

**ACTION FOR LIFE 2 NEWSLETTER #30**  
**28 June 2004**  
**Phnom Penh**

Dear Friends,

This is our last week in Phnom Penh, and the last newsletter from our team in Cambodia. On the 12th we will be joined in Siem Reap by the rest of our Action for Life group, to evaluate the last eight months, and to prepare for the Asia Pacific Youth Conference (APYC). We want to thank you for following our adventures, and leave you with our final reflections.

Laura Trevelyan (England):

I have been reflecting on the incredible connectedness of life. Our home and base here in Phnom Penh for close to three months has been The Swiss Guest House - a daily reminder of Caux, Switzerland on the other side of the world where the summer conferences are beginning. Last Sunday I heard a fine sermon by Tim Dearborn of World Vision whose daughter Andrea (it turns out) was part of the Caux Scholars Programme two years ago. She too works for World Vision now and her anti-trafficking posters are decorating the city, "Commit a crime against a child in this country. Go to jail in your own!"

I have been struck by the feeling that our global work is one of 'building'. Building on all that has gone before by so many. As I walk the streets navigating motorbikes and orange monks with yellow umbrellas, David and Alan Channer, father and son from England, are never far from my thoughts. At a recent screening of their film about Cambodia 'The Serene Smile' a young woman said, "I have been searching for the meaning of life and this film has helped me find it. The point is to find peace within ourselves and pass it on to our families and society". For myself I am leaving with new eyes, and a heightened awareness of the gift of life.

Natasha Davis (Australia):

The APYC is only three weeks away - and we are expecting about 230 participants! Fundraising has been essential because many of the participants cannot raise the \$200 conference fee. For Cambodians, we are asking only \$20, and even this is a very large amount when you consider the average monthly salary is between \$20-\$40. Over the past weeks, we have approached Embassies, Development Organisations, Institutes, companies, and anyone else we thought may be able to offer financial assistance. Despite a long list of "no, we're sorry..." for various reasons, we have been heartened by very positive responses, and believe this work has laid the ground for future partnerships, and possible support for post-APYC projects. The American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) has promised \$3,000USD and Forum Syd \$2,000. There have also been generous donations from many individuals overseas, especially Japanese friends who have raised \$6000. We still have to raise about \$5000, so keep us in your thoughts and prayers.

In Cambodia I have experienced the extreme beauty and darkness of humanity. The horror and bloodshed from years of civil war is shocking and has left a deep, deep scar, which still needs much healing. However, the contrasting generosity, grace and gentle spirit we have encountered so often leaves me with real hope for the future. If a beautiful smile is the answer to human suffering then Cambodia has a great gift for the world. I realise more than ever that each moment of life is precious.

Wambui Nguyo (Kenya):

Father Kike is a Catholic Bishop from Spain who is also known as the 'Wheelchair Bishop' because of his work with land mine victims. During the Khmer Rouge regime, the Church was destroyed and his predecessor was killed. For the territory of Battambang Diocese, a province in the North West of Cambodia, peace did not fully come until the last of the Khmer Rouge laid down their weapons in 1998. Father Kike's work is mainly with the victims of both polio and landmines. He refers to the wheelchair as a Sacrament because it makes such a dramatic difference to people's standard of life to be raised from the floor. 80% of Cambodia's population lives in the rural areas and there is a lack of access to farmland due to landmines, but many people are so poor they have to risk their lives and limbs and enter dangerous territory. Many years without vaccinations against polio has left a high number of people with disabilities in the region.

When I met him, I was expecting to see him in a wheelchair because of his nickname. That's when I understood his name is associated with his work. As we listened to him, the mood with everyone in the group became somber. He showed us many photos on the wall of landmine victims, some of them children and even those who work with the mines and have had their limbs blown off. We learned that in February alone, 150 people were blown up by landmines. I was touched by the cheerful innocent children full of hope for tomorrow, who did not do anything wrong yet they are victims without limbs. Coming from Africa which sometimes lives close to violence due to civil wars, I prayed for peace knowing that there are places that have landmines and innocent people die everyday.

Naro Thiek (India):

I began a journey to get answers to something I was doubtful of. I met people who were experiencing solutions at a personal and communal level on a daily basis. I realise that those who have experience can share and inspire and motivate us, but can't give us our answer because it is inside ourselves and we just have to listen more in silence. One such experience was meeting Bishop Kike. He mentioned how much difference it makes when the children can sit up on a chair from the floor. The smiles the children carried charmed us and inspired tears of joy and gratitude. The humility and warmth of the Bishop touched me - the joy he carries around speaks volumes and his last words as we left were "these children are my life and inspiration". This and other experiences challenge me to find answers and I have discovered two voices battling within, Faith and Fear. Which voice do I respond to? Cambodia has given me hope and restored my faith and I plan to extend my stay here after Action for Life.

