

» UPFRONT

More S'pore NGOs reach out to needy in the region



BY CAROLYN QUEK

MADAM Kim Oun, 54, who lives in Andoung, a slum outside Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, used to wait till nightfall before taking a bath.

She would also walk several kilometres to isolated spots to answer the call of nature.

The reason: There were no bath and toilet facilities to speak of in Andoung.

Not everyone bothered with their toilet like she did, which is why a 2ha tract there is dotted with scores of plastic bags containing human excrement.

But better days have arrived. Andoung now has a 1,400 sq m hygiene complex housing 11 latrines and 12 bathrooms; the Waterloo Station is also where the 2,400 slum-dwellers do their laundry.

Set up by Singapore non-governmental organisation (NGO) Lien Aid with help from the Singapore Soka Association, the \$73,000 complex took five months to build and was completed in August.

Like Lien Aid, more Singaporean organisations have sprung up or are shifting their focus to helping the less fortunate in the region.

And they are not in this for one-off projects, but digging in for the long haul.

The National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre (NVPC) here focuses on local volunteer efforts and does not keep track of volunteer endeavours overseas, but its chief executive Tan Chee Koon has noted a "discernible trend" among Singaporeans going abroad on such volunteer missions.

Mercy Relief and the Singapore International Foundation were two familiar names that emerged when Asian countries were picked up by the pieces following the tsunami of De-

cember 2004.

Post-tsunami, the number of players in this field has not abated. Lien Aid was formed just over a year ago to look at water and sanitation problems plaguing Asia's rural communities.

Besides its Andoung project, the foundation's developmental arm has just wrapped up a similar project in Musi Banyuwasin, a poor district in south Sumatra.

Lien Aid has lined up eight other projects in China, Thailand and Indonesia, to be completed by the end of this year.

The total cost of Lien Aid's projects since it started: \$2.2 million.

Another family-based philanthropic group, the Tan Chin Tuan (TCT) Foundation, which has traditionally championed local causes, has in the past year shifted its focus to the region.

In April, it donated \$130,000 to rebuild Kampung Peta, a flood-ravaged village in the Endau-Rompin National Park which is home to a community of orang asli.

The foundation, approached by the World Federation of Catholic Medical Associations this year, will also build a hospital in Nias in north Sumatra.

Other partners include the Indonesian voluntary welfare organisation Perdaki and the Catholic church in Nias.

The project will kick off by the end of the year.

TCT Foundation's chief executive Eric Teng said: "Charity first begins at home, and next come our neighbours."

Indeed, when investment company Temasek Holdings launched the Temasek Foundation in May, it declared Asia as its focus.

"We believe that for Asia to maximise its greatest potential, it needs to develop in an interconnected manner. Therefore, we need to rely on each other for growth," said Mr Benedict Cheong, Temasek Foundation's CEO.

The foundation is still ironing out its programmes but will zoom in on these broad areas: education, health care, promoting cross-cultural harmony, good governance and facilitating disaster recovery.

NVPC's Mrs Tan reckons globalisation and also an awakened consciousness of the needs of the region in the wake of the tsunami has given birth to this tendency to look beyond



PHOTO: TERENCE TEOBEN LIEN AID

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: The toilet and bathroom complex in Cambodian slum Andoung (above) set up by Singapore NGO Lien Aid has improved the lives of residents Kim Oun, 54 and Phy Phoru, 57 (below).

Singapore's own shores.

Mr Ken Tan, a director at Lien Aid, believes Singapore organisations are in this now also because they are in a better position to give and help than before.

"In the past, we were building the know-how. But with our country's growth, we now have the capacity to give," he added.

The awakening of the humanitarian scene here augurs well for the Government's call earlier this year to transform this nation into a philanthropy hub.

It is a development that will foster goodwill between Singapore and its neighbours.

The help given is help welcomed - especially if it comes with a Singapore label.

Mr Maan Chhoeurn, Phnom Penh's vice-governor for non-governmental organisations and poverty reduction, said: "When we hear that the non-governmental organisation involved is from Singapore, we believe in it."

Speaking to The Straits Times at the official opening of Andoung's Waterloo complex in August, he said of Singapore projects:

"We know that if they talk about something, they will see it through."

Lien Aid chief executive officer Hassan Ahmad said he



SI PHOTO: CAROLYN QUEK

when organisations go overseas, they want to wear their badges."

It was more important for them to "wear their hearts on their sleeves" and always put the needs of the people they are helping over other agendas, he said.

And at least one voice has also called for a refinement of local efforts overseas, so that efforts build on what has already been done.

"This way, duplication or being spread out too thin is avoided."

Perhaps, with a coordinating body giving more "structure" in place, Mr Teng said, "the outcome will be sustainable and the targeted recipients can benefit from Singapore's help consistently."

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TRUSTED BRAND

"When we hear that the non-governmental organisation involved is from Singapore, we believe in it...We know that if they talk about something, they will see it through."

MR MAAN CHHOEURN,
Phnom Penh vice-governor

hoped that groups headed overseas were clear about their intentions:

"It is understandable that