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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

## Upgrades Ahead for the Vientiane Autism Centre

**The Vientiane Autism Centre will undergo renovations thanks to a new Australian grant.**

**Vientiane, Lao PDR (Monday, 16 March 2015)** – Last week, the Association for Autism (AfA) received a new grant from the Australian Embassy in Vientiane for the renovation and improvement of facilities at the Vientiane Autism Centre (VAC) so that the AfA can provide better quality services to a greater number of children with autism in Lao PDR.

The VAC, located in Ban Phonepapao, has been providing education, therapy and specialist services to children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) since 2009. Students at the VAC receive basic education, various physical, cognitive, and speech therapies, and life skills trainings to help them reach their potential. The VAC is the only facility of its kind in Laos and its goal is to equip its students with the necessary skills that will allow them to live fulfilling lives despite their disability, and to help them work towards participation in inclusive mainstream schooling alongside other children.



*Representatives of the Direct Aid Program (DAP) at the Australian Embassy in Vientiane hand over the cheque for the grant to AfA Secretary-General, Misouda Heuangsoukkoun.  
Photo credit: DFAT / Mingngakham Pangnasak.*

The VAC is currently attended by a record 36 autistic children, although the AfA has plans to expand and further develop its capacity in order to help even more children. Thus far, the VAC has been primarily funded through private donations and contributions made by the students' parents, although this new grant from the Direct Aid Program (DAP) at the Australian Embassy in Vientiane will allow the AfA to renovate and upgrade existing facilities at the VAC. "We are very happy and extremely grateful that the Australian Embassy has agreed to support us. This new grant will allow us to further professionalise the services that we provide for children living with autism in Laos", said VAC Director, Ms. Thongkham Vongsay. "We are also very happy as it comes at a particularly significant time as we prepare for World Autism Awareness Day next month when we will celebrate the achievements and abilities of people with autism", she added.

The planned upgrades for the VAC will include the improvement of the existing purpose-built multisensory therapy (or *Snoezelen*) room and the construction of a new physical therapy room and gym where the children can work on their balance, coordination and motor skills. Other improvements will include general renovations to the classrooms and play areas throughout the Centre and improvements to all bathrooms and sanitation facilities. "This project will not only will serve as a facelift for the VAC, making the Centre a much more pleasant environment for our students to learn and grow, but we expect that it will also permit us a more efficient use of our resources and ultimately allow us to increase the current capacity of the VAC to 50 students", commented Ms. Phokham Duangdala, Acting-President of the AfA.

The AfA was selected as a successful grant recipient from a pool of over 200 applicants. "We are indebted to the Australian Government, the Australian Embassy in Vientiane, and the DAP program for their valued support. On behalf of everyone at the AfA and the children that we care for: thank you for your support! We are very thankful for the strong relationship that we have enjoyed with the Australians over the past few years and sincerely hope that we can continue this relationship well into the future", added Ms. Duangdala.

Australian Ambassador Mr. John Williams said "the Embassy is pleased to be able to help improve the quality of the facilities and services for children with autism, to learn life skills and engage more easily at school and in their communities."

The Association for Autism represents the interests of persons living with ASD in Lao PDR by promoting their rights, improving their access to appropriate services, and providing them and their families with education, therapy, and training to better equip them to live full and productive lives. The AfA is a grassroots not-for-profit association (NPA) established and run by the parents and guardians of autistic children, and has formal government recognition as a registered NPA under decision number 136 / Ministry of Home Affairs, dated 15 March 2012. More information about the Association, its work, and how you can help them help children with autism in Laos is available online on their website at: [www.laoautism.org](http://www.laoautism.org).

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