

Open Hearts, Helping Hands

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The Chairman of the Lao National Committee for the International Year of Volunteers (IVY), Deputy Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupma, officially launched IYV on December 5 at Vientiane's Lane Xang Hotel.

The hotel's ballroom was packed with over 200 guests, mostly representing volunteer sending agencies, both management and volunteers working in the Lao PDR. The Deputy Foreign Minister praised the work of international volunteers in Laos, saying that they contributed significantly to the government's work in improving national living conditions. He said that there were as yet few Lao volunteers working internationally, though the contribution of local volunteers in community campaigns was very important.

Mr Phongsavath added: "Such campaigns have been implemented through mass organizations such as the Youth Union, Women's Union and Trade Union. Due to many factors, for example limited knowledge, education and professional skills, the voluntary process in Laos is at the local level only. However, the Lao government encourages Lao people to contribute themselves one day at the international level."

Turning to the subject of IYV 2001, he said: "The Lao government has formed a National Committee, which will work with domestic organizations and international agencies to identify activities and actions for the year 2001." Those involved include the Lao Women's Union, the Trade Union and the Youth Union, along with UNV and UNDP. Mr Phongsavath pointed out: "Everywhere there are problems – poverty, violence, pollution – which transcend frontiers and require the help which volunteers can give. There is widening agreement that the solutions cannot be expected of government alone, that civil society must also play a part."

The meeting was also addressed by UNDP Deputy Resident Representative Gana Fofang, who also praised the work in Laos being achieved by international volunteers working side-by-side with Lao counterparts, principally in poverty alleviation and infrastructure projects like those for water provision.

Ms Marleen Van Asch, UNV Programme Manager, gave an outline of the work of her UNVs in Laos, and she was supported by a UNV who had been deeply involved in Laos for some seven years, as a UNV and in village and private person-to-person contact. Although the official ceremony appeared to concentrate solely on UNVs, there were in fact representatives of a number of volunteer sending agencies involved in the launch. Countries with a volunteer presence in Laos include Australia, Canada, Holland, Germany, New Zealand, and the UK. In addition, information was displayed concerning local volunteers working in places like the Mahosot Hospital, which received a great deal of attention from those attending the ceremony. The entrance room was festooned with balloons and posters, and guests carried away with them stickers, posters, more

balloons, and even a specially commissioned IYV 2001 calendar featuring some of the work done in Laos by volunteers.

The Deputy Foreign Minister said: “For many years, the Lao PDR has implemented an international policy for peace, independence, friendship and cooperation with countries, international organizations and NGOs, which have provided help in the implementation of Lao social-economic development. These organizations also provide volunteer experts in projects like those for rural and community development. The volunteers use their energy and knowledge and closely work with the Lao government especially in remote rural areas.”

He added: “The Lao PDR has its own charming culture. Lao people love peace, and are generous people. They love to help each other without reward, a traditional custom inscribed in the minds of Lao people. Along with the national construction and development, there are Lao volunteers working in the country. This can be seen in the cooperative work in campaigns for health, literacy and the arts, major driving forces in our developing society.”

After IYV 2001 was officially launched, the audience was serenaded with traditional Lao songs before taking refreshments, collecting what promotional literature was still available on volunteer agencies, and networking industriously.

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