

Festival showcases handicraft skills

Times Reporters

The 10th Lao Handicraft Festival opened in Vientiane yesterday at Lao-ITECC, attended by National Assembly President Mrs Pany Yathortou and other dignitaries.

Ministers, ambassadors, representatives of international organisations and consulates, and artisans from 13 provinces in Laos gathered for the opening of the festival, which showcases the talents of artisans from around the country.

This year's event features 170 exhibition booths, of which 48 display goods made in the provinces. The festival runs from October 19-23 and brisk sales are anticipated.

Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry President Mr Kissana Vongsay said the festival is a major annual event when producers gather and exchange ideas.

But the main aim of the event is to promote the skills of craftspeople nationwide and to preserve Lao handicrafts.

The festival also provides an opportunity for producers, customers, buyers and sellers to meet and interact, and for craftspeople and exhibitors to learn about new designs, innovations and techniques that might be adapted to improve the quality of their products.

Producers also have the chance to assess and respond to the needs of domestic and foreign markets.

"Our Party and government have a good promotion mechanism for handicraft activities and Lao



Mrs Pany Yathortou (third left) watches as silk is spun.

handicrafts have become significant market products. In the past, this line of work was only a supplementary occupation, but now handicrafts have become a primary occupation and a major commodity that is a strong tourist draw," Mr Kissana said.

Lao Handicraft Association President Mrs Chinda Phommasathit said the aim of the festival is to

provide opportunities for artisans, especially in rural areas, to gather and meet with domestic and foreign customers.

"This year is very special as the association has sent invitations to embassies of all the Asean countries and some European countries, and provides a platform for Lao handicraft producers to exhibit their

wares and culture."

The festival is co-hosted by the Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Lao Handicraft Association. It comes in the run-up to Lao National Handicraft Day on November 1.

"Most of the festival activities highlight the cultural heritage and

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Corn, rubber plantations pose environmental threats

Times Reporters

Many people in Laos are earning high incomes from corn and rubber plantations but these crops can cause serious negative impacts on the environment, according to a new study.

Lao researchers presented the economic valuation of ecosystem services on land use change on non-timber forest products collection, upland rice farming and corn and rubber plantations at a workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, on October 11 to 12.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) funded the workshop, which provided an opportunity to share experiences and lessons learnt with researchers and government delegates from Southern Sudan, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and Malawi from Africa, and Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan from Asia, as well as representatives from Wales.

The participants highlighted the importance of environmental valuation studies to inform decision makers who work on poverty reduction and sustainable economic development in their countries.

The Lao delegation was led by National Economic Research Institute Deputy Director General Mr Souphith Darachanthara and Ministry of Planning and Investment's Planning Department Deputy Director General Ms Phonevanh Outhavong.

Environmental economic valuation research in Laos is part of the UNEP's poverty-environment initiative. Research teams consist of members from national institutes, government partners and academic institutions.

The results of the study highlight the costs and benefits of different land use systems in Oudomxay province, including rubber plantations in Namor district, corn plantations and upland rice farms in Hun district, and non-timber forest product collection in Beng district.

According to the study, collection of non-timber forest products and upland rice farming provide the least financial returns and, while they cannot be considered as viable poverty reduction strategies, they do maintain a healthy environment that can provide for basic food and livelihood needs.

Corn and rubber plantations, on the other hand, generate relatively higher incomes and can be considered

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Funding for irrigation repairs leaves dry season crop in doubt

Khamphone Syongxay

The government has approved 25 billion kip of funding to repair irrigation systems damaged in recent flooding so that water can be supplied to dry season crops in the coming months.

The irrigation sector requested 170 billion kip in government funding to repair irrigation systems in 11 provinces, Irrigation Department Deputy Director General Mr Nouandeng Rajvong told *Vientiane Times* yesterday.

The shortfall in funding will need to be made up by provincial budgets and small contributions from farmers.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has announced a target of 125,000 hectares of dry season rice crops but that figure may be difficult to achieve if irrigation systems are not repaired.

