

Some Notes on the Mekong Timber Trade (Lao-Vietnam Border)

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Over last decade, Lao timber Harvesting & trade closely linked to infrastructure development (esp. hydropower), sometimes in protected areas



Not all of the cross-border trade is associated with large-scale/elite actors

Lao-Vietnam Charcoal Trade

Cross-Border Luxury Hardwood Trade



Late 2015 and early 2016

(note the January Party Congress, and announcement of new PM Thongloun Sisoulith):

Dec. 15, 2015



The screenshot shows the RFA website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'RFA Radio Free Asia' and language options. Below that, a menu lists various regions: Home, Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, North Korea, Tibet, Uyghur, Vietnam, In Focus, and E-I. The main content area features the article title 'Convoy of Lao Trucks Transports Logs to Vietnam, Despite Ban on Timber Exports' with a sub-headline '2015-12-30'. There are social media sharing icons for Twitter, Facebook, and others. A large image shows a long line of trucks with blue tarps covering their loads. The text of the article discusses the Lao government's continued transport of logs to Vietnam despite a ban on timber exports, mentioning a report by an international environmental group and a government decree from August 8th.

June 2, 2016



The screenshot shows a news article with the headline 'Bus explosion kills eight Vietnamese passengers'. The text describes an explosion that wrecked a bus loaded with an illegal shipment of timber and carrying 14 Vietnamese passengers in Khammuan province yesterday, killing eight people instantly. Below the text is a photograph of a white bus with significant damage to its front and side, with debris and what appears to be a large pile of logs or timber visible inside. A caption below the image states: 'The aftermath of the explosion, believed to have been caused by fireworks stowed in the baggage compartment.'

By many accounts, Laos PMO/15 having a significant effect, with provincial governors falling into line



Lao People's Democratic Republic
Peace Independence Democracy Unity Prosperity

Prime Minister

No. 15/PM

Vientiane Capital, date 13.05.2016

Order

**On Strengthening Strictness of Timber Harvest Management and Inspection,
Timber Transport and Business**

Govt orders forests closed to logging Vientiane Times, May 30, 2016

Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith has instructed that all types of forest be closed to logging by June 1, with all parties prohibited from collecting or removing logs from forest fields known locally as Sanam I.

The instruction was issued at the government's monthly meeting for May held on May 24-25 at the Prime Minister's Office and chaired by Mr. Thongloun.

Authorities seize illegal timber in Savannakhet province

Vientiane Times, August 12, 2016

http://www.vientianetimes.org.la/FreeContent/FreeContent_Authorities.htm

A huge quantity of contraband timber has been seized in Savannakhet province over the past three months since Prime Minister Thongloun Sisoulith issued an order to clamp down on illegal logging.



Authorities inspect a load of timber at Dansavan-Lao Bao international border checkpoint in Savannakhet province recently.



Joost Foppes
7 mins

This is the type of trucks that bring the timber to Vietnam...none of these past our office today, 2 June 2016.

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Some implications...

- 'Closure' of border to all timber exports has affected commercial plantation operators
- To my knowledge sawmills have ceased operations even in remote border areas (Ta Oy)
- District authorities registering villager's chainsaws, enforcement of permit requirements
 - A village of 47 HH, 9 chainsaws registered
- Given the demand and incentives, & the nature of the border area, (rivers, minor roads and and trails), people will soon be looking for new ways of transporting high value timber across the border
- The high profile nature of this crackdown appears different from previous efforts. PM Sisoulith staking a personal legitimacy to PMO/15?
- Even charcoal reportedly being held up at the Lao-China border (is charcoal not a processed product?)

Innovations?

Note yesterday from the Savannakhet
- Quang Tri border area:

- “A family I observed had paid 120 million kip (US\$14,400) for the wood. I don't know the volume. But they explained that they had attempted to pass logs 3 times over the border using just 2 Hyundai minivans. Someone at the border must have known, because officials were asking them 6 million (US\$715) in bribes to let it pass. So they are trying a new route, which includes transport over the Xepon River.”

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2016-09-29

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A truck with timbers inside on the road to the Phoutuckham border checkpoint in Namdome district, Sept. 2016.