

Japan's foreign minister outlines his country's support for Laos within Asean

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Laos and Japan recently celebrated the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic ties, with the relationship continuing from 1955 to 2015. Since 1955, high ranking officials and ordinary people from the two countries have exchanged visits on a regular basis. Over the past 60 years, both countries have assisted each other. Japan's Foreign Affairs Minister Fumio Kishida is currently attending the Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting and related meetings in Vientiane. Vientiane Times took this opportunity to interview him.

Q: This is your second visit to Laos this year. During your previous visit you announced increased support for infrastructure, human resource development, and other fields. With this visit, in which fields does the Government of Japan hope to strengthen Japan-Laos relations?

Sabaidee. When I came to Laos in May this year for the first time since becoming Minister of Foreign Affairs, I

received an extremely warm welcome from the people of Laos. I am honoured to have the opportunity to visit this attractive country again with the magnificent Mekong River and its gentle national character.

Currently, Laos is making strong efforts to realise its eighth Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan (2016-2020). To that end, Laos, located at the centre of the Mekong region, needs to strengthen both hard and soft connectivity with its neighbouring countries in order to develop itself as a regional logistics hub. Furthermore, industrial human resource development is urgently required for diversifying industry and enhancing the competitiveness of Laos. There is also a need to pursue balanced urban and regional development for sustainable development.

Currently, the governments of Japan and Laos are working on formulating the Joint Development Cooperation Plan, which will present a direction for medium- to long-term development



Mr Fumio Kishida.

cooperation. I am looking forward to presenting the Plan in the near future. Japan will continue its assistance in accordance with Laos' actual circumstances.

Q: How is the Strategic Partnership between Japan

and Laos progressing?

Last year, Japan and Laos celebrated the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, when the relationship between the two countries was upgraded to a "strategic partnership".

I am pleased that exchanges between the two countries have deepened, including visits to Laos by members of various friendship organisations in Japan for the various events held for the 60th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. In addition to my visit to Laos in May, Lao Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith attended the G7 Ise-Shima Summit Outreach Meeting this year, immediately following his appointment, and actively contributed to the discussion.

In recent years, Japanese business interests in Laos have been growing, and the number of Japanese companies in Laos has increased rapidly, climbing from approximately 60 companies in 2012 to approximately 130 at present. Additionally, the Japan-Laos Air Services Agreement entered into force in May this year. If direct flights between the two countries start operating in the future, it will further encourage Japanese companies' investment in Laos and people-to-people exchanges.

In this way, the relationship between Japan and Laos has steadily progressed in many fields, and is developing into a relationship truly benefiting a "strategic partnership" relationship. As a true friend of Laos, Japan will continue nurturing our relationship in which the two sides can exchange views openly,

equally and frankly.

Q: What benefits do you expect the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative to generate?

In May this year I visited the Mekong countries, including Laos, and proposed the launch of a Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative. That is because I believe that realising vibrant and effective connectivity is the key to advancing Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) integration, ensuring that no country is left behind on the path to growth and that the benefits of growth spread throughout the region.

The vibrant and effective connectivity that I envisage does not simply refer to developing infrastructure such as roads and bridges to connect the countries. It also means preparing systems for invigorating the flow of goods and people and expanding human networks by developing industrial human resources in order to better utilise the improved infrastructure.

For example, with Japan's support, the Second International Mekong Bridge connecting Mukdahan in Thailand and Savannakhet in Laos opened to traffic in 2006. It has made it possible to transport goods to and from Bangkok and Hanoi in only three days by land, whereas previously it took two weeks to do so by sea. Improvement of customs procedures will further facilitate transportation of goods. In addition, as a result of promoting development that is aligned with industrial policies and human resources development in the surrounding region together with neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, it will be possible to generate a greater flow of goods.

In the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative, the Mekong countries will play the leading role in every respect. Japan also intends to create frameworks enabling it to provide finely-tuned support for the efforts that the Mekong countries are undertaking on their own.

Q: What type of cooperation is Japan counting on from Laos in the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative?

When I visited Laos for the first time as Foreign Minister in May this year, I explained the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative to Prime Minister Thongloun, and conveyed Japan's intention of recognising the importance of Laos, which is located at the centre of

the Mekong region. Prime Minister Thongloun endorsed the Initiative, and expressed his high expectations in relation to human resources development and technical cooperation in particular.

Geographically, Laos occupies an extremely important position as the hub of land transportation in the Mekong region. In addition, the symbol of this region is the Mother Mekong, as the Mekong River is known, and close to half the river's entire length flows through Laos' interior, the most of any country in the Mekong region.

With the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative, in addition to promoting the vibrant and effective connectivity of the Mekong region's economic corridors, Japan also intends to pursue efforts to preserve the environment of the Mekong River, which runs through the centre of the Mekong region. Japan hopes to pursue those efforts by all means, with the close cooperation of Laos.

Q: What role does the Government of Japan expect the Government of Laos to play as the Asean Chair?

Under the Vision Statement on Asean-Japan Friendship and Cooperation adopted in 2013, the cooperative relationship between Japan and Asean is steadily developing in political, security, economic, social, and cultural areas, and in human exchanges.

2016 is an important year as it marks the first year of the Asean Community. As Asean's equal strategic partner, Japan has consistently been a strong supporter of strengthening the Asean Community and has strongly supported Asean centrality and unity, and will continue its support in the future. Japan supports the eight priority areas for this year that Laos is occupying the Asean Chair, and will continue to cooperate with the further integration efforts of the Asean Community on all fronts. Additionally, Japan strongly hopes that the Asean Community, as the centre of regional cooperation and a partner with shared values such as the rule of law and democracy, will robustly address the problems faced by the region and the international community, and take leadership for regional stability and prosperity based on the rule of law.

In order to strengthen the cooperative relationship between Japan and Asean, and in the interests of regional stability and prosperity, Japan intends to cooperate closely with Laos in its role as Asean Chair.