientiane to the Chinese border over a distance of 427 km is expected to begin in December this year, an official in charge has said. Agreements with six Chinese construction companies and six consultancy firms will be finalised next month which will pave the way for the start of construction at the end of this year. Director of the Laos-China Railway construction project and Director of the Lao National Railway Company, Dr Koung Souk-Aloun, told *Vientiane Times* yesterday We have already signed an agreement with one Chinese construction company last year. We will sign agreements with the other five Chinese construction companies and consultancy firms next month. Meanwhile, the international trade publication *Global Construction Review* reported that the China Railway Group had won a US\$1.2bn contract to build a large section of railway through Laos. The group's announcement to the Hong Kong Stock Exchange last week drew a thumbs up from ratings agency Moody's, which said the win would help it gain more business traction in Laos. Three subsidiaries of the group will build sections I, II, and III of the Laos-China railway, which is considered a crucial step in China's plan for a continuous rail link all the way south to Singapore. An official ground-breaking ceremony for the almost-US\$6-billion project took place in Vientiane in

December last year to mark the 40th anniversary of the foundation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic. However, more work remains to be done including compensation for those affected by the project and demarcation of the precise route the railway will take. Dr Koung said compensation payouts to the owners of land and other property on the railway route would be completed this year. Detailed demarcation of the project corridor for various planned stations was also needed before construction could begin, he said. When asked which sections of the railway would be built first, Dr Koung said construction of all sections would take place simultaneously. The planned single track with a 1.435-metre standard-gauge rail network would have 33 stations, of which 21 would be operational initially, according to the Ministry of Public Works and Transport. There will be 72 tunnels with a total length of 183.9 km, representing 43 percent of the project's total length. The line will also have 170 bridges of 69.2 km, accounting for 15.8 percent. Passenger trains will travel at a speed of 160 km per hour, while the speed of rail freight will be 120 km per hour. The railway in Laos will link with the track in Thailand to form part of the regional rail link known as the Kunming-Singapore railway, covering a total distance of some 3,000km.

(Vientiane Times 15 September 2016)

Funding needed to improve lives of disabled people

(By Times Reporters)

The Cooperative Orthotic & Prosthetic Enterprise (COPE) Centre in Vientiane is continuing its work to raise money to improve conditions for disabled people in Laos, with over 1,000 people in need of the centre's help. COPE Chief Executive Officer Ms Bounlanh Phayboun told *Vientiane Times* on Wednesday that more than 1,000 disabled people are currently registered at the Medical Rehabilitation Centre on Khouvieng Road. Some 30 to 35 percent of those seeking help have been injured and disabled in accidents involving unexploded ordnance (UXO). Ms Bounlanh said Every year, we need US\$500,000 to US\$600,000 to fund our work. Some years we need US\$800,000 to US\$1,200,000 if we have to improve or build new facilities or offices. But we set funding targets and so far each year we have been able to meet those targets. Every year we receive money from international organisations and also sell products at the centre such as paper bags, cloth bags, clothing items, mugs and other items, she added. Most of the international organisations that support the centre are based in the US, Australia, Canada and Norway. Funding from the US government and other bodies enables the Centre to provide people with disabilities, including UXO survivors, with access to prosthetic and rehabilitation services. The

Cooperative Orthotic and Prosthetic Enterprise also assists and provides prosthetics and equipment for the manufacture of prostheses at the Medical Rehabilitation Centres in Vientiane, Xieng Khuang, Luang Prabang, Savannakhet and Champassak provinces. These centres make prosthetics and provide physical rehabilitation services for officials who were injured in the war as well as serve other disabled people in Laos. During the 28th and 29th Asean Summits held in Vientiane last week, US President Barack Obama visited the COPE Centre and met some of the people who had been injured in UXO-related accidents. During his visit, Mr Obama talked to a UXO survivor, Thoummy Silamphan, who was injured as a boy when a device exploded in Xieng Khuang province. Speaking on the occasion, Mr Obama said We see the determination in the survivors of UXO accidents. Some of you heard me talking to Thoummy Silamphan, who joins us here today. When he was just a young child, he was badly wounded by a UXO explosion and lost his left hand. But rather than losing hope, he's dedicated his life to providing hope for others. Through his organisation, the Quality of Life Association, Thoummy has helped survivors get medical care, find work, and rebuild their lives with a sense of dignity.

(*Vientiane Times* 15 September 2016)

Laos to commence second social indicator survey

(By Times Reporters)

The Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB) under the Ministry of Planning and Investment, together with the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Sports, relevant line ministries and development partners are set to commence the second Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS II).



Assoc Prof. Dr Phouthone Meuangpak, Dr Samaychanh Boupcha, Ms Hongwei Gao, and Ms Frederika Meijer sign the MoU.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the implementation of LSIS II 2016-2017 was signed yesterday in Vientiane between Deputy Minister of Health Assoc Prof. Dr Phouthone Meuangpak, Head of the LSB Dr Samaychanh Boupcha, UNICEF's Representative to Laos Ms Hongwei Gao, and UNFPA's Representative to Laos, Ms Frederika Meijer. The survey will take place in 2016 and 2017, with results expected to be made public in 2018. Speaking in his remarks, Dr Samaychanh Boupcha said the Lao Social Indicator Survey is a nationally representative sample survey which combines the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) and Lao Reproductive Health Survey (LRHS). The two surveys which have been generally conducted at a similar time, produce a variety of national figures for social indicators. Therefore, in order to maximise government resources as well as resources contributed by development partners and achieve a set of single national figures for social indicators both surveys were com-

