

## **Xi promotes Cambodia ties**

By Liu Xin Source: People's Daily and Global Times

Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived Thursday in Cambodia for a two-day state visit, with experts saying that the trip would push the traditional friendship to a new high, and will further promote regional development and integration, despite the challenges that lie ahead.

Thirty-one agreements, including soft loan deals of around \$237 million, were signed on Thursday following the meeting between Xi and Prime Minister Hun Sen, Reuters reported.

Xi also pledged to urge Chinese investment in building high-speed rail in Cambodia and an airport in Siem Reap province, as well as provide an additional 500 scholarships.

The Chinese leader has also canceled around \$89 million in debt, according to Eang Sophalleth, an aide to Hun Sen.

"This is historic in terms of the number of agreements signed and pledges," Sophalleth said, adding that Beijing had also pledged another \$14 million in military aid.

Xi on Thursday also met with Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni at the Cambodian Royal Palace, vowing to carry forward the traditional friendship between the two countries, the Xinhua News Agency reported.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen said Wednesday in a joint written interview with the Chinese media that friendly relations between the two countries have witnessed remarkable progress.

The two countries now face various challenges from domestic to international, including economic development, regional security, terrorism, climate change and others, said Hun Sen.

"Xi's visit shows that Cambodia and China have cemented their friendship and pushed bilateral ties to a new high amid frequent exchanges at all levels," said Chen Shilun, a research fellow from the Guangzhou-based Institute of Advanced International Studies of Sun Yat-sen University.

Xi's visit will contribute further to promoting Cambodia-China cooperation in areas of infrastructure, agriculture, tourism, education, trade and investment, Chheang Vannarith, chairman of the Cambodian Institute for Strategic Studies was cited by Xinhua as saying.

China is now Cambodia's largest trading partner and source of foreign investment with bilateral collaboration expanding in many areas, including trade, investment, connectivity, energy resources and infrastructure.

Statistics from China's Ministry of Commerce show that trade between China and Cambodia reached \$4.43 billion in 2015, indicating an annual growth of 17.95 percent.

China and Cambodia have a lot of complementarities in national development and dealing with regional issues - China could offer a hand with Cambodia's economic development, and if it thrives, it will also represent China's efforts in promoting regional development and stability, Chen said.

China has provided more than \$3 billion in loans and grants to Cambodia since 1992. In July, China agreed to provide \$600 million to Cambodia for infrastructure, education and health.

Chen also noted that compared with the influx of aid from Western countries which has come under some conditions, China's aid has no strings attached.

### **Standing together**

In a signed article published on the Cambodian newspaper Rasmei Kampuchea on Wednesday, Xi said that China and Cambodia have stood together and supported each other on issues concerning each other's core interests and major concerns.

"Cambodia was firm in supporting China's efforts to restore its lawful seat in the UN. When China acted to safeguard its territorial sovereignty and maritime interests and was devoted to resolving related disputes through peaceful negotiation, Cambodia did not hesitate to speak out to uphold justice," Xi said.

Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn said during an ASEAN foreign ministers' meeting in July that maritime disputes in the South China Sea are not an issue between ASEAN and China, adding that the South China Sea arbitration has damaged regional stability, Xinhua reported.

Cambodia also plays a key role in mediating China's relations with other ASEAN countries, which may counter US and Japanese accusations against China over the maritime disputes, Zhou Fangying, a professor at the Guangdong Research Institute for International Strategies, told the Global Times

However, it may belittle Cambodia's role as some observers say that China is trading for the country's support over maritime or other political disputes, Zhao Gancheng, director of the Center for Asia-Pacific Studies at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, told the Global Times.

China is trying to expand its diplomacy from not only maintaining good political relations with neighboring countries or offering financial aid, but also to seek regional development, said Zhao, pointing out that Cambodia has played an active role in implementing the "Belt and Road" initiative.

The booming Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone stands as testimony to how fruitful China-Cambodia cooperation can be. By June 2016, 100 companies were operating in the zone with a total investment of \$280 million, creating over 13,000 jobs.