
Interview: Vang Rattanaovong

Laos: From Land-Locked to a Land Link

Gail Billington interviewed His Excellency Vang Rattanaovong, Ambassador to Washington, D.C. of the Lao People's Democratic Republic, on April 20.

EIR: During the Cold War, when Laos was drawn into the Indochina war, its involvement had everything to do with its geographical location and topographical attributes, situated at the watershed of the mighty Mekong River and as a transit area from China into Southeast Asia. But what once were roads to war, now put Laos at the crossroads for peace and development. The principal route for the Eurasian Land-Bridge goes through Laos, as we see on the map from *EIR's* special report on the subject. [See **Figures 1-3** and **5-9** in the section on Mekong development.]



Vang Rattanaovong

Ambassador Vang: I think that your plan here is very interesting. It shows the great transportation connection between the landmasses of the world. If this project can be realized one day in the future, I think it is excellent for the benefit of the people of our planet. It would help to strengthen peace, friendship, and cooperation to have a network of superhighways linking the landmasses of the world.

As far as Laos is concerned, as you know, during the Cold War, the Indochina war, before the American intervention, we fought against French colonialism, and after that, during the Cold War, the Americans jumped into Indochina and the war continued until 1975. After the Americans withdrew, Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia recovered their independence. And now as far as Laos is concerned, we are increasing stability and progress in our development. We can say that we are transforming Laos from being “land-locked” into a “land link.” We have our program to develop roads from Thailand to Vietnam, from Thailand to China. There are many highways that we are developing as an east-west corridor across Laos. There is a bridge across the Mekong between Vientiane and NongKhai, financed by the Australian government. A second bridge inside Lao territory between Pakxé and Phon-

thong, financed by the Japanese government, will be finished in June. It will help to develop the southern part of Laos, intersecting Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. A third bridge has been started between Mukdahan, Thailand and Savannakhet, Laos, financed by a loan from Japan, and road No. 9, linking this bridge across Laos to Danang, Vietnam, financed by Japanese grant aid. And there is a road linking Bokeo, Laos to Yunnan, China.

EIR: Vietnam is talking about constructing a highway along the old Ho Chi Minh Trail. I don't know to what extent that would extend the roads.

Ambassador Vang: In the other direction, too, you have Route 12 from Thakhek, Laos to Ha Tinh, Vietnam; Route 8 linking Laksao, Laos to Vinh, Vietnam; and Route 9 from Savannakhet to Danang, Vietnam. So, you see, we have turned Laos from being land-locked to being the land link on mainland Southeast Asia, so we become the bridge between China and ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations]—Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China. We have not yet, but maybe in the future, we'll build a road from Myanmar to Vietnam.

EIR: That's impressive. I didn't realize the number of roads going east and west.

Ambassador Vang: Laos will be the crossroads in that Mekong sub-region. Thailand has all the Asian highways from Bangkok to Vientiane, so we continue to develop them from Vientiane to Hanoi, including Bangkok to Hanoi, Bangkok to Vinh. There are many, many points in Laos in terms of land transportation.

Also we are developing air transportation, because the routes from Europe pass through Laos to Hong Kong, Korea, and Japan. We estimate this can add more than \$10 million for us in income through two points of entry, one in the south and one in the north.

We are also developing satellite capability to make Laos an international telecommunications connection. There is already investment from the U.S., Canada, the Nordic countries, Australia, Japan, and Thailand, jointly with the Lao government.

EIR: A big part of the Mekong plan is in hydropower development, but these projects were getting under way right at the point at which the Asian financial crisis hit back in 1997, and, I believe, Thailand had to pull back for economic reasons, from buying power. What is the status of these projects?

Ambassador Vang: As you know, we can say the crisis is over, and the economy of the region has started to move forward again. In our business development, 75% of investment is concentrated on investment in hydropower. There are now 35 countries investing in Laos to the tune of \$7.5 billion. I received a cable today that an Italian company has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Lao government to

start a hydropower project in southern Laos, Sekong Project No. 5. In terms of investment, Thailand is No. 1 with around \$2.5 billion; the United States, No. 2, with \$1.5 billion.

EIR: And then the European Union?