Violeta Frimu (Moldova):

I am very grateful for my Cambodian experience. I learnt a lot about myself and about life. My biggest impression came from the Cambodians themselves, such a painful history and yet such a warm loving spirits. I can see a great future for this country. Maybe Moldovans and Cambodian teams can be friends and work together in the future.

Vuth Kim (Cambodia):

I am very grateful for my AfL friends who have been working together for four months, mainly in Cambodia. They are working as if they are in their own country, not in a foreign country. It really means a lot to me and I learn that I have to give my entire heart to needy people wherever I am.

Peter Heyes (Canada):

I have just returned from a trip to Sampor on the Thai-Cambodian border. Even though it is only 80km from Battambang it took four hours to get there (five and a half hours if you include waiting for the

taxi that never came!). It was the worst road I have ever been on in my life, and travelling in the cab of a tiny pick-up truck with seven others, including a breast-feeding mother, didn't help. After an hour I rebelled. My legs and feet couldn't move, my bag weighed heavily on my stomach and there didn't seem to be enough air for all of us. I decided to join the people in the back of the truck, but the driver said I couldn't and I thought he meant I wasn't allowed to, so I pressed on. When I saw the thirty people with their belongings in the back, I realised what he meant. I was fortunate to be travelling in comparative luxury. I wasn't wrapped up in all the dust and heat, trying to find space among the sacks of rice and the odd chicken.

I stayed with a friend Thiroth at a project run by the French NGO 'Enfants R?fugies De Monde.' Every weekend about twenty others come to study and if successful they attend college for two years and then become primary teachers in this remote area. Their teachers are young men who are grateful for their \$1 an hour salary. The older men were former Khmer Rouge. I felt uncomfortable with them knowing the history of the Khmer Rouge regime. One of the men had been Pol Pot's bodyguard. Was I supposed to dislike them? Could they be trusted? I noticed none of the young folk had any problems with them. Gradually I was able to relax. They noticed my every need, brought me water from the pond for bathing, and cooked for me. I was glad to see these men wanting to get back into society, and into a job which would affect the lives of the younger generation of Cambodians. Healing has to take place in this country, and hopefully this project is part of it.

I'm amazed that there are so many young people in Cambodia who care enough to want to do something for their country. In the West, people generally wait till they are financially secure before they start giving to society; here the youth aren't waiting, they are doing it now while studying, struggling to pay for their studies, and facing responsibilities. With this level of commitment there is hope for Cambodia. It's been a privilege to be included in their efforts.

Bhavesh Patel (England):

It was inspiring to meet 'Youth For Peace', their aim is to develop practical skills, moral thinking, and spiritual life in young people. Last year they held a 'Bike for Peace' rally through Phnom Penh with the theme 'Eliminating the weapons in your heart.' They believe that you can't tell young people to change their ways, but through meditation, discussion, and training, young people find their own ideas and the path to a better life. They encourage everyone to start with themselves, their families, their school and community! All they shared was very similar to Frank Buchman's approach, the initiator of Moral Re-Armament: peace in the world begins with peace in our hearts, and in the way we treat others.

I have enjoyed my time and know I will return someday soon to support and encourage my friends. I believe the future of Cambodia depends on this youthful population not only practising the rituals of religion, but also living the principles of Buddhism, and experiencing the guiding peace of daily meditation.

Ngan Le Thy Truong (Vietnam):

In a developing country like Cambodia, while people are struggling with their daily needs, we had a chance to meet Cambodia's Media Forum on Environment (CMFE). They try to educate people in understanding that the natural environment is very important for daily life and now it is in danger. Mr Ek Visrakhun, publisher and editor in chief, shared "Sometime it's very difficult for the journalist to get news from remote areas because the local people sometimes do not understand, and there are financial problems. But we believe in our job and if we are threatened with guns for exposing the truth, we have our cameras!" Since I met AfL I learned that I must own my problems, but as soon as I share them and ask for help, I don't need to carry them alone because everyone cares for me. Now I have started thinking about bigger global problems like CMFE do.

Rob Wood has been in Indonesia for about ten days, helping the group in their preparations for the APYC. As we leave Phnom Penh, we are filled with gratitude for our many new and old friends who have looked after us so well, and opened their homes and hearts. It has been a privilege to meet old friends of Rob, Megumi and others who have made many visits to Cambodia, and we hope we can continue to support and nurture a young, inspired network of people who will be the next generation of 'change-makers' in this country.

Warm Greetings from: Bhav, Laura, Naro, Natasha, Ngan, Peter, Rob, Violeta, Vuth, Wambui

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