

UNITED NATIONS



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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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REMARKS AT OPENING OF UN HOUSE

Vientiane, 11 April 2009

Your Excellency Mr. Thongloun Sisoulith, Deputy Prime Minister of the Lao People's Democratic Republic,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the Government for inviting me to this beautiful country. I feel very comfortable here among such warm and diverse people.

I am happy to see so many partners gathered together for this event -- government representatives, the diplomatic corps, our development partners and representatives of non-governmental organizations. I am especially pleased to see so many young people.

The United Nations is deeply grateful to the Government and people of Laos for this beautiful UN House. This generous gift wonderfully reflects the close ties we have developed over the decades.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I know that you are concerned about the global financial crisis, and how it could affect life here in Laos. I share your concern.

That is why I used my recent visit to the G-20 Summit to sound the alarm about the world's most vulnerable people. I wanted to make sure that leaders in London did not forget subsistence farmers in Laos. I called for a truly global stimulus that advanced the interests of all nations.

I stressed the need to keep our pledge to reach the Millennium Development Goals. I also called on the G-20 to promote a "Green New Deal" that would address climate change while tackling the economic crisis. And I took a strong stand against the new protectionism.

Negotiations were tough, but there was full consensus on the need for urgent action. And in the end, the G-20 agreed on a substantial package of financial support totaling \$1.1 trillion. Most of the funds will be made available through the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and other multilateral development agencies.

Now the goal is to keep donors to their pledges.

I am also pleased to join in launching the latest report on progress toward the Millennium Development Goals here in Laos.

There have been steady improvements in health, education, living standards and life spans. Poverty has declined significantly. Infant and child mortality rates continue to fall, and school enrolment and literacy rates are climbing. There is also greater access to safe drinking water

These gains are underpinned by greater macro-economic stability and increasing integration with the global economy. In addition, Laos is increasingly governed by the rule of law, and its accountability systems are growing stronger.

I congratulate the Government on these achievements, and I thank our many partners for their support.

At the same time, and as we all know, there is still great cause for concern. Poverty is prevalent, especially in the countryside. Too many people in remote parts of the country suffer from hunger during the lean season. Too many are isolated by barriers of language, culture and economics. Inequality – especially between rural and urban areas – is getting worse.

I am especially concerned about the high rates of child malnutrition and maternal mortality. Mothers – our most important caretakers – suffer the highest mortality rates in the region. The education index in Laos is lower than that of any other ASEAN country.

This is not only a human tragedy; it will have serious implications for the future of this country's workforce and its ability to compete in a global economy.

We have to acknowledge these serious problems. But I remain hopeful. The Government is committed to achieving the MDGs by 2015, and to the equally important goal of graduating from the list of least developed countries by 2020.

These goals are linked. To graduate from LDC status, Laos needs to maintain high economic growth and increase per capita income while improving social indicators on nutrition, child mortality, education and adult literacy. All of these targets are included in the MDGs.

Laos will have to do more than just increase growth. It will have to focus on the quality and sustainability of that growth. That requires greater investments in human development and the social sector.

In this regard, I am please to inform you that I am going to convene a summit meeting to review the MDG implementation in 2010.

In these times of global financial turmoil, social protection is all the more important. Safety nets catch those most at risk. And that helps maintain progress.

Laos will have to focus greater attention on environmental sustainability, especially at a time when some of the country's natural riches are endangered by short-term economic interests.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This new MDG report is not just a balance sheet of progress and challenges. It is a valuable tool for the Government and its development partners.

And this UN House is not only a symbol of our partnership. It will foster greater economies of scale, improve collaboration among UN agencies, and present a unified UN image to the country. Sharing premises under one roof inspires teamwork and improves coherence. At the UN House, we will all join forces to benefit the people of this country, especially those who need it most.

I hope to see Laos reach every one of the MDGs and graduate from the list of LDCs, thereby assuming a larger role among the community of nations.

Such advances would benefit Laos as a whole, but above all it will help the country's people who so richly deserve the better life that progress will bring.

We dedicate this UN House to them.

Thank you.