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**L**aos and Japan have enjoyed diplomatic relations for the past 60 years and in 2015 the two countries marked the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. From 1955 onwards high ranking officials and ordinary people from the two countries have exchanged visits on a regular basis. Over the past 60 years, the Japanese government and people have assisted the Lao government and people in a wide range of fields. Japan has been the biggest aid provider to Laos for the past 60 years and continues to support Laos' efforts to graduate from Least Developed Country status.

*Vientiane Times* interviewed Japan's Foreign Affairs Minister Fumio Kishida prior to his visit to Laos on May 4.

**Q: How has cooperation between Laos and Japan developed over the past 60 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations?**

A: Sabaidee (Hello). Japan

and the Lao PDR established diplomatic relations on March 5, 1955. When then-Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong visited Japan last year, the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Japan-Laos diplomatic relations, the bilateral relationship was upgraded to a "Strategic Partnership" entering a new stage. Coinciding with this, mutual visits by dignitaries from the two countries have increased recently. Under these circumstances, I am very pleased to be able to visit the Lao PDR for the first time since assuming office.

Since 1991, as the world's largest contributor of assistance to the Lao PDR, Japan has consistently contributed to the economic and social development of the Lao PDR. As the Lao PDR's strategic partner, Japan will also continue to actively cooperate in the Lao PDR's nation-building in the future, including helping it graduate from the list of Least Developed Countries (LDC) by 2020 and achieve the eight priority areas of Asean with Laos as Chair.

Furthermore, in addition to Overseas Development Assistance (ODA), recent investment in the Lao PDR by Japanese companies has been thriving. Japanese companies such as Aderans, Nikon and Toyota Boshoku have already established businesses in the Lao PDR, and Japanese

companies' interest in investing in the Lao PDR is growing rapidly.

In this way, over the last 60 years, Japan and the Lao PDR have steadily nurtured friendly relations. As Japan's Foreign Minister, during this visit I will personally meet Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith and Minister of Foreign Affairs Saleumxay Kommasith, who were appointed last month, and also intend to promote friendly relations with the new leadership.

**Q: In the past, Japan has provided assistance in the fields of infrastructure, agriculture, education and health. What fields will Japan focus on in the future and why? What vision and strategy does Japan have in place concerning assistance for development in the Lao PDR?**

A: Last year the Asean Community was launched and economic integration moved forward. In this context, development of the Lao PDR, the only landlocked Asean country, is the key to advancing stronger Asean integration.

The Lao PDR is the key to the development of the region, and I am aware that it is currently pursuing various initiatives aimed at graduating from the LDC list by 2020.

I believe that the important challenges for attaining that goal are strengthening connectivity with neighbouring

countries undergoing remarkable economic development; diversifying industries, developing small- and medium-sized enterprises, and developing industrial human resources in order to realise further progress; and rectifying disparity and reducing poverty through balanced urban and regional development.

Japan intends to extend assistance in close consultation with the Lao PDR, based on the current circumstances and developmental challenges it faces.

In promoting support, Japan will put into practice the "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" that it announced in May last year. Along with providing technical support, Japan will provide assistance for high-quality, environmentally-friendly, disaster-resilient and long-lasting infrastructure, in which Japan is well experienced.

Furthermore, under the Industrial Human Resource Development Cooperation Initiative proposed in November last year, Japan will hold dialogues with countries to secure a grasp of their needs, and use an "all Japan" framework to support industrial human

resource development towards sustainable growth.

Including these supports, in July last year Japan adopted the "New Tokyo Strategy 2015 for Mekong-Japan Cooperation" (MJC2015) and announced it will provide 750 billion yen in ODA to the Mekong region over the next three years.

Japan intends to advance robust support for the Lao PDR through these initiatives.

**Q: In your opinion, does the AEC bring opportunities or challenges for the Lao PDR as the Chair of Asean?**

A: The Asean Community was established at the end of last year, and the course the Asean Community takes in the future is attracting the world's attention. The AEC in particular is being watched with a great deal of interest, not just by the government but also by economic groups in Japan.

The Lao PDR is serving as Chair in the first year of the Asean Community, and it shoulders the important duty and expectation of leading the efforts to solidify the community.

The Lao PDR's characteristic feature of being a land-locked country bordered by Thailand, Vietnam and

other countries may have been a disadvantage up to now, but a stronger AEC will allow it to maximise that characteristic feature as a transit point and base for manufacturing and trade.

To achieve that, in addition to physical connectivity in the form of infrastructure development, it will also be vital to develop institutional connectivity in relation to trade and business, and people-to-people connectivity facilitating the movement of people. Furthermore, it will be necessary to take into account small- and micro-enterprises, women, and other stakeholders who are vulnerable to the effects of economic integration and to help all people participate appropriately in economic integration.

In an Asean speech I gave in Bangkok on May 2, I proposed the establishment of a "Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative" in the interests of bolstering efforts to strengthen the connectivity that is vital for a stronger Asean Community. Through such efforts, Japan continues to provide full-fledged support for the Lao PDR's own efforts in this area and its efforts for Asean as Chair of Asean.

**What the Lao papers say**