



Restoring the Kingdom's rails

Thursday, 06 May 2010 15:00 Ellie Dyer

NEW life is being breathed into Phnom Penh Railway Station as a multi-million-dollar project to restore Cambodia's decrepit rail system gathers steam.

Formally a graveyard for rusting Soviet-era locomotives, the site has been transformed into a hive of activity over the past few months as Toll Royal Railways (TRR) pours an estimated US\$80,000 into renovating the Kingdom's trains and freight stations.

Six locomotives – some armoured with thick metal sheeting and bearing the scars of Cambodia's long civil war, a wood-fired steam engine, a passenger train and even the Royal carriage – are being refurbished in preparation for the launch of Cambodia's new-look railway system in October this year, according to TRR officials speaking Wednesday.

The Kingdom's rail system is undergoing a complete overhaul with \$141.1 million in funding from the Asian Development Bank, AusAID and Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Companies (OPEC). It is hoped that the project will boost trade by improving the Kingdom's railways, which were built in 1929 and last upgraded in the 1960s before civil war damaged much of the network.

“Cambodia's railway was thought to be one of the worst networks in the world,” said David Kerr, TRR's chief executive officer, speaking from his office nestled behind Phnom Penh's iconic station, which opened in 1932.

According to anecdotal evidence, Kerr said, the last train to run the 264-kilometre track to Sihanoukville from Phnom Penh this year took 28 hours to reach its destination. The new service should take only eight.

But, the task of restoring the capital's station to become a hub for a regular train service is huge.

“It was like a jungle when we first came here,” said Toll Royal Railways Chief Operation Officer John Guiry on Wednesday, wandering past rusting skeletons of freight carriages jumbled in heaps to the side of the railway site, which stretches for 4.5 kilometres.

Mountains of disused train parts were left to decay in the open, he said, as Cambodia ran a limited service, which, according to previous Post reports, garnered just \$1.5 million in revenue in 2008.

Restoring relics

However, as the railway project gathers pace, time and effort are being put into the enormous task of restoring ageing models from the Czech Republic, France and Russia to run on tracks, now being transformed across the country by development partners.

“Most of these trains are 40 to 50 years old. Many have been derailed or seen combat during

the Khmer Rouge regime. We are removing armour plating,” Guiry said, pointing to the bullet holes in one locomotive.

Australia-based Toll has teamed up with the Royal Group in order to carry out the station project. So far, more than \$1 million has been spent improving the Phnom Penh Railway Station site, which had fallen into disrepair. Copious white ant colonies have been wiped out, and more than 2,000 square metres of rubbish have been removed from the area.

Officials with TRR, which hopes to employ up to 670 people in the future, say the project remains on schedule.

Renovated trains are being test-run on 118 kilometres of track from Phnom Penh to Touk Meas, which services Kampot’s cement industry, and preliminary runs are imminent on parts of a 338-kilometre stretch of track leading to Battambang and [Poipet], Kerr said.

Surveys are also under way on the much-anticipated link between Vietnam and Cambodia, which has been billed as bridging a gap in the proposed Trans-Asia Railway (TAR) linking Singapore to Kunming, the capital of southwestern China’s Yunnan province.

Passenger service

The feasibility of running domestic passenger trains – one of which has been refurbished – is also being investigated, and there is an intention to protect Phnom Penh’s historic station from further damage in the rainy season. The wood-burning steam engine is being repaired for “special occasions”, according to Kerr and Guiry.

Limited freight service is set to begin in October, with trains from the capital running to Sihanoukville and Battambang in May 2011 and May 2012, respectively.

However, despite the progress, concerns remain.

Toll believes that for the railway to become tenable it needs direct access to the Sihanoukville Autonomous Port, which is set for renovation. Kerr called the project a “dead duck” if the link isn’t made, as without it the cost of freight transportation would spiral “dramatically”.

According to Kerr, the move is being stalled by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which is funding the port project.

“Negotiations are in progress between all parties,” Kerr added.

JICA representative Iwai Masaaki and an office spokeswoman declined to comment Wednesday. The spokeswoman stated that queries regarding the railway should not be directed at the organisation.

The future of the thousands of villagers who live in the “corridor of impact” around the railway is also being considered. According to a document produced by the government’s inter-ministerial resettlement committee, about 2,629 households live in close proximity to the railway tracks affected by the renovation throughout Cambodia.

A synopsis of a January meeting, carried out earlier this year to discuss relocation and compensation in Phnom Penh, showed that some villagers are concerned about the impact of relocation on their businesses.

So far, said Kerr, the track-side population has been enthusiastic about the plans. But whether this will prove the case as the relocation plan progresses remains to be seen.