



VISIT TO LAOS

ARRIVAL PRESS STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER  
OF AUSTRALIA, THE RT. HON. HAROLD HOLT, MP.

I welcome the opportunity to make personal contact and discuss mutual problems and interests with the Prime Minister, His Highness Prince Souvanna Phouma, and the members of the Royal Lao Government, and to see what I can in the time available of the Lao people and their country.

I am grateful for the invitation of the Royal Lao Government to visit Laos which enables me to do these things.

I am also most grateful, as well as honoured, that His Majesty the King has seen fit to accord me an audience and a luncheon tomorrow at Luang Prabang.

We were glad to receive His Majesty's son, the Crown Prince, in Australia on a State visit in 1965.

His Majesty's brother, as Charge d'Affaires in Canberra has, of course, kept me and my government informed of developments in Laos - and I might add, has told me of the beauties of Luang Prabang.

My visit to Laos fits into the pattern of visits which, as you may know, I am paying to Australia's neighbours. We have come to realise how closely and inextricably our fortunes are bound up with those of our neighbours, and we are now making further efforts to come to understand these neighbours better. In recent years, Laos and Australia have developed close and continuing contacts with each other through our Embassies in each other's capitals, as well as through our co-operative ventures under the Colombo Plan, in ECAFE and the Mekong Committee, and in the Asian Development Bank, to mention only a few organisations.

I believe it essential for Australia and its neighbours such as Laos to maintain and improve their contact and mutual comprehension, and jointly to tackle the problem of more rapid development in the area. On the basis of the experience we have had and the skills we have acquired in Australia, we have tried to assist within our resources to help Laos' efforts to develop as quickly as possible.

Our aid under the Colombo Plan has been varied.

Communications are, of course, a basic problem in Australia, and it was fitting that our first project immediately after the independence of Laos was the provision of substantial quantities of road-making equipment designed to assist in the re-opening of the road systems. More recently, we have continued this interest in communications with the provision of radio receivers and of material for the Lao National Radio - and the two transmitters and mast for the Luang Prabang station which will be arriving shortly.

For the rest, our aid, which last year was in the vicinity of \$US 1,300,000, comprises especially our participation in the financial stabilisation programme, including the Foreign Exchange Operations Fund and our Commodity Import Programme, the development of our livestock improvement project at Na Pheng, the provision of the bulk of the school supplies required by the Lao primary schools, our financial contribution to the construction of the Nam Ngum Dam, and the provision of some 35 scholarships a year in Australia and of some experts here.

We are also acutely aware of the military problems of the area, including those of Laos.

In 1962, the proud, free, peaceful people of Laos accepted neutrality internationally through the Geneva Accords. Though we ourselves were not a party to those Accords, we nevertheless accepted them and have respected them. We respect fully the neutral status of Laos.

We shared the Lao disappointment, not long after the Accords had been signed, to find that one signatory, North Viet Nam, had not withdrawn its troops but, on the contrary, and particularly as its aggression against South Viet Nam increased, was violating Laotian territory both in order to infiltrate thousands of troops through Laos to South Viet Nam and in order to dominate certain areas of Laos,

We have watched with admiration the response of the Lao people to this invasion.

We are aware of the burden which the maintenance of its defence forces imposes on Laos in terms of manpower and finance.

We are aware of the toll of soldiers and civilians, and the suffering of the wounded soldiers and injured or dispossessed civilians.

We have admired the progress which the Lao Army has made over the past two years or more in clearing out the enemy from Government-held areas and creating a protective screen behind which the economic development of Laos can proceed.

Mrs. Holt and I are looking forward very much to our visit.

We shall meet again at the press conference arranged towards the end of my visit when I shall be glad to deal with the questions you may wish to put to me.

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APRIL 1st, 1967