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Asean chairmanship puts spotlight on Laos

Somsack Pongkhao

Laos is in the spotlight of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), with less than two months to go for the country to assume the chairmanship of the regional bloc amid a range of global challenges.

The Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Mr Saleamxay Kommasith, recently highlighted opportunities and challenges for Laos in leading the regional grouping. Laos is set to promote community building and enhance cooperation on Asean connectivity and resilience during its term as chair.

"The global situation now and in 2024 will be so different from that in 2016, when Laos assumed the Asean chair for the second time," Mr Saleamxay told a news conference last week.

"We are living in an era of geopolitical and geo-economic rivalry and Asean is no exception, as it has been affected by situations across the world."

The conflicts in the Middle East and in Ukraine, the Myanmar issue, and the



Mr Saleamxay Kommasith (right) at the launch of the official website of Laos' Asean chairmanship in 2024. --Photo KPL

situation in the South China Sea and the Korean peninsula have all affected Asean as a whole.

"More challenges have been added in front of us. These are challenges we foresee under the chairmanship of Laos," he said.

Southeast Asia is a dynamic region with rapid growth that has also become

a centre of strategic rivalry.

All eyes will be on how Vientiane represents and leads Asean in dealing with all these challenges. "On top of that, the economic situation does not look promising. We can see an economic downturn across the world. This is another challenge facing Asean under the chairmanship of Laos," Mr Saleamxay said.

However, the Deputy Prime Minister believes that with the unity and support of all Asean member countries, dialogue partners and other external partners, Laos' chairmanship will be successful and Asean as a whole will overcome all these challenges.

Mr Saleamxay highlighted

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Palestinian death toll in Gaza surpasses 13,000

GAZA (Xinhua) -- Gaza's government media office announced on Sunday that the Palestinian death toll in the Gaza Strip has exceeded 13,000 since the Israel-Hamas conflict erupted on Oct. 7.

Ismail al-Thawabta, the director general of the media office, said at a press conference that among the dead were 5,500 children and 3,500 women, while more than 30,000 others were variously injured.

Al-Thawabta said the number of missing persons has surpassed 6,000, including 4,000 children and women still under the rubble of buildings destroyed by Israeli attacks.

Israel has been carrying out attacks on Gaza over the past weeks to retaliate against the Hamas surprise attack on southern Israel on Oct. 7, during which Hamas militants killed about 1,200 people and took more than 200 hostages.

Laos, Australia partner to strengthen teacher development

According to a new report, the Australian Government's flagship education programme in Laos, BEQUAL, has had a positive impact on teaching quality, improved literacy and increased student engagement.

Times Reporters

Recent research has revealed that three years after the introduction of a new Lao language Grade 1 curriculum, supported by the Australian Government's Basic Education Quality and Access in Lao PDR (BEQUAL) programme, teachers demonstrated increased knowledge and confidence and students are more engaged in the classroom,



leading to improved literacy. BEQUAL Phase 1 (2015-2022) developed curriculum orientation training, provided teaching and learning resources, and supported education support grants in target districts.

"The Australian and Lao Governments are united in our dedication to improving teaching quality and student learning outcomes for all

Laos students, especially those experiencing disadvantage. While COVID-19 disruptions had a significant impact on schools and teachers throughout the country, the improved outcomes in Grade 1 teachers' knowledge, attitudes and practices are exactly what we hoped to achieve with the new primary curriculum," said the Director General of the Research Institute

for Educational Sciences, Ministry of Education and Sports, Associate Professor Dr Anoulom Vilayphone.

A multi-year study by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) collected data in 2019 (baseline), in 2021, and again in 2022, to assess the impact of BEQUAL support in improving teaching quality and student literacy outcomes.

The study found that teachers valued BEQUAL-supported orientation training, as well as the new curriculum teaching and learning resources. Nonetheless, teachers consistently signalled the need for more comprehensive and ongoing professional learning.

"Teachers in Laos are often working in difficult and remote conditions. Incorporating new approaches to teaching under a new curriculum can be

challenging. This study has helped us to understand how teachers can be supported to deliver better outcomes for students," said the Australian Ambassador to Laos, Mr Paul Kelly.

Between 2019 and 2021, the proportion of 'high' performing students increased from 12 percent to 21 percent. As a result of the new curriculum and BEQUAL support, students are also more interested and engaged in school. In common with their teachers, the research showed that students need a great deal more time and support to meet literacy expectations in the new curriculum.

"The Australian Government is committed to investing in education in Laos. We know that improving learning outcomes for girls and boys, especially those most vulnerable

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Education ministry lays out development strategy at Global South summit

Times Reporters

The education ministry highlighted the focus areas of its human resources development strategy during an online Education Ministers' Session under the 2nd Voice of Global South Summit.

India hosted the 2nd Voice of Global South Summit on November 17.

The Education Ministers' Session on the theme of "Making Human Resources Future Ready", focussed on developing human capital through education and skill development, knowledge sharing for a future ready workforce, and the need to bridge the skill divide in the Global South.

Lao Minister of Education and Sports, Associate Prof. Dr Phout Simmalavong, said the government is preparing a human resources development strategy for 2026-2035.

In the future, the ministry will continue to work to improve the quality of and inclusive access to education by strengthening the capacity of teachers and educational institutions, and by providing workers with more knowledge and skills through effective cooperation with business operators and employers.

The ministry will also cooperate with international

development partners and countries to learn about good practices in human resources development, Dr Phout said.

The minister thanked the Indian government for previous and current assistance with human resources development in Laos, including the provision of scholarships, construction of the Laos-India Centre for Entrepreneurship and secondary schools, and other support.

Human resources development plays an important role in national development, Dr Phout said. Education and training enables people to develop their personal and organisational skills, knowledge, and abilities, in order to improve their wellbeing and contribute to Laos' socio-economic development.

