

**REPORT ON VISIT TO SVA PROJECT
SITES IN LAONGAM DISTRICT,
SARAVAN PROVINCE, LAO PDR**

“TO GIVE EVERY CHILD A CHANCE”

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Note: Information for this report is based on personal notes taken during trip to Laos. Any errors or omissions are sole responsibility of the author.

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I.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this visit was to see firsthand the work of Shanti Volunteer Association in Saravan province of Lao PDR as well as to see the education and living conditions in the villages. Several village school locations were visited and a home stay was done in one of the villages. SVA is most definitely providing much needed support of education in the villages by its program to build primary schools. There is ample need in Saravan province for schools as well as other work such as building water sources, health and hygiene, and UXO clearance. Recommendations made include immediate support of a well project, ongoing support of SVA's school building program, and over the long term becoming involved with other work and perhaps MiVAC establishing a presence as a registered NGO in Lao PDR.

II. INTRODUCTION

Several months ago the groundwork was laid for cooperative efforts between Shanti Volunteer Association (SVA) of Japan and Mine Victims and Clearance Trust (MiVAC) of Australia. Specifically, MiVAC would work with SVA in support of efforts to build primary schools in Saravan province in Laos.

The purpose of this trip was to visit Saravan province and directly observe the schools, villages, and work of SVA. This resulting report includes information on:

1. education/school conditions
2. past, current, and future work of SVA in Saravan
3. the villages
4. logistics of getting to and from Saravan
5. staying in and getting about in and around Saravan
6. volunteer opportunities
7. home stay
8. recommendations

The following people participated in the visit:

- Walter and Somsong Kopek on behalf of MiVAC
 - Takahashi Hisao, Project Leader, International Relations and Training, SVA Laos
 - Bounyuay Khanthapanya, School Education Aid Coordinator, SVA Laos
 - Mr. Kennasin, Laongam District Education Bureau
 - Mr. Khambai, Laongam District Education Bureau
- Note: Laongam district is in Saravan province and is the location of all schools and villages visited.

Mr. Kennasin and Mr. Khambai accompanied us for two reasons:

1. all visits to schools must be coordinated through the district education bureaus
2. the Lao government does not provide funds for officials from the district bureaus to travel and visit schools in the district; since we were using an SVA vehicle and were visiting six school sites, the district officials joined the ride

III. EDUCATION/SCHOOL CONDITIONS

A. Structure

There is basically a five level education structure:

1. Ministry of Education
2. Provincial Education Authority
3. District Education Bureau
4. Village
5. School

Added to this is the cluster concept. Clusters consist of primary, secondary, and high schools in geographically proximate villages. Within the clusters teachers and schools share resources such as books, libraries and teacher training. The objective is to maximize the use of resources and to provide a cohesive education path for the students. The cluster concept was introduced by SVA and has been adopted by the Lao government.

B. Statistics for Laos

Number of schools:

1. 8,573 primary schools
Note: There are 10,500 villages in Laos. Thus there are 2,000 villages without primary schools.
2. 641 secondary schools
3. 31 high schools

Number of primary classrooms:

1. 27,356 primary classrooms
2. 3.2 primary classrooms/primary school
Note: UNESCO defines a complete primary school as one that has 5 grades; an incomplete primary school is any that has fewer than 5 grades
3. 45% of primary schools are complete

Number of primary school teachers:

1. 27,588 primary school teachers
2. 3.2 teachers/primary school
3. 42% of primary schools have one teacher
4. 15% of primary schools have two teachers

Students

1. 11% of children never enter primary school
2. 62% of primary school students complete 5 grades
3. thus 55% of all children complete primary school

Text books

1. normally one text book for every five students
2. text books replaced every ten years

C. Statistics for Saravan

1. 17,590 grade 1 students
2. 5,076 grade 5 students
3. 26% of primary schools are complete
4. 2.3 teachers/primary school
5. 34.9% of students repeat grade 1

This is largely due to the fact that there are 14 minority groups in Saravan. Rarely do the teachers and students speak the same language. Given that there are approximately 80 ethnic groups in Laos, this is a problem throughout the country.

IV. WORK OF SVA

SVA builds primary schools in Laos in order to see that “every child gets a chance.” SVA works in a very organized and structured manner which has allowed SVA to gain the confidence and trust of the Lao PDR government and to be successful in building and supporting libraries and schools thus improving the overall education environment in Laos.

1. SVA coordinates overall activities and projects with the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Information and Culture. The Ministry of Education and SVA determine which provinces are beneficiaries of primary school projects.
2. SVA then coordinates with the Provincial Education Authority to determine which districts to work in.
3. The District Education Bureaus and SVA coordinate to select villages for projects.

Typically it will require six to twelve months of meetings among the District Education Bureau, villagers, and SVA to finalize the commitment to build a school. It is a critical requirement that all involved understand and commit to their respective roles to build and support the school. In the villages this involvement goes all the way to the parents and children.

There are four guiding elements/action areas at the local level for each school project:

1. construction of the school
Note: actual construction is done by a contractor
2. encouragement and involvement of the villagers; the villages are required to provide lumber for the school construction
3. a village committee for ongoing support of the school
4. cooperation and involvement of the district education bureau

Note: SVA provides ongoing support in the form of teacher training and resource centers. It is up to the various levels of government, from the ministry level to the village level, to provide resources such as text books and teacher salary. In the SVA model, all governmental/administrative levels must be involved.

