

Australia Day message, 26 January 2020



Lao women pass the Australian flag during the 25th Anniversary celebrations on the Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge funded and built by Australia



The launch of the new Grade 1 primary school curriculum supported by Australia required more than 850,000 new textbooks, and will support a new generation of Lao learners

Australia's national day on 26 January is a day to remember what it means to be Australian, to celebrate contemporary Australia and to acknowledge our history – including both our Indigenous heritage and our European foundations.

This year, as our nation continues to deal with the ongoing unprecedented bushfires, it is also a time to reflect on Australia's many strengths displayed during this difficult time.

I would like to acknowledge the brave firefighters; the selfless volunteers; the huge groundswell of community support; and the countless individuals and groups across the world that have stepped up to support Australia in our response and recovery.

Thanks to their efforts, Australia continues to be a world-leading and safe place to visit, study and invest, whether in unaffected regions or those that will recover from these bushfires in the months and years to come.

The Australian Government is working to help families, farmers and businesses affected by the fires, and help restore the local environment and impacted wildlife. As part of the response, the Government has created a new agency – the National Bushfire Recovery Agency – to coordinate the national recovery effort with an initial budget of \$2 billion.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the concern and support shown by the Lao Government and the Lao people for Australia. In difficult times, the strength of our friendship with Lao PDR, and our partnership, becomes clear.

Australia was deeply saddened by the droughts in northern Laos and the most recent flooding in the south, which continue to impact on the lives of affected communities. I am pleased Australia gave financial assistance to help recovery efforts in affected provinces in 2019, building on our previous assistance to Attapeu last year. And in turn, Australia has received expressions of condolence and support from the Lao Prime Minister and Foreign Minister as well as many other senior officials.

The relationship between Australia and Lao PDR has also shown its people-to-people strength at the community and individual level. I have seen and received hundreds of expressions of sympathy from Lao people through social media, along with grassroots efforts to mobilise and support Australia's recovery.

These strong Government-to-Government and people-to-people links are vitally important to us, because national disasters are not the only challenges Australia and Lao PDR tackle together.

Our shared neighbourhood is an increasingly dynamic Indo-Pacific region.

Over the decade ahead, we will need to grapple with ongoing changes in economic growth, shifts in strategic power, new ways of working as technology evolves, and trans-boundary issues such as climate change.

Neither Australia nor Lao PDR are large countries compared to some in our region. On our own, and without rules and structures that promote prosperity and stability, both Lao PDR and Australia may struggle to overcome the challenges and make the most of the opportunities.

Australia is committed to shaping our destiny, and supporting countries in our region – our neighbours - to do the same.

We are leading regional collaboration on issues at the frontier of a changing world, like e-commerce, cyber security, infrastructure development, innovation and technology, and maritime security. We are close to finalising the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, an agreement that includes 15 economies, including Laos, and accounts for about one-third of global GDP. And we continue to be a leading security, economic and development partner for Southeast Asia, ASEAN, and the Lao PDR.

In 2019, Australia celebrated the 45th anniversary of becoming ASEAN's first dialogue partner and continued to support the Mekong River Commission on sustainable water and hydropower development. Together with Laos and Thailand we also celebrated the 25th anniversary of the first Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge – an enduring demonstration of Australia's longstanding support for connectivity and economic growth in the Mekong region.

At the bilateral level, Australia is supporting Lao PDR with the building blocks it needs to achieve its long-term potential.

Improved education outcomes are vital if Lao PDR is to compete in an increasingly integrated labour market, and ensure girls, people with a disability and ethnic groups are not left behind. That is why improving primary school education, particularly for disadvantaged children, remains a key area of our bilateral partnership, and one we encourage the Lao Government to invest in more as part of the 9th National Socioeconomic Development Plan.