The government formulates national strategies and five-year plans for human resources development, and a National Committee on Human Resource Development has been appointed to support all sectors of government to implement these strategies and plans.

National plans for human resources development have led to many outstanding achievements. Laos has fulfilled the needs of the target human resource

index and created a human capital basis that will enable graduation from Least Developed Country status in the near future.

The human resources development strategy for 2016-2025 is currently being rolled out with a focus on producing a skilled workforce that can meet the needs of socio-economic development and of employers.

On the same day, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Saleumxay Kommasith, took part in the Foreign Ministers' Session with the theme "India and the Global South: Emerging Together for a Better Future".

Mr Saleumxay outlined the key priorities for the Global South, and informed participants of Laos' Asean chairmanship in 2024.

Important discussions were held on furthering South-South cooperation and consolidating the gains from India's G20 presidency for the Global South.

The 2nd Voice of Global South Summit focused on sharing with countries of the Global South the key outcomes achieved in various G20 meetings over the course of India's Presidency. The challenges posed by global developments were also discussed.

Vietnamese company supports rice production in Laos



Mr Nguyen Quoc Dung speaks the success of the demonstration on rice seed production techniques.

Times Reporters

The Rice and Cash Crop Research Centre teamed up with Vietnam's Saigon Plant Protection Joint Stock Company to demonstrate rice seed production techniques and the use of appropriate pesticides.

Staff from the Centre met recently to evaluate the success of the demonstration, which took place almost six months ago in cooperation with the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

Director of the Saigon Plant Protection Joint Stock Company, Mr Nguyen Quoc Dung, said that, as part of the great friendship

between Laos and Vietnam, and with the support of NAFRI, the company partnered with the Institute to demonstrate the use of different rice varieties in Phonhong village, Xaythany district, Vientiane.

In the almost six months since the demonstration, good results have been observed.

Rice seeds were trialled at the Rice and Cash Crop Research Centre on an area of almost one hectare, from June to November, producing a yield of more than four tonnes.

The Saigon Plant Protection Joint Stock Company also teamed up with the rice research centre to write a handbook on rice cultivation techniques, which was published by NAFRI.

Mr Nguyen Quoc Dung said the company was honoured to contribute to the handbook concerning the identification of major rice pests and integrated preventive measures to help farmers easily identify pests, and quickly detect and eliminate them with quality products.

Staff at the Rice and Cash Crop Research Centre said the success of the project will enable nearby farmers and rice seed production centres to learn new methods of rice production.

In addition, farmers were given information about new rice varieties and handbooks on rice production and plant protection products by the Saigon Plant Protection Joint Stock Company.



Signatories and other participants gather for a photo at the contract signing ceremony in Vientiane on Friday.

Work on modern bus lanes, stations to start next month

Times Reporters

The construction of Bus Rapid Transit lanes and stations from Fa Ngum Park to the National University of Laos under the Vientiane Sustainable Urban Transport Project will start next month and is expected to be complete by December 2024.

Two contracts, worth nearly US\$15 million, were signed in Vientiane on Friday.

The contractors were selected following the submission of tenders, with funding for the contracts coming from a loan from the OPEC Fund for International Development (OPEC Fund).

The agreements cover the construction of 12.9 kilometres of exclusive Bus Rapid Transit lanes along Setthathirath, Mahosot, Nongbone, Kaysone Phomvihane and 450 Year Roads, and the construction of 27 Bus Rapid Transit stations along this corridor.

The contracts were signed by the Deputy Director General of the Department

of Transport, Ministry of Public Works and Transport, Mr Vilayphanh Xayavong; Advisory Chairman of One Formula Co., Ltd., Mr Sabsanga Bunkhongprasert; and the Managing Director of Road No. 8 Construction Enterprise, Mr Phouphouane Sengphachanh. The signing was witnessed by Minister of Public Works and Transport Mr Ngampasong Muongmany, ADB Country Director Ms Sonomi Tanaka, and invited guests.

The Vientiane Urban Sustainable Transport Project was initiated in 2016 with US\$99.7 million in financing from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), European Investment Bank, OPEC Fund, European Union-Asia Investment Facility, Global Environmental Facility (GEF), and the Lao government.

An additional five contracts have been signed, including a contract worth US\$14.8 million, financed by the European Investment

Bank, for the supply of 55 battery electric BRT buses; a contract financed by the Global Environmental Facility for the supply of 150 electric pedicabs worth US\$456,000; a contract worth US\$3.5 million financed by the ADB and GEF for the construction of a pedestrian zones around Bus Rapid Transit stations; a contract for a bus depot and control centre worth US\$7 million financed by ADB, and a contract worth US\$5.5 million for the installation of an intelligent transport system to regulate bus traffic, financed by the Asian Development Bank.

Other qualified companies are now being selected to fulfil contracts under the project in the fields of traffic signalling, automatic fare collection, and management.

The new bus system is aimed at improving the quality of life in the capital, easing traffic congestion, reducing the number of road accidents, improving air quality, and cutting costs for passengers.

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and disadvantaged, will have long-term, positive outcomes for the development of the country overall. We need to build on initial gains in student engagement, for better learning," Ambassador

Kelly added.

The study involved surveys of teachers and principals, student literacy tests across 355 schools, and interviews and classroom observations in 12 case study schools. The study

recommendations include: investing in continuous professional learning to support teachers; greater focus on building students' oral language and school readiness skills in both education and home settings; and collecting and using student learning data to target interventions at the system and school level.

"These results give us insights into where we need to target specific support to students and teachers. We are looking to incorporate these recommendations as we work on BEQUAL Phase 2 with the Australian Government," Associate Professor Dr Anoulom Vilayphone added.