

On the Edge

The villagers of Khum Trea no longer want to be redundant. The Hemispheres reports the current plight of the Cambodian town.

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Belonging to the Kampong Cham province, the province of Khum Trea is situated along the Mekong River. The last 18km of the five-hour journey to the village from Phnom Penh is greeted by bumpy roads and virtually no signs leading to the district - a reflection of Cambodia's poor infrastructure. This lack of development reaches the pre-dominantly Muslim village of Khum Trea. Populated by about 800 families, the village is plagued by a burgeoning number of problems that reveal a threatening reality to its younger generation.

Back To School

Like many other villages in Cambodia, Khum Trea is defined by poverty. Basic education is not available to most of the children. Currently, only an Islamic



The village of Khum Trea

madrasah educates a small number of younger villagers. An old school building unutilized since the Pol Pot regime has since been turned into a school by several Singaporeans. Here, up to 370 children receive Basic English lessons for free.

However, several challenges have arisen since its inception. Dreadful ventilation and the absence of fans and lights force students to study in darkness and utter discomfort. The school's admission which has swelled from 120 to 370 over the last year, coupled with the service of only one teacher contributes to an average of 60 pupils per class - greatly affecting the amount of attention each student receives.

A single class is usually occupied with students ranging from the ages of 6 to 11 years old learning at the same level. Basic stationery like notebooks is replaced with

mini blackboards and pencils with chalk - a cheaper alternative to facilitate lessons. These cost-efficient tools however, hamper each student's revising abilities and understanding of lessons learnt. Despite this, the overwhelming enrolment is a sign of enthusiasm from the ever-smiling inhabitants of Khum Trea.

Limited Resources

Churning funds from Khum Trea residents is currently not an option given the sorely lacking access to employment among



Lending an artistic touch to the Blanket of Voices



Dental Therapist, Alia gives a lesson on dental hygiene

both male and female. Electricity supply to help power fans and lighting in the school requires a hefty sum of money and most villagers rely on costly generators or no electricity at all, making solar panels the optimum choice for long-term power efficiency. But with each solar panel costing around US\$3000, the future of Khum Trea appears dismal if intervention does not take place.



An eager crowd forms to receive second-hand clothing

While it may seem easy to suggest to villagers the possibility of creating work opportunities such as reconstructing roads, growing crops or even selling handicraft, financial start-up and working material is barely affordable. The soil-ruining rainy season and a missing irrigation system are two reasons for the inability to maintain crops all year round. Villagers work at the fields only once a year and most get by with whatever is reaped to last them an entire year.

Unlike other Asian villages, Cambodian handicrafts are hard to come by in villages like Khum Trea. During Pol Pot's regime, art and education were obliterated and

after decades of its absence in the lives of older Cambodians, the younger generation has little to learn from. The female residents however, possess sewing skills but the profits from mending the clothes of other villagers are too modest to invest in any upgrades.

Seeing the Light

The effects of the Khmer Rouge coupled with Cambodia's inefficient government have crippled the development of Khum Trea. The villagers here like many other Cambodians, need both moral and financial support to realize the possibility of a better future. "We don't have an option to leave and find a better life. We have land and family here. Our way of life is something that we've accepted," replied a despondent Sina - a 22-year old unemployed resident of Khum Trea. Still, there's no doubting from the warm welcome relief workers constantly receive, that Khum Trea's inhabitants are in search of a better tomorrow.

The most recent relief trip involving several Singaporeans reached out to the villagers in a truly forthcoming way. Other villagers enjoyed the distribution of second-hand clothes - a prized treasure in a Khum Trea where brand new outfits are almost unheard of, while students at the Basic English School were given new stationery and toothbrushes. One relief worker, Alia Khaneez, a Singaporean Dental Therapist conducted Dental Hygiene lessons to demonstrate the proper methods of tooth brushing.



One of the many faces of Khum Trea

Taking Action

Several organizations including Hemispheres Foundation are raising funds to purchase solar panels and water filtration system to improve the living conditions in Khum Trea. Plans to increase the town's profitability are also underway and relief workers hope to encourage more productive plantation



The Children's Voices

growth. The sewing talents of Khum Trea's women are another resource that Hemispheres Foundation hopes to utilize.

Some 200 school children were also asked to express their thoughts on Cambodia through art on pieces of cloth and colouring pens provided by the foundation. These creative masterpieces will be stitched to create a Blanket of Voices and will be on display at the upcoming WOMAD Festival at Fort Canning from 24-26 August this year to alleviate poverty in Cambodia

To show your support for the people of Khum Trea, contact Ann Phua, President/ Founder, Hemispheres Foundation email ann@hemispheresfund.org.