Champassak province alone requires 35 billion of funding to

repair damaged irrigation systems and expand existing water supplies in flood-affected areas this dry season but will receive just six billion kip from the central government.

However, provincial authorities plan to request additional funds from the provincial governor to help the agriculture sector recover from the floods, said provincial Agriculture and Forestry Department Director Mr Soupany Silipounyo.

The department will also cooperate with district authorities to allocate water resources to the most needed areas, he said.

The department planned to encourage farmers to plant 17,500 hectares of rice this dry season but irrigation systems will only be able to reach 13,000 hectares after repairs are carried out, said Mr Soupany.

Local farmers and authorities will strive to grow crops on the remaining 4,500 hectares to ensure the target is achieved.



A dried up irrigation channel awaits reconstruction.

Last dry season farmers in the province cultivated crops on only 11,800 hectares and hundreds of hectares were ruined by unseasonal

weather in the wet season, he said.

Flooding this year inundated 13,000 hectares of rice in the

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Home news



Professor Dr Somsy Nhorphanxay (right) shakes hands with Ms Gretchen A. Kunze at the signing ceremony.

Asia Foundation invests in students' future

Phaisythong Chandara

The Asia Foundation has enabled 50 Lao women to pursue their undergraduate studies in pure and social sciences at the National University of Laos (NUOL).

The agreement to provide scholarships was signed yesterday at the Dongdok campus between NUOL Vice President Professor Dr Somsy Nhorphanxay and the Foundation's Country Representative Ms Gretchen A. Kunze.

Speaking at the signing ceremony, Ms Kunze said the foundation decided to provide the scholarships to help outstanding students who are financially disadvantaged, especially those from the 46 poorest districts.

"The scholarships will contribute to the nation's human resources development," she said.

The scholarships will be awarded to low-income women who have been admitted to the university and have demonstrated academic achievement and a commitment to learning.

A US\$700 bursary will be paid to each student each year to cover tuition, admission and exam fees, uniforms, books and educational materials.

Ms Gretchen said the programme is made possible through the generous support of the Shirin Pandju Merali Foundation.

She encouraged all scholarship recipients to work towards the nation's socio-economic development by promoting growth and reducing poverty and to help raise Lao living standards to international levels.

"Having a skilled workforce will help Laos to achieve a standard of living similar to that of other countries," Ms Gretchen added.

NUOL President Professor Dr Soukkongseng Xaingaleuth said the university greatly values its relationship with the foundation, which has helped to set higher benchmarks in educational reform.

"Educational development is a priority of the Lao government and is part of a strategy being implemented by the Ministry of Education and Sports and the university,"

he said. Dr Soukkongseng said rapid changes in technology require all education sectors to expand their frameworks and perspectives to meet the needs of society.

To achieve this, higher education needs to be redesigned through collaboration with national and international sectors and companies, to enrich students' experiences and transfer expertise, Dr Soukkongseng said.

"Fighting poverty in Laos is not only about implementing development projects but also requires a comprehensive strategy for sharing knowledge."

Dr Soukkongseng said the role of the university is to teach students core competencies that will make them skilled members of the workforce.

He reiterated that all scholarship recipients should work towards socio-economic development by promoting growth and reducing poverty to raise living standards.

NUOL teachers and representatives from both sides attended the scholarship signing ceremony.

Measles, rubella vaccinations to start next month

Xayxana Leukai

The National Centre for Mother and Child Health's Expanded Programme of Immunisation estimates that more than three million doses of a vaccine against measles and rubella will be administered to targeted people next month.

The run of vaccinations has been funded by the Lao government to the tune of more than 2.2 billion kip, while the World Health Organisation has provided more than 6 billion kip (US\$759,000), Unicef more than 3.2 billion kip (US\$400,000), Luxembourg Agency for Development Cooperation about 80 million kip (US\$10,000), India's vaccines manufacturing factory about US\$1.6 million, Japan International Cooperation Agency almost 56 million kip (US\$7,000), and Gavi Alliance almost 40

million kip (US\$5,000).

