

Ambassador's 2014 Australia Day Message



John Williams

I am delighted to speak to you on the occasion of Australia's National Day.

We usually celebrate Australia Day on January 26 each year – the date of the arrival in what is now Sydney of the first fleet of European convict settlers back in 1788.

But this year we have postponed our celebrations in Laos a few weeks, so that I was able to first present my credentials as Australia's Ambassador to His Excellency, President Choummaly Xayasone, on 13 February.

Australia Day is an opportunity for Australians of all backgrounds to celebrate the values and achievements of our nation. We have much to be proud of. We are a country unlike any other.

Australia today is a vibrant multicultural nation, enriched by an indigenous history stretching back many thousands of years, and a much more recent story of migrants and refugees from every corner of the globe.

We have strong government institutions, and a robust economy built around our natural resource wealth, advanced services sector and highly-skilled workforce.

Australia is also fortunate to be geographically linked to the countries of Asia and the Pacific – an increasingly dynamic and influential region in world affairs. Australia has many friends in this region, among them a relationship with Laos that continues to grow in scale and importance.

Australia has the longest unbroken diplomatic relationship with Laos at ambassador level of any country. We celebrated our 60th anniversary of bilateral relations with Laos in 2012.

Australia has, for over five decades, supported Laos' economic development. We are one of the Lao PDR's major bilateral grant donors, with an annual aid program valued at over \$53 million.

Education remains at the centre of this, as we support the Lao Government's vital work to further develop the skills of the Lao people. Australia is also active in strengthening livelihoods and infrastructure in rural areas, UXO clearance and economic integration.

Australians can be proud too of the value – and values – our companies are bringing to Laos – in mining, banking, education, legal services, transport and other sectors. Australian companies are major contributors to both the Lao economy and its people, investing heavily in high quality training for their workers.

Our mining companies, such as Phu Bia Mining and MMG, are world leaders in environmental management and community development. They are setting high standards for others to follow in the Lao mining sector.

I also pay tribute to the many volunteers – over 400 young Australians in total – who have lived and worked in Laos over the years to share their skills with Lao communities.

And I want to acknowledge the highly professional NGOs who help deliver our aid program in Laos. Our programs would not have the same impact in addressing poverty in this country without the help of organisations like Care, Plan International, Oxfam, Child Fund, Interplast, World Vision, Save the Children and the Fred Hollows Foundation, together with their local partners in Laos.

I pay credit too to the over 20,000 Australians of Lao descent for their contribution to our country, and the continued support of many for the socio-economic development of the Lao PDR.

And I should also acknowledge the important contribution to Lao-Australia relations of the more than 1,000 Lao people who have studied in Australia under Australian Government scholarships, and many others who have studied in Australia privately.

These Australian alumni are now making a major contribution to Laos in government, business and civil society. And they are allies for us in strengthening awareness and understanding of contemporary Australia across the Lao PDR.



Former Prime Minister of Laos, Khamtay Siphandone (second from right), former Prime Minister of Australia Paul Keating and former Prime Minister of Thailand, Chuan Leekpai at an official opening ceremony of the 1st Friendship Bridge, 1994

2014 shapes as another important year in Australia-Lao relations. I am extremely proud that this year we will celebrate the 20th birthday of the Friendship Bridge (or Kangaroo Bridge as it is often called) – the first bridge across the Mekong connecting Laos and Thailand.

The bridge is a lasting, cogent symbol of Australia's commitment to Laos, and to the integration and economic development of South-East Asia. We are looking forward to a range of public events – on both sides of the border – to help celebrate this anniversary from 5-7 April.



The 1st Friendship Bridge

This year is also the 40th anniversary of Australia's relations with ASEAN. Australia has, from the outset, been a strong supporter of ASEAN's vision of a peaceful, prosperous and integrated South-East Asia. And we have been a highly effective partner for ASEAN, in good times and in bad.

We are keen to use the anniversary to help chart a new strategic direction to this partnership that better recognises both ASEAN's importance to Australia, and Australia's importance to ASEAN.

We are looking forward to staging a number of activities in Laos this year to mark this important anniversary, ahead of the 2014 ASEAN-Australia Commemorative Leaders Summit in Myanmar at year's end.

As I said at the outset, I am deeply honoured to represent Australia in the Lao PDR. This is a beautiful country, and the people of Laos share qualities Australians appreciate and respect. First among these are great resilience, humility and good humour.

I will strive, for the duration of my posting, to build on the close ties Australia enjoys with Laos and to continue Australia's work as a partner Laos can rely on to help resolve challenges and to achieve great things together through cooperation and hard work.

Australia will continue to strive to be a meaningful and effective partner for Laos in building prosperity and stability for the people of the Lao PDR.

Sabaidee!

John Williams

Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR

