

Crowds honour King Fa Ngum

□ SOUKNILUNDON
SOUTHIVONGNORATH

MORE than 1,000 members of the public and officials gathered at Chao Fa Ngum Park in Vientiane on Saturday, to give alms in celebration of the 5th anniversary of the construction of the Chao Fa Ngum statue.

The celebrations, organised by the Vientiane Information and Culture Department, ran for five days, from January 1 to 5. During that time more than 20 booths displayed and sold local products and handicrafts, attracting both local and foreign visitors.

"We also had

performances of traditional Lao dances and songs to entertain the almost 1,000 people that attended the event each night," Deputy Chief of the department Soutan Phonsongkham said yesterday.

He commented that this was the first time people had gathered to publicly honour the statue since it was built in January 2003.

"The celebration was organised to honour the memory of King Fa Ngum; we had considered doing this every year but haven't been able to because the logistics were just too complicated."

"In fact, Lao people should remember King Fa Ngum

every minute, not just once in five years, so we really should have a celebration every year," he added.

According to Lao historians, Chao Fa Ngum was born in 1316 at the Palace of Xieng Thong in the Kingdom of Muong Sua or Xieng Dong Xieng Thong. He was the son of Prince Khun Phi Fa. At that time, the Kingdom of Muong Sua was the theatre of complicated palace intrigues, due to rivalry among various factions of the nobility.

In 1340 AD, King Fa Ngum led an army of 10,000 men in conquests in all directions - to the south as far as the Khmer border (Cambodia), to the north as far as Sipsong Phanna (Yunnan, southwestern China), to the east to the watershed of the Mekong and Red Rivers, to the northwest as far as Chiang Saen Lanna, and westward to Korat-Dong Phanphay (Thailand).

King Fa Ngum united the mighty Kingdom of Lane Xang (One Million Elephants) in 1353. He introduced Buddhism into the kingdom, took the sacred Phrabang Buddha image from the Khmer kingdom and installed it in Swa (now Luang Prabang).

This kingdom extended beyond today's Laos, where Lao place names and Lao-speaking inhabitants can still be found today.

Mr Soutan thought a similar event would be organised next year because a lot of people had helped by donating contributions through the holding of traditional parties, when nine kinds of gifts, including beds and cooking utensils, were donated to monks in the major temples in Vientiane.



People pay their respects at the Fa Ngum Monument early on Saturday morning in celebration of the 5th anniversary of the building of the monument in Vientiane.

Savannakhet mulls installation of water tanks

□ VIENTIANE TIMES

SAVANNAKHET authorities will meet again this week to discuss the proposed purchase of water tanks for districts around the province, after the loss of the Songkhone Market to a fire last month.

Songkhone district officials pointed out that businesses and the economy had been growing rapidly in many districts, and water tanks were necessary to prevent any similar losses due to fire.

All authorities have agreed on the importance of the water tanks in ensuring another incident does not occur, and are now discussing possible sources of funding.

A senior district official, Mr Luan Thammavong, said the fire, which was caused by an electrical fault, left eight families homeless and destroyed the livelihoods of almost 200 traders.

The total cost of the damage was estimated at more than 18 billion kip, including the loss of 188 shops in the market.

Apart from provincial assistance, authorities have

also mobilised funds and provisions donated by villagers to help the victims of the disaster, and traders have been granted suspensions on their loan repayments.

Songkhone district does not have any fire engines or water trucks to battle a fire. "We could only watch the market burning down, without being able to do anything about it," Mr Luan said.

Songkhone Market, 75km from the main provincial town of Kaysone Phomvihane, was one of the largest markets in the province.

All available fire fighting equipment is based in this town and, as it can take several hours to reach outlying districts, most villagers have little hope of help arriving in time.

This is not the first time a fire has burned down a district market in Savannakhet province.

Two years ago, a fire burnt down the Xeno district market, causing around 10 billion kip in damage.

A few years ago Phin district market was destroyed by fire, with damage estimated

at around five billion kip.

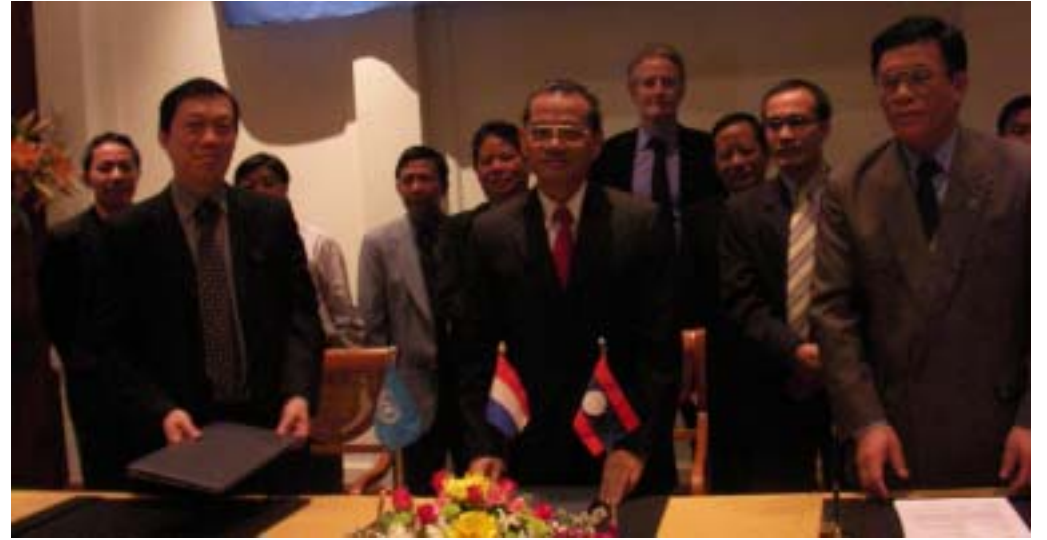
Household fires have become a major problem in Laos, causing millions of dollars in damage and leaving hundreds of people homeless each year.