Ambassador Vang: Not so much. No. 3 are the Koreans; No. 4 Australia; No. 5 Malaysia, etc. We can say that Laos has a very big potential of water resources, because 42% of the water flow into the Mekong comes from sources in Laos. There are many, many tributaries of the Mekong. The rainfall every year is very high, more than 2,000 millimeters. We can develop nearly 70 projects in Laos just for the tributaries of the Mekong, and if we can develop all, we can have generation capacity of 18,000 megawatts (MW).

In 1975, we had only one dam, which generated 30 MW. Now we have six dams and 600 megawatts. The total potential only for the tributaries of the Mekong River is 18,000 megawatts. If we include the Mekong River—but the Mekong River is international, and you have to have cooperation with neighboring countries—we can increase the capacity of power to more than 40,000 megawatts, according to the estimate of the Mekong Committee.

Now Laos has joined ASEAN. In the year 2020, ASEAN will form an ASEAN power grid, so Laos will be the principal supplier of electricity to ASEAN. We have agreement with Thailand and Vietnam that from the year 2006, they will import power from Laos. Thailand will import about 3,500 MW; Vietnam about 2,000 MW; and also Cambodia will import some for their provinces bordering Laos.

EIR: Environmentalists are very keen to shut down these dam projects.

Ambassador Vang: Some environmental groups have concern, but I think they don't understand our situation. Maybe they have a wrong understanding, or misunderstanding. Our country is a mountainous country, and the river passes through the mountains, but there is no one living there. There is the river and very steeply sloped mountains. The water stays there; it does not flood villages. The people themselves are very happy to welcome the dams, because they can earn income and get out of poverty. They have lived there for many hundreds of years with no progress in their area. Once the dam projects start, they can profit from fisheries, tourism, etc.

We have to keep a balance with nature, too. The dams help us to prevent flooding, prevent all the rain from damaging villages and crops.

EIR: And how is the electricity supply for the Laotian population?

Ambassador Vang: In 1975, there was only electricity in Vientiane city, from the Nam Ngum dam there, but now we have extended the electrical power grid to all cities, provinces, and to the countryside, so that about 30% of the country has power. In remote areas, we use small schemes, where people

can buy motors for about \$200, which they place in the streams.

EIR: So, they create their own hydropower, then?

Ambassador Vang: We have a lot. The Chinese provide the motors for the countryside. So, then we can tell people not to cut trees for fuel, but use the energy from water, because our country has a lot of water.

EIR: Laos has, in fact, a very small population.

Ambassador Vang: We have only 5 million people.

EIR: For all of the former Indochina countries, the number of younger people is quite high as a percentage of the population. In Laos, 45% are 14 or younger. What are the educational prospects?

Ambassador Vang: We have about 800,000 students in primary and secondary school, and we have around 2,000 students at the National University. Our university was launched in 1997; before there were separate institutes, which have now been joined into the national university with many different faculties. We also send students abroad every year to neighboring and faraway countries—Vietnam, China, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Japan, Australia, France, Canada, the U.S., India.

EIR: In the hundreds of students?

Ambassador Vang: Many hundreds.

EIR: That's very different from the situation in 1975. What would you say the education, or literacy, level was then?

Ambassador Vang: We can say that 65-66% of our population can read and write.

EIR: Health care?

Ambassador Vang: We have developed hospitals and clinics throughout the country. We can eliminate some diseases such as malaria and dengue. Sometimes there are epidemics, but we can now prevent major damage. We now have about 1,000 doctors in the country, and they are quite qualified, because we have assistance from France and Germany, Thailand, Vietnam, China, and Australia for training specialists. Japan is currently helping to build a new hospital.

EIR: The level of aid to Laos is still fairly low?

Ambassador Vang: I think it is fairly high. Japan provides us every year with \$100 million; Australia maybe about \$15 million; Sweden about \$20 million; European Union about \$20 million, too; the United States about \$11 million last year in humanitarian assistance.

EIR: What is the status of U.S. ties with Laos?

Ambassador Vang: We have very good cooperation in the field of MIAs, U.S. soldiers missing in action from the war. Now we have a ten-year project to excavate the sites of U.S.

plane crashes during the Indochina war, and have returned the remains of 143 Americans to the U.S. government.

