

# Foreign Office Minister begins 4-day visit to Laos, Cambodia and Thailand

Foreign & Commonwealth Office Minister Heather Wheeler began her visit today (16 September) in Vientiane and will meet Laotian Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Sengphet Hounbounnuang to discuss the bilateral relationship, including trade. She will also meet Health Minister Bounkong Sihavong to discuss UK-Laos co-operation in tackling anti-microbial resistance. The Minister will visit UK funded de-mining projects that work with international and local partners to clear existing mines and educate the local population about the risk of mines in the region.

The Minister will also:

- meet female national parliamentarians to discuss the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's support to the National Assembly
- see how rugby has transformed the lives of young women and girls in Laos
- meet with students in Vientiane to discuss the illegal wildlife trade

On Tuesday, the Minister will travel to Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh where she will meet Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs, H. E. Prak Sokhonn. The Minister will also meet her counterparts with responsibility for key elements of the UK-Cambodian bilateral partnership; the Senior Minister for Mine Action, the Minister of Environment, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Women's Affairs.

Minister Wheeler will finish her 4-day visit in Bangkok, where she will meet the new Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Dr Vijavat Isarabhakdi. They will discuss the UK-Thai relationship, collaboration on climate change and on tackling the illegal wildlife trade with the Minister for Environment. She will meet the British Council to discuss their work on education.

The Minister will discuss the role of women in politics with female Thai parliamentarians and see the important work the consular team do with Thai partners to support the victims of rape and sexual assault.

As countries vulnerable to climate change, droughts and flooding, Minister Wheeler will use her conversations in Laos, Cambodia and Thailand to emphasise co-operation on climate issues and UK leadership, including hosting COP 26 in Glasgow in 2020.

Speaking ahead of her visit to the region, the Minister for Asia and the Pacific Heather Wheeler said:

Brexit is an opportunity for the UK to think in a truly global manner. In that spirit, and as the Minister for Asia-Pacific, I want to build a stronger relationship with the countries of South East Asia.

Through this visit I will demonstrate the UK's commitment to supporting the people of the Mekong and I look forward to discussing trade opportunities, the role of women in society and global challenges like climate change.

Speaking on the work of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in Laos, their Chief Executive Anthony Smith said:

Promoting gender equality is an important part of our work worldwide, including in Laos. That is why we are engaging with the National Assembly to help ensure new laws such as the Gender Equality Bill deliver better protection for women, in line with Laos' international commitments.

## **Background**

UK-funded de-mining programmes in Cambodia have directly benefited over 185,000 Cambodians. In Laos, over 6 million square metres of contaminated land has already been cleared, directly benefiting almost 8000 people, and a further 6,895 people have educated about mine risks.

## **Further information**