

242 billion kip lost to corruption, inspection reveals

Times Reporters

A government inspection committee has uncovered almost 242 billion kip in lost assets due to corruption in 2015, resulting in 95 officials being disciplined.

The shocking figures were released in a report that summarised the work of the Inspection Committee of the Party Central Committee, and the Government Inspection Authority.

The report was presented yesterday at the annual meeting of the Inspection Committee of the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism in Vientiane.

Of the 242 billion kip in missing assets, only a little more than 10.2 billion kip had been recovered so far, Vice Chairman of the Inspection Committee of the Party Central Committee, and Government Inspection Authority, Mr Singphet Bounsavattiphphanh told the meeting, which was held at the National Culture Hall.

The 95 officials who were

disciplined included four women.

Sixty-two officials worked in Oudomxay province, 11 at the Ministry of Finance, and 22 in state banks.

The cases involved the embezzlement of state assets, accepting and giving out bribes, the production of fake documents for personal gain, and abuse of power to obtain assets belonging to the state and individuals.

Some corrupt officials had faked documents certifying construction and design standards, among other things, for their personal benefit.

Inspection authorities also carried out investigations into state expenditure and revenue collection in 303 targeted bodies within 11 ministries and state organisations as well as in 13 provinces and Vientiane.

These investigations revealed that more than 3,034.3 billion kip had been lost through various means, of which only 467.59 billion kip had been recovered, according to the report.

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Candidates for NA membership in Vientiane introduce themselves to people at the National Culture Hall yesterday.

Election campaign commences nationwide

Somsack Pongkhao

Candidates standing for March 20's election as members of the National Assembly (NA) met local people in their constituencies yesterday, marking the start of an election campaign across the country.

The official ceremony was held in all 18 constituencies, allowing all 211 candidates (of which 149 will be elected as NA members) to meet and introduce themselves as well as talk about

their intention to serve for the interests of the nation and people.

In Vientiane (Constituency 1), a ceremony for the election campaign was held at the National Culture Hall where 24 candidates (of which 17 will be elected as NA members) introduced themselves one by one to over 1,500 people.

They also assured the crowd that they were ready to serve as their representatives at the NA and push for greater sustainable development in Laos over the

next decade.

Party Politburo Member and Vice President of the National Assembly Dr Xaysomphone Phomvihane, who is candidate No. 1, highlighted the significant role of the NA in making decisions on all fundamental issues concerning the nation.

Dr Xaysomphone said the NA is the highest State Power, playing the role of electing or removing the country's leaders and approving the national constitution and laws.

"Over the past five years, the NA has approved 75 new and amended laws and approved the pardon of about 2,000 prisoners as well as approved the granting of Lao nationality for 200 foreigners," he said.

"March 20's election is the landmark as we aim to strengthen our people's democratic regime and ensure the rights and benefits of local people are protected."

Dr Xaysomphone called for eligible voters to exercise their

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Prof. Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara (centre) and Mr Singphet Bounsavattiphphanh (right) address the meeting.

Lao, Swiss doctors provide free treatment in Xieng Khuang

Times Reporters

The Mother and Newborn Hospital and the Swiss Lao Hospital Project have formed medical teams to provide free diagnosis and surgery for poor women in Xieng Khuang province to mark the 22nd anniversary of the hospital's establishment.

The first team has already arrived to take registrations of poor women who really need help.

The second big team, which is yet to arrive, consists of visiting Swiss surgeons, nurses, anaesthetists, gynaecologists

and other involved officials. The team will join together with local surgeons to provide treatment.

Director General of the Mother and Newborn Hospital, Associate Prof. Dr Bouavanh Saensathit, told *Vientiane Times* yesterday that the hospital was established with the main aim of helping poor people.

Every year the hospital provides free surgery for women who cannot afford the medical fees for the surgery they require.

"This year is special as we will celebrate 22 years of progress at the hospital. So

we will do something special by providing free surgery for disadvantaged ethnic women," he said.

It is expected that during the two-week long visit by the foreign surgeons more than 300 women in Xieng Khuang province shall receive medical check-ups and treatment.

The teams will conduct the service at Kham district hospital, Khoun district hospital, Nonghet district hospital and at the Xieng Khuang provincial hospital. So far, at least 10 cases are registered for surgery involving gynaecology, including womb

cysts.

Typically, the cost of such surgeries is anywhere between 1 million to 10 million kip depending on the medical problem and the condition of the patient.

Dr Bouavanh said that the free surgical trip would not be possible without the assistance of the Swiss Lao Hospital Project.

President of the project, Dr Urs Lauper, said that the main target of the project is to improve the health of mothers and their children and reduce their death rates in line with the

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Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives to Asean shake hands at the opening ceremony in Vientiane.

