

Laos and Japan strong cooperation proves fruitful

VIENTIANE TIMES

THE cooperation between Laos and Japan has been increasing day by day since the establishment of diplomatic relations by the two countries in July 1955.

During the visit of Lao Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh to Japan on May 14, the Japanese Prime Minister Mr Shinzo Abe announced that Japan would contribute about US\$1 million through the Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund to clear unexploded ordnance (UXO) in Laos.

The decision was announced in a Joint Press Statement given after a summit meeting between the two prime ministers.

The large number of UXO still buried in the ground is hindering development in Laos, and continues to injure and kill people living in affected areas almost daily.

According to the national clearance programme, UXO Lao, Laos has the unfortunate history of being the most heavily bombed nation on earth with over 580,000 bombing missions dropping more than two million tonnes of ordnance on Laos by American warplanes over the 10 year period of the secret war in the 1960s and 70s.

Some 10 to 30 percent of this ordnance, including millions of small bomblets from cluster bombs, never exploded, leaving an estimated minimum of 87,200 square kilometres scattered with UXO which has the potential to detonate at any time.

In addition to large-scale explosives, the war planes dropped bombs filled with clusters of smaller anti-personnel explosives which are now scattered through the countryside and farmland. Each bomb case was filled with nearly 700 'bombies', expected to explode shortly after impact.

Tragically, it is now known that the failure rate could have been as high as 30 percent and thousands of these 'bombies' remain buried in the ground.

As a result, more than 12,000 Lao people have become victims of UXO since the end of the war in 1975.

About 400 people are killed or injured by unexploded ordnance in Laos each year,

remote areas whose agricultural land has been abundantly planted with UXO. Agricultural crops are the only source of income for many people living in these areas. Efforts to facilitate UXO clearance from arable land will help to significantly improve the quality of life for these families, who will be only too pleased to reap higher yields

of human resource development, basic human needs, agriculture and forestry, and industrial infrastructure, according to the Japanese foreign minister.

Through human resources development assistance, Japan has built hundreds of primary and secondary schools throughout Laos, and has supported the development

Japanese passport holders.

In a press statement, Lao Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe acknowledged that Laos needed to improve basic socio-economic infrastructure to aid the process of poverty reduction and capacity building.

The two leaders welcomed upcoming joint projects to rebuild Hinheub Bridge and provide Japanese Human Resource Development Scholarships on May 16. They decided to accelerate negotiations on the bilateral investment agreement to facilitate its early conclusion, and announced the launch of a Japan-Laos Public and Private Dialogue by the end of this year.

During the visit, Mr Bouasone expressed his understanding and sympathy towards the humanitarian concerns of the Japanese people, including the abduction issue, and said he hoped both sides would settle this bilateral issue by peaceful means as soon as possible. He also expressed his understanding of Japan's efforts regarding this situation with the United Nations.

The Lao Prime Minister reiterated the Lao PDR's support for Japan's permanent membership in the expanded UN Security Council. He also expressed the Lao PDR's

support for Japan's non-permanent membership of the Security Council for the term 2009-2010.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced that Japan would aim to invite 1,000 Lao youths to Japan in the coming five years under various programmes including the Japan-East Asia Network of Exchange for Students and Youths Programme.

Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh valued Japan's positive consideration of the Project for the Construction of Laos-Japan Budo Centre for the purpose of the promotion of the Japanese traditional sport 'budo', as well as his intention to effectively utilise the Budo Centre on various occasions, including the SEA Games 2009.

In addition, the two leaders confirmed their willingness to have more frequent high-level visits and to strengthen policy dialogue at the senior official level.

In previous years, the Lao and Japanese leaders have frequently visited each other, including a visit by their Imperial Highnesses Prince and Princess Akishino in July 1999. It was the first visit to Laos by Japanese imperial family members, and is expected to further strengthen the friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries.

Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi visited Laos in 2000 and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited and attended the 10th Asean Summit in Vientiane in 2004, while Lao high-ranking officials have also had the opportunity to visit Japan, including Prime Minister Khamtay Siphandone in 1995 and Prime Minister Bouasone Bouphavanh this month.

During the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, the two countries have conducted many events to celebrate this important day.



according to officials from the National Regulatory Authority.

Laos has a total of 17 provinces, including Vientiane, with 14 of these having been significantly impacted by UXO. Only three provinces in the country are less affected by UXO problems.

At this point in time, Laos is far from being cleared of UXO and, according to the Director of UXO Lao, complete clearance is estimated to take more than 100 years.

The grant from Japan for UXO removal will be a major contribution to Laos, especially to those people in

in a safer environment.

The population of Laos is about 5.6 million, of whom 80 percent live in rural areas. While ever a large number of these people struggle to acquire enough arable land to safely provide food for their families, it will be very difficult to raise the country above the poverty line.

The Japanese government, as well as private individuals and Japanese NGOs, have contributed significantly to Laos in various fields every year. Since 1991, Japan has been the top-ranking donor in Laos, cooperating mainly in the

of the National University of Laos as well as providing scholarships for Lao students to study in Japan.

Currently, another large Japanese government-funded project is the rebuilding of Road No 1, running past Wattay International Airport to the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge, slated for completion at the end of this year.

Government cooperation, as well as personal relations between officials of the two countries, has been increased, assisted by the Lao government's decision to implement visa exemptions for

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