EIR: I know that, with Vietnam, the U.S. is still withholding expanding relations, contingent on cooperation in these areas, which makes things very difficult.

Ambassador Vang: We also have very good cooperation with the United States in the field of the fight against narcotic drugs, opium. We are a victim, too, because opium was introduced into Laos during the colonial period, and, in the beginning, the United States did not understand. They just blamed Laos, accusing us of producing opium, but after our explanation, they understood. We are victims, too; the U.S. is a victim, so we cooperate together to struggle against narcotic drugs in Laos. We have a project for alternative crops, and we developed a scheme of rural development, small irrigation scheme, so that now we can reduce the production of opium year by year, and the American government is satisfied. According to the plan, in the year 2006, we can abolish the production, but I think it is not easy, because the region is a transit area for the drug, too. Our border is very long with neighboring countries; it is a porous border.

EIR: That's one area, with this administration, where White House drug policy adviser Gen. Barry McCaffrey (ret.) has done a good job in trying to build cooperative relations with other countries.

Ambassador Vang: We have an agreement among Vietnam, China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Cambodia—all the neighboring countries—to struggle against narcotic drugs.

EIR: As a consequence of the war, to what extent does Laos have a large overseas Laotian population?

Ambassador Vang: About 10% of our population lives abroad, because the situation after the war was very complicated. There were no jobs; people became very poor, and there was conflict, so they sought refuge abroad. But now they return home to visit; we estimate more than 10,000 return from the United States every year. From France, about 8,000; Australia, Canada, perhaps more than 1,000 from each country. I can say perhaps 25,000 visit Laos every year, and they bring back money.

EIR: I was surprised by a report of about \$2 billion in remittances from overseas family members to relatives in Vietnam. But I am very familiar with the situation in the Philippines, where the dependence on remittances from overseas contract workers is very high, upwards of \$6 billion.

Ambassador Vang: I think that every person who comes home brings in at least \$3,000. It doesn't pass through the government, but it helps development indirectly.

Now, we also had last year 700,000 tourists visiting Laos. In 1998, it was 500,000. We anticipate revenues of \$90 million from tourism.

We can say that income from tourism is now number one;

gemstones, number two; electricity, third; wood and forest products, fourth.

As for rice, in 1975, we produced only 500,000 tons for 3 million people. Twenty-five years later, we produce 2.1 million tons, so we now can feed our people and have some surplus. In 1975, we had no irrigation system at all, and we had only one crop in the wet season. Then, we had about 400,000 hectares of rice fields. Now we have 600,000 hectares of rice fields, and we now have irrigation for about 20% of the rice fields, so that we can have a second, dry-season crop.

Now, food security is achieved.

EIR: Food self-sufficiency is crucial.

Ambassador Vang: When we had problems from the financial crisis in Southeast Asia, if we hadn't had food security, we would have had problems. But with food security, we have rice, we have fish, we have plenty to eat.

EIR: Going back to the land corridors through Laos, and the roads—

Ambassador Vang: In 1975, we had only 3,000 kilometers of roads. Now, we have 6,500 kilometers. During the colonial period, they didn't develop roads. They developed nothing. The French developed Vietnam and Cambodia because they had access to the sea. But they kept Laos as a reserve colony. After Vietnam and Cambodia developed, only then would they develop Laos. The Second World War came, the Indochina wars came, the American intervention, so there was no time to develop Laos. When the Americans intervened in Indochina, they developed Thailand, because it became a base for the Americans.

Laos became the victim of the Indochina war. After the war, our government had to redevelop everything, and after that we had to clean up the unexploded ordnance (UXO) dropped from American planes.

EIR: I've seen the figures on the extent of the bombings. Did Laos also suffer from landmines and deforestation?

Ambassador Vang: We suffered from the bombs dropped by the U.S. Air Force. Three million tons of bombs dropped into Laos, and about one-third is unexploded. Every year they kill about 200 people.

EIR: Over what extent of the country?

Ambassador Vang: Almost the whole country, and to clear the land for farming, this increases the cost for us.