Last year, together with the European Union and the United States, we supported the Lao Government to roll out a new Grade 1 primary curriculum that will give the next generation of Lao learners the foundation they need for success. Congratulations to the Lao Government on this huge achievement that involved production and delivery of 856,000 textbooks to more than 8,700 schools and training of over 9,660 teachers nationwide.

But our support for improving human capital is not limited to young Lao learners – it extends to future Lao leaders as well. With our broad range of scholarships and training, we are helping build Lao workforce capacity in many sectors.



The Lao Women in Leadership program is just one of the ways in which Australia supports gender equality and women's empowerment in Lao PDR

We are also making sure that Lao women, people with a disability and people from diverse ethnic groups have equal access to development opportunities, and receive special support where needed.

Diversity and gender equality has given Australia resilience and creativity. We have gained enormously from the contributions of Australians with different cultures, languages, religions, genders, and sexual orientations. We want to help Lao PDR reap the same benefits, and ensure its economic growth reaches all citizens, including the most disadvantaged.

With 26 years of uninterrupted economic growth, Australia has many lessons to share – and we are a committed partner on trade facilitation and private sector development in Lao PDR.

One of the factors in Australia's success is our open, transparent and rules-based trading and investment regime. The Lao Government has committed to taking some positive steps in the same direction, but it will be important to maintain momentum on improving the ease of doing business and trade facilitation going forward.

I was pleased 2019 brought opportunities for our two countries to exchange of knowledge and experience on common challenges, and I hope the coming year will do the same.

Last August Australia hosted the 6th Lao PDR-Australia bilateral Human Rights Dialogue, and showcased the important role of civil society and freedom of expression in Australia's vibrant economy and diverse society.

We were also very glad to exchange other high-level visits including Her Excellency Mme Pany Yathoutou, President of the Lao National Assembly, and His Excellency Mr Alounxay Sounnalath, President of the Lao Youth Union, to Australia, and the Australian Ambassador for Women and Girls, the Hon. Sharman Stone, to Lao PDR.

In the area of defence and security cooperation, we were pleased to host the Deputy Head of the Australian Federal Police and the Deputy Chief of Australia's Army in Laos, to explore how our security cooperation might grow. In addition, Australia made an effort to connect with Lao youth as part of our Australia Now: ASEAN 2019 campaign.

In 2020 we are looking forward to even more bilateral milestones – including welcoming His Excellency the Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith to Australia to open the new Lao Embassy in Canberra, and Her Excellency Mme Bounkham Vorachit, the Vice Minister for Natural Resources and Environment, who will be visiting this year to learn more about Australia's approach to mining, environmental and water management issues.



Lao officials attend the first Mekong-Australia Renewable Energy Dialogue in 2019 in Canberra, Australia



HE Mr Jean-Bernard Carrasco, Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR, and his wife Gill with prominent Lao Australian alumni HE Mme Sengdeuane Lachanthaboun, Minister for Education and Sports, and HE Mr Saleumxay Kommasith, Minister for Foreign Affairs and his wife Alouny at an alumni celebration in 2019.

We are expecting an Australian parliamentary delegation to visit Lao PDR in August. And we will be holding our next High Level Consultations with the Lao Government, to review the progress of our broad bilateral cooperation.

I have welcomed the opportunity over the past year to see more of Lao PDR's diverse and scenic country, from the historic caves of Viengxay District in Houaphanh Province, to remote schools implementing the new primary curriculum in Xiengkhouang, to rapidly developing Special Economic Zones in the north and south. These travels illustrated to me the significant progress that has been achieved but also the challenges that remain if Laos is to further improve its prosperity and stability.

I hope our two countries can continue to face those challenges head on, and build a strong and sustainable future for Lao PDR, together.

I would like to end by thanking all of the friends and partners of Australia in Laos for your support for Australia, and for Lao PDR-Australia relations. May I wish you all the best of health and success in your endeavours for 2020.

And to all Australians living and working in Laos – happy Australia Day!

Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR
HE Mr Jean-Bernard Carrasco