In 2005, almost 50 fires broke out in Vientiane, destroying 41 houses and causing more than 1.4 billion kip in damage.

The National Assembly approved a new fire prevention law in December in an attempt to curtail such incidents, which can strike hard in these times of apparent economic growth and prosperity.

The law stipulates the establishment of Fire Prevention and Control Brigades at district level.

The major cause of fires in Laos has been identified as faulty wiring and consequent electrical short circuits. Vientiane authorities plan to monitor villages and market places more strictly, and encourage people to install proper electrical equipment, as well as provide basic information on fire prevention and fire safety.



(From left) Mr Leik Boonwaat, Mr Soubanh Srithirath and Mr La Singdara at the signing ceremony in Vientiane on Friday.

Drug law enforcement to combat illicit drugs

□ PANYASITH
THAMMAVONGSA

THE Lao National Commission for Drug Control and Supervision (LCDC), the Justice Ministry and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) have jointly signed an agreement for the National Drug Law Development of Enforcement Strategy project, to combat illicit drugs.

The signing ceremony was held at Settha Palace Hotel last Friday, when the agreement was inked by LCDC Chairman Soubanh Srithirath, Deputy Minister of Justice La Singdara and UNODC Representative Leik Boonwaat.

"This is the first project to be signed this year and is based on the first drug law, approved by the National Assembly in December. This new law will put us in a stronger position in working to eliminate illicit drugs and associated crime," said Mr Soubanh.

Mr Soubanh, who is also Minister to the President's Office, added that a drug law also provided the country with a reference framework, enabling Laos to receive cooperation and assistance from international organisations in the battle against illegal drugs.

"I am very confident that this cooperation will help us to achieve our targets," he said.

Mr La told Vientiane Times the project would also help to reduce human trafficking and crime.

"The law will enable state authority mechanisms to be more effectively enforced and ensure greater security in society," he said.

Mr Leik said at the signing ceremony that UNODC will assist the Lao government with the project through support from the Luxembourg government's Fonds de Lutte contre le Trafic des Stupefiants.

The project will foster the improvement of the structural

and operational capacities of judiciary and law enforcement agencies in combating illicit drugs and drug-related crime, according to a press release from UDODC.

It will also focus on capacity building of the judiciary, law professionals and law enforcement in Laos and will serve to strengthen international and regional cooperation between the judiciary and law enforcement agencies.

The Lao government has been challenged by illicit drugs for centuries, with their use harming large numbers of people. In 2006, opium production was almost entirely eliminated in Laos due to the strong commitment by the government for a drug free society. It seems that Laos will achieve the goals of the 1998 UN General Assembly Special Session in paving the way for a drug free Asia by 2015, according to the press release.

Champassak electricity debt falls

□ KHONESAVANH LATSAPHAO

RESIDENTS of Champassak province have paid off almost half of their debts to the provincial branch of Electricite du Laos, an official from the province said on Friday.

"At the start of 2007 we were owed 40 billion kip, but over the year customers managed to reduce that to 26 billion kip," said the deputy manager of the provincial electricity department, Mr Khoune Bouaphengphanh.

"We are very happy with how much customer debts have been reduced," Mr Khoune said.

He said the department hopes to reduce the outstanding amount from 26 to 16 billion kip by the end of this year.

In the past some residents could not meet the demands of payment if incomes in the poorer communities fell, and other people simply don't like to pay bills so end up with a mounting debt, he said.

"We will not cut off their electricity if they do not pay their debts, but we will explain the situation to them and ask them for reimbursement until they have paid us all they owe."

Customers have signed agreements indicating they will pay their bills in amounts that fairly match their ability to pay. Some can repay the total amount in about three months, others will take longer," Mr Khoune said.

There are 10 districts in Champassak province, and over

half of the 926 villages receive electricity from the provincial branch of Electricite du Laos.

According to the department, the province is planning to expand the grid system in rural areas in the middle of this year.

This is to support the Lao government's strategic plan for poverty reduction, aimed at lifting Laos out of least-developed country status by 2020.

The grid will be widened to a further 119 villages over the next five years, with funds allocated by the World Bank, Mr Khoune said.

By 2010, the department expects to supply power to 70 percent of villages in the province, he said.

Lao Press in Foreign Languages

Director General Savankhone Razmouny

Vientiane Times

Established 1994, Volume 13

Vientiane Times is published by Lao Press in Foreign Languages

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