EIR: Does the government have an estimate of the cost of clearing out this UXO? I ask, because I've seen an estimate that the cost of the war for the United States was \$150 billion. My idea in working on this project was, if the United States spent \$150 billion on the war, what are we prepared to pay for the peace?

How many were killed by the bombings?

Ambassador Vang: Many thousands. Until now, about

10,000 over the last 25 years were killed and wounded by the UXO. We also have landmines, but they are not a big problem, because we don't produce them. They are in some places, for example, where they were used to set a perimeter around soldiers' camps.

Our target, regarding the UXO, is to clear only the land that we can use.

We are also reducing slash-and-burn cultivation. In 1975, we had 265,000 families practicing slash-and-burn cultivation, but we have reduced this to 100,000. Our target is to reduce, year by year, the slash and burn, because it destroys the forest. The big environmental problem for Laos now is this slash and burn.

EIR: Is there a problem with illegal logging?

Ambassador Vang: We have logging projects, but not big problems. There is some in the villages, where people cut the trees for their own consumption.

EIR: Are there problems with landmines along the borders, which would disrupt the corridors that are being built?

Ambassador Vang: There are landmines along the borders, but there are no problems for our people or the people of the neighboring countries, because, you see, along the borders with Thailand, Vietnam, or China, each side planted landmines to protect their own border. People in the border areas know that, and they don't pass there. They have to pass only through the established checkpoints. It is dense jungle; there are tigers, snakes, but it is not a place to live. There are landmines, from both sides, to protect their own territory. To clear the landmines is not easy.

Even the United States has not yet signed the landmine treaty. We appreciate the treaty, but we cannot join yet. The United States, China, and Russia have not yet joined.

EIR: At the recent meeting in Manila of the ASEAN Eminent Persons committee, where they outlined a plan for the integration of ASEAN, they assigned roles for each of the countries involved. What do you think of this integration idea, which includes creating a single currency zone, and even having a possible head of state of ASEAN?

Ambassador Vang: I think it depends on the development of ASEAN in the future, but up until now, each country keeps its own independent sovereignty according to the ASEAN principle.

EIR: What are the primary objectives of the Laos government in the context of the ASEAN 2020 program?

Ambassador Vang: For us, our policy efforts are aimed at bringing Laos out of underdevelopment, to make it a developing country. Now we are included among the least developed countries, so by 2020, we have to join the ranks of the developing countries.

EIR: ASEAN also has the ASEAN Plus Three relations with

China, Japan, and Korea. How are Laos's bilateral relations with China?

Ambassador Vang: We have very good relations with China, with Japan, and with Korea. Japan is the number-one aid donor to Laos, but number 15 in terms of investment. Maybe after the infrastructure is well developed, Japanese investors will come to Laos.

EIR: You are familiar with the proposal of the Eurasian Land-Bridge, but the question always is, how do you pay for it? The problem is that, within this current monetary system, where the expectation is that private funds will pay for a major portion, that simply is not going to happen. Especially now with the development of the so-called "new economy," those who can't quite make it into cyberspace will be left behind. That is why we are saying that, to build the Land-Bridge, we must have new mechanisms, new institutions to create the funding necessary.

Ambassador Vang: I think so. I hope so.

EIR: And new institutions that will create that possibility. That is why we are calling for a New Bretton Woods.

Ambassador Vang: I think that idea is the best idea, about the new system of international finance. You see, for us, if Laos can develop, we can bridge the whole of Asia, and we can bridge ASEAN with China.

I summarize it like this with our friends: During the war period, Laos suffered, but during the peacetime and development period, Laos will prosper.

EIR: That is the irony. For the same reasons that Laos was dragged into the war, are the reasons why Laos can emerge at the center of regional economic development.

Ambassador Vang: That is the logic of the matter.

EIR: It is a principle of justice, too.

Ambassador Vang: You see now, once ASEAN became ASEAN 10, we are at ease. We can say it is the first time Southeast Asia has enjoyed peace and stability after the Second World War. After the Cambodian conflict, we can say that we have peace. Now there is some conflict in Myanmar, but it is domestic, not international. I think that with development, it, too, will disappear.

EIR: I think so. I think there are signs of that.

