

Japan, Laos to strengthen strategic partnership

Times Reporters

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono will pay a working visit to Laos from April 7- 8 for the first time since being appointed foreign minister last November. *Vientiane Times* interviewed him prior to his visit.

Q: What is the purpose of your visit to Laos?

A: Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith visited Japan last month to attend the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Southeast Asia Regional Programme (SEARP) Ministerial Conference. During a bilateral working dinner, we exchanged views in a candid way on Japan's assistance towards the further social and economic development of Laos, regional and international situations, and other matters.

The main purpose of my visit is to further strengthen the relations between our two countries as "strategic partners", following on from that meeting in March. Also, I am scheduled to explain directly to Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith the progress of our efforts for the financial stabilisation of Laos and for strengthening connectivity. These initiatives were requested by Prime Minister Thongloun.

Furthermore, since this is my first visit to Laos, I am looking forward to touring the city centre of Vientiane and getting to know Laos a little better. Then I would like to contemplate Japan's cooperation towards Laos' stability and prosperity through communicating, internally and externally, successful examples of our two countries' multilayered collaboration.

Q: What is the Japan-Lao Joint Development Cooperation Plan for the Sustainable Development of Laos, and what are the outcomes of that plan?

A: Prime Minister Abe and Prime Minister Thongloun reached an agreement on the plan and announced it



Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Kono.

when Prime Minister Abe made an official visit to Laos in September 2016. The plan presents a future vision for Laos and a direction for cooperation between our two countries towards realising that vision. This plan identifies the following "three pillars of cooperation" as the most important challenges for Laos, and we will implement these:

1. Strengthen connectivity with countries in the region on tangible and intangible fronts;
2. Develop industrial human resources in order to diversify Laos' industries and enhance their competitiveness;
3. Rectify disparity through balanced urban and regional development that takes environmental and cultural preservation into account.

To cite one outcome as an example, in January this year a bus service connecting Wattay International Airport and the city centre was launched. This was realised as a result of cooperation between the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the Vientiane State Bus Enterprise, as an embodiment of "urban development that takes environmental preservation into account".

To ensure the steady implementation of the "three pillars of cooperation," stabilising Laos' macro-economy and public finance is indispensable. Over the past year, Japan has been cooperating with relevant organisations to improve the capabilities of Lao administrative officials

by holding seminars on issues such as VAT (value-added tax) and book-keeping. In addition, we invited Deputy Minister of Finance Athsaphangthong Siphandone to Japan, when he visited Japan Customs and the National Tax College.

Q: What plans are being carried out specifically with regard to efforts to "strengthen connectivity" that Japan is pursuing?

A: To promote economic development, it is necessary to vitalise the circulation of people and goods by physically connecting cities to other cities via roads, bridges, railroads and other means. Rather than simply developing physical infrastructure, Japan believes that we could realise "vibrant and effective" connectivity by improving customs clearance procedures at national borders to make the transport of goods smoother, and by developing the regions in the vicinity of the economic corridor.

One achievement is the plan to expand the terminals at Wattay International Airport. To respond to the airport's growing demand in terms of passengers and cargo, which has more or less doubled over the past decade, and to improve the airport's convenience and its connectivity with neighbouring countries, we are working on the expansion of the international terminal and construction of a new domestic terminal. The project is proceeding steadily and construction is scheduled to be completed this summer. I believe this project will further enhance connectivity with neighbouring countries.

Furthermore, on National Highway No. 9, a part of the East-West Economic Corridor connecting Vietnam and Thailand, deteriorating bridges in two locations are currently being repaired. This is expected to lead to safe and stable traffic on Road No. 9, and contribute to the development of the economic and social infrastructure in the surrounding regions and the East-West Economic

Corridor. This will also have significant economic benefits for Laos.

Additionally, to ensure the effective utilisation of such hard infrastructure, we are, for instance, dispatching Japanese experts to provide advice for the improvement of systems, structures and procedures towards efficient customs operations in accordance with international standards. I expect these initiatives will lead to the sustainable development of Laos.

Q: The Olympic and Paralympic Games will be held in Tokyo in 2020. What sort of cooperation is taking place between Japan and Laos in the run-up to these events?

A: The Tokyo Olympic Games are scheduled to be held from July 24 to August 9, 2020, while the Tokyo Paralympic Games will be held from August 25 to September 6, 2020. This will be the second Summer Olympic Games to take place in Tokyo since 1964, and will demonstrate the image of Japan, which is different from the previous Olympics in 1964.

The government of Japan has been implementing "Sport for Tomorrow", an international contribution programme in the field of sport, including soccer, volleyball, judo and athletics, through JICA's Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers and senior volunteers.

As part of this programme, we are also pursuing cooperation on Paralympic sports in Laos. The Japan Blind Football Association and the Lao blind football national team are collaborating closely, and in February this year the Lao national team travelled to Japan. In addition, Japanese NGOs continue to engage in popularising sports for disabled people in Laos.

Through this cooperation, I am looking forward to welcoming athletes from Laos to both the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Japan in 2020.