The target group for the free measles and rubella vaccination is people aged from nine months to 19 years.

The vaccines will be administered in two stages - the first in the southern provinces of Saravan, Xekong, Champassak and Attapeu from November 1-14, and the second in the remaining provinces from November 21 to December 6.

Head of the Expanded Programme of Immunisation Dr Anonh Xeuatvongsa told *Vientiane Times* recently that the national vaccination drive is part of a wider programme to wipe out the two viruses in 36 countries in the Western Pacific region in 2012, which Laos approved in 2006.

"The campaign aims to eradicate the viruses in Laos next year," he said, adding this would directly reduce the incidence of illness, disability

and deaths of women and children, and help Laos to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Dr Anonh thanked all donors who provided funds for the upcoming vaccination campaign.

"We hope that everyone in the target group in each province receives the vaccine against the two viruses in one shot as scheduled," he said.

The programme has also provided free vaccines for diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis ('whooping cough'), polio, tuberculosis and hepatitis B, and meningitis and pneumonia.

In developed countries, the population receives at least 13 vaccinations against a wide range of diseases.

This year the programme is expected to reach 95 percent of the target group. The last national measles vaccination campaign in 2007 reached 96 percent of its target.

Hotel adds to donations for flood-affected students



Mr Phonekeo Vorakhoun (centre left) receives the donation from Mr Nobuyuki Fukuda yesterday.

Times Reporters

Lao Plaza Hotel General Manager Mr Nobuyuki Fukuda yesterday presented educational material and sports equipment to *Vientiane Times* representative Mr Phonekeo Vorakhoun for distribution to flood-affected students in Champassak province during a trip to the area on October 27.

The materials included 750 textbooks for primary and secondary schools, 1,500 notebooks, 1,000 pens, 500 pencils with erasers, 300 rulers, 50 cases of pencils, and 27 bags. The sports equipment consisted of 10 footballs and 10 sepak-takraw kits. The total value of the donation was 15.29 million kip.

The donation coincides

with the 14th anniversary of the opening of the hotel on October 19.

Since *Vientiane Times* started collecting donations to assist flood-affected students in Champassak province last month, it has received educational materials, sports equipment, drinking water, instant noodles and cash from generous individuals, the Buddhist Aid Centre of Japan, Lao-Top College and Circumnavigation.

A delegation from *Vientiane Times* visited Khammuan province on September 23-24 to distribute educational supplies and food to children in three primary schools in Nhommalath district after launching a fund-raising appeal in August.

The total amount contributed by the public reached 9.3 million kip in early September, increasing to 15 million kip when *Vientiane Times* donated a further 5 million kip, including 690,000 kip from newspaper staff.

More than 13 million kip was spent on purchasing educational materials, noodles, milk, candy and cans of fish for Phonsaek, Nakasang and Nongkhiew primary schools in Nhommalath district. More than 220 pupils benefitted from the aid.

Vientiane Times also plans to raise funds to assist flood victims in some northern provinces after distributing donations to students in Champassak province next week.

Corn, rubber plantations...

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as potentially effective poverty reduction strategies.

However, the latter two land uses also cause substantive environmental and local health problems that might persist long into the future.

The results of the study will be disseminated at both the provincial and national level later this year to identify

and discuss possible policy recommendations with involved organisations and key government stakeholders.

Mr Souphith said the research project was a critical environmental and social safeguard that would aid development by providing information that can influence decisions to effectively

integrate environmental impacts and the concerns of poor and vulnerable groups.

Ms Phonevanh also highlighted the importance of the research project and said it provides necessary and relevant information to policy makers as they consider the environmental aspects of large scale investment projects.

Lao Press in Foreign Languages
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Vientiane Times

Established 1994, Volume 16
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