Asean officials gear up for ministerial retreat

Times Reporters

Permanent Representatives to Asean gathered in Vientiane yesterday to prepare for the Asean Seniors Officials Meeting (SOM) and Asean Ministerial Meeting Retreat (AMM Retreat), which take place today and tomorrow.

This is the third meeting of the Committee of Permanent Representatives to Asean (CPR) under Laos' 2016 chairmanship of Asean. Lao Ambassador and Permanent Representative to Asean Mr Latsamy Keomany chaired the meeting.

While the topics of discussion at the CPR meeting have yet to be revealed, they are likely to centre on tourism development, trade facilitation, Small and Medium Sized Enterprise development, employment creation, and cultural preservation, which are prioritised by the Asean chair.

"Turning Vision into Reality for a Dynamic Asean Community" is the theme of Laos' chairmanship. This is aimed at building on the achievements made to maintain and promote a peaceful, stable

and outward-looking Asean region, with a highly integrated and cohesive regional economy, enhanced connectivity, and strengthened efforts in narrowing the development gap.

The finalisation of the Initiative on Asean Integration Work Plan 3 and the Post-2015 Agenda for Asean Connectivity as an integral part of the Asean Community Vision 2025 will also be the focus of Asean this year and will feature in the Press Statement by the Chairman of the Asean Ministerial Retreat.

Meetings of the CPR are held twice a month and mainly convened in Jakarta, Indonesia.

In its capacity as an Asean mechanism, the CPR has several main functions and duties. These are assisting Asean Senior Officials, 'Asean Foreign and Sectoral Ministers', as well as Asean leaders' meetings, and serving as a regional focal point of coordination for Asean national secretariats, line ministries, sectoral bodies and local authorities of Asean.

The committee also engages at the regional level with Asean

dialogue partners and non-Asean ambassadors accredited to Asean to mobilise support and cooperation, and carries out oversight on behalf of the Asean Secretariat.

With a population of more than 600 million people, the Southeast Asian region is the world's seventh largest economy and is made up of diverse cultures, religions and languages.

Laos has been entrusted to chair Asean for the second time. This is a landmark year as the regional association has officially become a community. It is also the first year of the implementation of the Asean Community Vision 2025 and its blueprints for the three community pillars.

Asean is being built as a regional community comprised of three pillars, namely the Asean Political-Security Community, Asean Economic Community and Asean Socio-Cultural Community. It serves to strengthen Asean institutions, promote regional peace and security through moderation, and to enhance Asean's role as a global player.

Travel agency calls for safety checks

Times Reporters

The Lao Association of Travel Agencies (LATA) is asking its members to conduct safety checks on all tour vehicles following the tragic bus and minivan collision last Sunday which claimed the lives of four Korean tourists.

The road accident in Kasy district, Vientiane province also killed the Lao driver of a minivan at the scene while 22 passengers on board the bus and two aboard the minivan sustained injuries.

LATA's Management Committee Mr Somphong Dayviengxay made the suggestion during an interview with *Vientiane Times* yesterday, saying "All travel agencies should take consideration of safety first."

Mr Somphong highlighted that conducting safety checks means that each travel agency needs to recheck their vehicles and routes as well as to educate drivers to drive carefully before leaving their departure point.

"Checking vehicles frequently is very important in order to guarantee the travelling

public's safety, especially for tourists, and to reduce accidents," he added. According to a report from the Traffic Police Department of the Ministry of Public Security, from February 8-25 there were over 100 road accidents around Laos, including the horrible accident in Kasy district, Vientiane province.

Mr Somphong stressed that this accident was the worst in many years and it is hoped that the country's reputation for travel safety does not suffer as a result.

Over the period from February 8-25, many people died at the scene of accidents and some also died after being sent to hospital. Over 200 people were injured, more than 200 vehicles were damaged and there were over 20 fatalities.

Laos is now conveniently connected to many other cities by air and land transport which makes it easy for people to visit the country. It is predicted that the number of foreign visitors will reach 4.6 million by 2016, so transport authorities and tourism bodies need to make sure the transport options available to visitors are safe.

According to a recent report from the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, there were 4.3 million international tourist arrivals to the country last year, up 4.88 percent from 4.1 million in 2014. The trips generated US\$670 million in revenue.

Thai nationals represented the biggest market followed by Vietnamese and Chinese.

In 2014, 2.04 million Thai tourists travelled to Laos, down marginally by 0.76 percent from 2.05 million visits in 2013.

About half of this number chose to travel with a tour operator. There are now 340 travel agents providing services for foreign nationals visiting Laos but only 60 are members of the LATA. Laos has become a top destination for international visitors due to its intriguing tourist attractions including the two UNESCO World Heritage Sites - the ancient city of Luang Prabang and the pre-Angkor Vat Phou temple complex.