Ambassador Vang: In Thailand, too, in the last 20 years, there was big trouble, too, in domestic conflict, but now with development, it has disappeared. In Laos, too, at the beginning of the liberation, there were the remnants of the former regime, which sought refuge in Thailand, and crossed the border to attack, but now they have disappeared. They have grown old, and nobody supports them any more. And inside the country, we developed.

EIR: At a certain point, their children do not want war, they

want peace.

Ambassador Vang: So, I think with this ASEAN 10 of 500 million people, this is a big market. I wish the United States would increase cooperation, trade, and investment with Laos, by investing in electricity, supplying Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar, and others in this region. I think that in the future, supposedly in the next 30-40 years, the availability of oil and gas will be reduced, and the use of electricity will increase. In that case, Laos will be booming. Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan has said that Laos will become the “Kuwait of Southeast Asia.”

I think so. Suppose one day we have electric batteries for cars; in that case, we will be booming. I saw on TV, big commentaries about the “greenhouse effect,” concerning the use of oil and gas.

EIR: Sounds like good a riposte to those environmentalists who oppose the hydropower plants.

Ambassador Vang: The hydropower in Laos does not harm the environment, because we develop it only in the mountain areas. In Thailand, they can develop only 17 dams. In Vietnam, they cannot develop, because of the population density along the river. If they develop, it floods the villages. Each case is different.

We developed our project very democratically. We asked the people first. We consulted them first. Everybody gave support in order to overcome the poverty. They have stayed there many, many years with no development. The first dam project was in Vientiane province, Nam Ngum 1. As a result of the development of that dam, the whole region has become developed, has electricity, roads have been built so people can market their products.

And the dam helps to protect the environment, too. I myself lived in the area. Before the construction of the dam, every year there were floods that destroyed all the crops. But in the 30 years since the dam was built, there have been only two floods, because the dam could not hold back the water from the mountains. I am 52 years old; before the dam, every year I saw floods. In our case, as the waters in the rainy season come down the Mekong River from China, the river swells, and if the water from the tributaries of the Mekong in Laos join at that same moment, it floods the entire country. So, if we can keep the water in the mountains, and prevent it from merging with the water from the tributaries, we reduce the flooding. Each region has its own problem.

EIR: Any final remarks?

Ambassador Vang: I wish to see friendship, cooperation, trade, investment between Laos and the United States increase for the good, for the benefit of our two people. Your success in development is good, and we have many things to learn from you.

EIR: I think we have things to learn from Laos and the other countries of Southeast Asia, including a quality of courage

and stamina in the face of tremendous adversity. Also, we must not get stuck in the past.

Ambassador Vang: There are some things we *don't* want to learn from you, too, like “gun democracy.” In Laos we confiscate all guns; only the police, soldiers, and militia can have guns. In Laos, we even collect hunting weapons, because they kill the tigers and other wildlife.

Let me also reflect on history. Before 1975, for 280 years, from 1695 to 1975, our country had been at war; infighting between rival factions led to the loss of our independence, and we were colonized. After 1975 was the first time for peace. There are 47 different ethnic groups in the country, the low-landers, up-landers, and high-landers. But there is no history of conflict between the ethnic groups. Some allied with the Americans, others not. But there has only been war for Laos between the people of Laos and foreigners.

Interview: Ouch Borith

Spare No Effort for Peace and Stability

Gail Billington interviewed His Excellency Ambassador Ouch Borith, Permanent Representative of the Royal Government of Cambodia to the United Nations, on May 2, 2000, in New York City.

EIR: Mr. Ambassador, where were you on April 17, 1975?

Ambassador Borith: In 1975, I was in Phnom Penh with my brother, my sister, and my father. I think it was April 16 when my father asked me to bring my sister to the center of the city to stay with my uncle, because the fighting was very intense, and our house was on the outskirts of Phnom Penh.



Ouch Borith

In the early morning of April 17, I went to pick up my sister and we were going back home, but unfortunately, the Khmer Rouge soldiers had blocked all the road access to my home, and they forced us to go into the direction that they had determined. We were then separated from my father and brother. Together with other hundreds of thousands of people, my sister and I were deported from the capital city of Phnom