

# LAOS

LAOS [THE LAO PEOPLES' DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC] IS ONE OF THE WORLD'S POOREST COUNTRIES. IT IS SPIRITUALLY HUNGRY, BUT RESTRICTIONS ON CHRISTIAN WITNESS, PERSECUTION AND A LACK OF MATURE CHURCH LEADERSHIP HAMPER THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL.



## population

- Population: 6.4 million
- Density: 27.6 per square km

Although there are over 100 ethno-linguistic groups, the people of Laos fall into three main groups.

- 66% Lao or Lao Loum [lowland Lao]. They live mainly in the lowlands along the Mekong.
- 22% Lao Theung [upland Lao]
- 9% people of Tibetan origin, such as the Hmong and Yao, known as Lao Soung [highland Lao] who inhabit the northern mountains.
- The remaining 1% are mostly ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese. Only 15% of the people live in towns. Over 80% live in rural hamlets.

## religions

- Buddhist 61.05%
- Animist 31.2%
- Non-religious/other 4.3%
- Christians 1.85%
- Muslim 1.1%
- Chinese religions 0.5%

The principal religion of Laos is Theravada Buddhism, though it is often little more than a veneer over deep-seated animism. Laotian life and culture is heavily influenced by Buddhism. There are temples in Lao villages, but most non-Lao villages have no Buddhist presence.

## language

Laos lacks a common language. The country's official language is Lao, but

ethnic groups use their own languages and dialects. French and English are also spoken.

## geography

Laos is completely landlocked, bounded by China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar. Although 90 percent of the country is mountainous, most life centers around the fertile Mekong River and its tributaries. The river irrigates rice paddies and provides some fish. However Laos is not self-sufficient in rice, and much food is imported from surrounding countries.

## climate

The climate of Laos is tropical with April temperatures averaging 29°C [84°F] and January temperatures averaging 22°C [72°F].

## history

The early history of Laos is sketchy. The original inhabitants of the area were the Mon-Khmer. The Lao and other Tai peoples gradually moved south from present-day Yunnan Province, China.

The "Kingdom of a Million Elephants" was founded in the mid-14th century when the Khmer king at Angkor married his daughter to a Lao prince, Fa Ngum. After him, the kingdom had a long period of peace. It expanded to control parts of North Thailand, was beaten back by the Burmese, ruled by the Vietnamese and eventually split into three states in 1713.

Hostilities between Thailand and Vientiane led to the conquering of the latter in 1778 and the other two states were forced into line. When Vientiane tried to reassert its independence in 1827, Thai forces completely destroyed it.

During the second half of the 19th century the French began to make their presence felt. A French military expedition in 1893 occupied the most important towns and by 1904 they controlled the whole country.

During the Second World War the Japanese occupied Indochina. After a brief period of independence, the French reoccupied the region in 1946.

In 1949 Laos became an independent state within the French Union but dissidents allied themselves with the pro-Communist Vietminh forces fighting the French in Vietnam. They invaded Laos in 1953 and quickly gained control of large areas.

The Geneva armistice ended this war in 1954. A coalition government was formed and in 1955 Laos joined the UN.

The US and USSR supported different factions in the inherently unstable government. Civil wars alternated with tentative governments and splits alternated with coalitions.

In the mid-1960s Laos was drawn into the Vietnam War. North Vietnamese troops used jungle trails in eastern and southern Laos as routes to supply their forces fighting in South



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Vietnam, and US warplanes carried out increasingly heavy bombing attacks on the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail, releasing two million tonnes of bombs.

Following Communist victories in Cambodia and Vietnam in 1975, the Laotian monarchy was abolished and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was proclaimed. The [Communist] Lao People's Revolutionary Party is still the only legal political party in Laos. Most opposition leaders fled the country in the 1970s. Vietnamese troops remained in Laos to bolster the regime until 1990.

The country has struggled economically and discontent is widespread. Subsistence agriculture accounts for half of the GDP and provides 80 percent of total employment. Recently the government has attempted to move towards an open-market economy.

Laos has no state social services.

The country has a high infant mortality rate [8.7 percent], and many urban areas lack modern sewage and water facilities. Malaria, dysentery, parasitic diseases and respiratory infections are a major problem, and there is only one doctor for every 6,500 people. Life expectancy is 55 years.

## christianity

The birth of the church in Laos was slow and difficult. The ethnic Lao had no interest in the gospel, which was brought by a Presbyterian missionary in 1885.

However, the Khmu, slaves of the Lao, responded vigorously and the Khmu church now numbers around 20,000 [5.3 percent of all Khmu people]. In 1901 Swiss missionaries worked among Lao outcasts called Phi-Pop, men who are believed to communicate with evil spirits. They also

responded and Christians in southern Laos now number around 15,000. However, since the early Christians were non-Lao and social outcasts, churches gained a stigma that has proved a barrier to those wanting to become Christians.

The Communists sought to eradicate all religion. Persecution of Christians was exceptionally harsh between 1975 and

1978. Suspected because of their association with Western missionaries, at least 90 percent of the trained church leaders fled the country, and all Bible schools were closed.

Persecution and restrictions continued throughout the 1980s, with many believers imprisoned and fellowships quashed. Restrictions were eased in the 1990s but churches are suspected as potentially subversive and are still watched.

As conditions in Laos improved, Christians were among the refugees who returned from Thailand. Sadly, the lure of material goods and aid programs have become another threat to the strength of the church. Some church leaders jostle for prestige and the biggest aid budget.

The Bible was translated into Lao in 1927, but this is now archaic. A new translation was completed in the late 1990s. Some ethnic groups have portions of the Bible in their languages.

Restrictions remain on public evangelism, the building of churches and links with foreign organizations. It is said that the years since 1997 have been the most oppressive for Christians since the beginning of Communist government. Christians have been imprisoned and forced to sign statements rejecting their faith.

Buddhism is regaining its old influence and is heavily promoted by the Lao government.

## how to pray

- The church still faces restrictions and Christians still face persecution. Pray for freedom for evangelism, church planting and building, for the effective use of present freedoms and for changes that will open Laos up for the preaching of the gospel. Rather than retrenching, pray that Christians would reach out, especially to the ethnic minorities.
- Pray for unity, integrity and godly leadership in the church.
- Pray for leadership and Bible training. Pray for the effectiveness of informal study programs [by radio and through Theological Education by Extension].
- Missionary work is not officially permitted, but there are openings for Christian professionals and those working with aid and relief programs. Pray for a reopened door for Bible translators, church planters and Bible teachers.
- Unreached peoples in which there are no known churches:
  - Tai peoples, speaking 15 languages.
  - The northern peoples, many of whom have responded to the gospel in neighboring China and Thailand.
  - The small southern ethnic groups that were being evangelized for the first time between 1957 and 1963. War prevented the planting of churches among most of these peoples and they remain deeply enmeshed in the fear of spirits.
  - The Vietnamese and Chinese, among whom there has been little evangelism.
- There are at least 13 languages for which there is a definite need for Bible translation teams and a possible total of 66 languages. Pray for discernment in prioritizing, and for men and women to invest their lives in translating God's word.
- Christian radio: FEBC broadcasts 16 hours weekly in Lao, Hmong, Khmu and Lahu. Pray for a good reception and spiritual response.