bined to create the LSIS, he added. Dr Samaychanh said the first Lao Social Indicator Survey was carried out in 2011-2012 by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and Lao Statistics Bureau (LSB) in collaboration with concerned line ministries. The financial and technical support was provided by the government, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), Luxembourg Government, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Health Organisation (WHO), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), and the World Food Programme (WFP). The LSIS was the first national survey that provided ranges of social and economic information that was then integrated into planning, advocacy, and updating the status of many core interventions. Specifically, the LSIS I provided baseline data for the 7th National Socio-Economic Development Plan (NSEDP) and continued monitoring of progress towards the MDGs, Dr Samaychanh said. Under statistical law and the Strategy for the Development of the National Statistics System 2010-2020, every five years, the government of Laos is committed to conduct a second round of LSIS from this year, which shall be known as LSIS II. Similar to LSIS, the LSIS II will benefit from the standard methods used worldwide, based on the updated MICS6 modules with added on modules from the Demographic Health Survey. By using the same methodology, surveys can be compared over the years, allowing for trend analysis and comparison to other countries. Dr Samaychanh said LSIS II will continue to provide valuable data in

areas including the socio-economic situation of children, women, men, and households. It will cover multiple indicators on health, nutrition, education, water and sanitation, marriage and sexual activity, fertility and mortality, contraception, HIV/AIDS, child pro-

tection, and use of mass media and information technology. These data and information are significant for the monitoring and implementation of the 8th NSEDP and SDGs, Dr Samaychanh added.

(Vientiane Times 16 September 2016)

EAS countries escalate fight against human trafficking

(By Somsack Pongkhao)

East Asia Summit (EAS) member countries have agreed to deepen their coordinated action in the fight against human trafficking and responses to migrants in crisis. In their Declaration issued after the 11th EAS Summit held in Vientiane last week, the EAS leaders agreed on the urgency of countering trafficking in persons in all its forms, including migrants who may be exploited during the migration process. The leaders expressed serious concern about the large global displacements of people caused by conflict and crises including the high numbers of displaced women and children, as well as the tragic loss of life at sea and the abuse and exploitation of people. Of particular concern are those who are in vulnerable situations, at the hands of people smugglers and perpetrators and accomplices of trafficking in persons. In addition, Asean leaders adopted at the 28th and 29th Asean Summits last week the Vientiane Declaration on Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment towards Decent Work Promotion in Asean the move expected to better regulate employment and address labour exploitation. Minister of Foreign Affairs Saleumxay Kommasith told a press conference on Tuesday that the two documents would be instrumental references to regulate employment and address human trafficking. The statements [of the leaders in the declaration] made adamant the intention of the leaders of the involved countries in addressing the issues, he said. The declaration would be a reference for the involved countries to draw

up bilateral agreements to regulate the issues, Mr Saleumxay said. However, he stated that some Asean member countries already had bilateral mechanisms in place to regulate the issues. In the context of Laos, whose labour force has flocked to neighbouring Thailand both legally and illegally to seek employment opportunities, the governments of the two countries have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on labour cooperation to regulate the issues. More than 60 per cent of over 200,000 Lao workers were working in Thailand illegally, the minister said citing unofficial data. He added that the governments of Laos and Thailand have cooperated in verifying nationalities of illegal workers to legalise their status. Media reports have emerged from time after time that Lao workers, notably those without legal documents, fell victims to human trafficking in Thailand. The minister stated that the declaration adopted at the summits would be an important document for the member countries to improve the existing mechanisms to streamline processes that could better assist the victims of human trafficking and regulate illegal employment. In the said Vientiane Declaration, the Asean leaders vowed to strive to take necessary concrete actions towards the transition from informal employment to formal employment in Asean member states. They also pledged to promote the elimination of forced labour, child labour, violence in the workplace and all forms of discrimination, including gender inequality.

(Vientiane Times 16 September 2016)

Oudomxay plans to attract more tourism investment

(By Times Reporters)

Oudomxay province intends to attract more investors to develop the tourism sector by putting in place open policies for both domestic and foreign companies. Provincial Information, Culture and Tourism Department' Tourism Section Head MrVanhMingboupha told *Vientiane Times* yesterday that many investors have expressed interest in tourism development within the province, with six companies conducting feasibility studies for new visitor attractions in Xay, Houn, and Pakbeng districts. These companies are mainly from China and Thailand, he said. Beside these firms many other operators have expressed interest in opening tour companies and developing tourism sites in the province, especially natural tourism sites at waterfalls, caves and the Nam La River. However, they haven't yet come to conduct feasibility studies at tourism sites, MrVanh added. Oudomxay had considerable tourism potential because it is linked to China, so the department believed more foreign investors would show interest in the tourism sector, he explained. Last year the province also opened a tourism information centre for the convenience of domestic and foreign visitors who want to know more about various tourist sites in the province. Oudomxay, located in

the heart of the nation's north, has potential but relatively few tourism sites have been developed thus far. There are currently 106 tourism sites, 12 of which are of historical interest, 40 are cultural sites, and 54 are areas of natural beauty. Currently only 33 have been developed and opened for the public. The number of tourists visiting the province has increased steadily over the past few years. In 2013-2014, there were almost 187,240 tourists visiting the province, including more than 102,000 foreign visitors. These figures increased to 251,488 in 2014-2015, of which some 127,000 were foreigners, and the province earned revenue of over US\$12 million from its tourism services, according to the department. MrVanh highlighted the most beautiful natural site at Nam Kat waterfall, about 20 km from the provincial capital, where activities such as trekking, mountain climbing and biking, abseiling, zip-lining, a tree-house sleepover and traditional lifestyle education were all on offer. Other popular destinations include Chom Ong cave in Xay district, Tad Ta Lae waterfall in Houn district, Tad Lak Ha waterfall in Xay district and Buddha's Protective Shield in Pakbeng district.

(*Vientiane Times* 16 September 2016)