The number of hotels, guesthouses and resorts across the country has jumped from 1,926 five years ago to 2,426 at a recent count.

US planning to increase funding for UXO clearance

Souksakhone Vaenkeo

The US government is planning to increase financial support to Laos to help accelerate the clearance of unexploded ordnance (UXO), a senior White House official has reaffirmed.

Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes made the statement during an interview with Asean media at the Special US-Asean Summit held at Sunnylands, California, from February 15-16.

During the Indochina War from 1964-1973, US warplanes dropped more than two million tonnes of bombs on Lao territory - making Laos the world's most heavily bombed country per capita. About 30 percent of the dropped bombs failed to detonate and continue to maim and kill, claiming the lives of tens of thousands of civilians in peacetime.

Mr Rhodes said the US recognised its responsibility for this problem and plans to engage more in assisting Laos to remove the deadly devices.

"We do have plans to continue to increase our financial support and direct support to clear UXO there for a number of reasons," Mr Rhodes said.

"We believe it's our responsibility. The US created this problem. We have a moral responsibility to help clean it up."

He acknowledged that clearing these devices was important to save civilian lives and advance socio-economic development, which has been hampered by the UXO that remains and contaminates a large area of land.

It is estimated that up to 37 percent of the country's total land area, about 87,000 km², is contaminated with various types of UXO.

But from 1996 to 2015 only about 55,000 hectares of land has been cleared of UXO, according to the National Regulatory Authority.

Mr Rhodes said now was a good time to increase resources for UXO clearance as a lot of good work has been done to map their location.

He said he and Secretary John Kerry had been briefed on efforts to use old US bombing records from the Indochina War along with technology to better map the areas that are contaminated. That gave the US confidence that if they were to increase resources the problem could be solved.

Mr Rhodes added that the US was increasing resources



Mr Ben Rhodes says the US has a moral responsibility to help clear UXO in Laos.

this year in the lead up to President Obama's visit to Laos in September as they wanted to put forward a vision of how Laos could complete the work.

During his official visit to Laos last month, Secretary Kerry told reporters the United States was considering increasing financial aid to Laos to help clear UXO.

He expected a final aid package to be completed by the time President Obama comes to Laos this summer when Laos hosts the Asean Summit.

The United States has been helping to locate and clear UXO for more than half a decade, starting with US\$5 million a year and gradually increasing funding to US\$15 million last year and US\$19.5 million this year.

Lao, Swiss doctors... FROM PAGE 1

UN Millennium Development Goals.

Helping poor Lao women and newborns in the provinces is one of many aspects of the project's target. The Lao and Swiss doctors visit the provinces to provide free treatment at least five times a year.

According to the Lao Social Indicator Survey in 2012, the death rate of birthing mothers is 357 out of every 100,000 births.

The death rate of children under one year is 68 out of every 1,000 live births, and for children under five it is 79 out of every 1,000 live births.

Since receiving permission from the Ministry of Health in 2004, the Swiss Lao Hospital Project has been working in collaboration with the Mother and Newborn Hospital to improve health service standards in Xieng Khuang province.

In addition to human resource development, the project has also provided modern equipment for accurate diagnosis and treatment. In addition, some provincial doctors and nurses



Associate Prof. Dr Bouavanh Saensathit (fourth right) and Dr Urs Lauper (third right) will lead a medical team helping poor people in Xieng Khuang province next week.

are also invited to be trained, improving their medical skills and learning how to use the modern medical equipment provided by the project each year.

Dr Lauper said that currently, the health service standards in Xieng Khuang are better than the services before the project was conducted there. However the project will

need to continue to support them as there are many young doctors and nurses working there.

The Swiss-Lao Hospital Project is an initiative by Swiss doctors, midwives, nurses and association members who have lobbied for an improvement in the medical care available to mothers and children in Laos since the year 2000.

242 billion kip lost... FROM PAGE 1

Deputy Director General of the Inspection Department under the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism, Mr Kiangkeo Silaphom, said the department carried out inspections into 37 targeted bodies under the ministry.

In addition, the department investigated 27 state-funded investment projects worth more than 59 billion kip. These projects were found to be in line with the relevant regulations.

The meeting also discussed the inspection plan for the 2015-16 fiscal year.

During the meeting, Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism Prof. Dr Bosengkham Vongdara called for inspection officials to work harder to fulfill their mandates, including improving the work of Party building.

He stressed the need to ensure that all the Party members within the ministry observed the Party's statute and acted as role models, while continuing to build Party organs with all-round strength.

He told officials at the meeting to improve the management of state expenditure and revenue collection, and urged them to make sure that financial discipline was strict.