SVA has built and is supporting multiple primary schools in Saravan. The goal is to construct 3 – 4 primary schools annually.

V. VILLAGES/SCHOOL SITES VISITED

A. Name: VANG PEUAY

- a.** Ethnicity/Languages: village is Lao but school is attended by students from neighboring villages of various ethnic backgrounds speaking various dialects
- b.** Status of School: consists of one primary built by SVA, two secondary schools, plus a resource center/library that serves the teachers in the local school cluster



Primary school (white building) built by SVA. Wood building is secondary school built by government. Vang Peuay village



Classroom in Vang Peuy secondary school.

B. Name: PONUAN

- a.** Ethnicity/Languages: 70% Laoloum, 20% Taoi, 10% Lao

- b.** Status of School: two grade bamboo/wood primary school with 37 first grade students, 21 second grade students; current school built by village in 2000; SVA anticipates constructing a school in 2008 – 2009



Primary classroom, Ponuan village



Primary school, Ponuan village

C. Name: INPENG

a. Ethnicity/Languages: Suay

b. Status of School: two teachers for three grades (1, 2, 3); grade one has 55 students, grade two has 21 students, grade three has 17 students; school built by SVA



Three grade primary school built by SVA, Inpeng village



Primary classroom, Inpeng

D. Name: KIENG TANGLE

- a.** Ethnicity/Languages: Nge
- b.** Status of School: none, 100 children with no school; SVA anticipates building a three grade primary school in 2008
- c.** Other information: some children in the village attend school in nearby villages; ten in grade 1, nine in grade 2, six in grade 3, nine in grade 4, eight in grade 5; village has a population of 336 people consisting of 61 families and 53 houses; SVA needs a sponsor for building school here



Some children of Kieng Tangle village



View of Kieng Tangle village

E. Name: SANUE MUAY

- a.** Ethnicity/Languages: Laoloum
- b.** Status of School: currently has three grade bamboo/wood school built by village; SVA concrete school under construction
- c.** Other information: the people in this village reappeared in 1974 after the war; it is not known where they spent the war years



Current primary classroom, Sanue Muay village



Three grade classroom under construction by SVA in Sanue Muay. Construction time typically about four months.

F. Name: TEME POPOUM

- a.** Ethnicity/Languages: Laven, Suay
- b.** Status of School: has one grade bamboo/wood school built by villagers; 65 students in school but many are attending grade one for a second time because they do not want to travel to another village for second grade; SVA plans to build a three grade school as soon as sponsor is finalized
- c.** Other information: was home stay village for Walter and Somsong Kopek in October 2007; this was first time SVA had organized a home stay in Saravan



Primary school, one grade, Teme Popoum. The villagers Rebuilt the school about two months previous.



Classroom in primary school, Teme Popoum

VI. LOGISTICS AND LIVING CONDITIONS

A. Getting to/from Saravan

1. fly into Vientiane and drive/ride 10 hours or so; least desirable
2. from Bangkok, fly into Pakse airport in Champasak province, adjacent to Saravan; about \$200.00 US round trip; flights into Pakse on Tuesday, out on Saturday; if timing is right, can make connection out of new Bangkok airport without leaving airport; otherwise can stay at our house about 15 minutes from airport to wait for connection
3. fly to new Bangkok airport, take domestic flight from old Bangkok airport to Ubon; take ground transport to Lao border then to Pakse or Salavan; about 1/3 price of flying from Bangkok to Pakse
4. visa on arrival can be obtained at Pakse airport or land border; \$35.00 US, good for 30 days; can also obtain at Lao embassy prior to departure

B. Places to Stay

1. Saravan
Saravan city, the capitol of Saravan province, appears to have no hotels. Several internet searches did yield a number of guest houses. Rates are likely in the \$10 - \$15 US range. Saravan city is about an hour from most villages that SVA is supporting in Saravan province.

2. Pakse

Pakse, in Champasak province adjacent to Saravan province, has several hotels and guest houses. We stayed in an air conditioned room with two beds in a guest house for about \$12 US. We also stayed in a deluxe room in a hotel for about \$35 US. There were some rooms for about \$20 US. The rate includes breakfast. The hotel has roof top restaurant and

wireless service in the lobby. Pakse is about two hours from the SVA school sites.

C. Eating

It seems that one can be as adventurous or as passive as one would like when it comes to eating. For our first lunch at a restaurant in Saravan we were treated to two dishes described as a big rat with wings and a small animal. The first turned out to be a flying fox (like a huge bat) and the other was a squirrel.

The people at SVA say there are only a couple of restaurants in Saravan city where they will eat. On the other hand, Pakse has a number of restaurants and cafes.

D. Getting about

If SVA is along, and most time they likely will be, you will travel with them in SVA vehicle. Otherwise, traveling to and from Pakse or Saravan city to the villages will require transportation arrangements, likely a car and driver rented by the day. Four wheel drive required.

Note: Please consider that all of the above logistical information is based on one five day visit. As we learn more, we will certainly pass it on.



School lunch break



River that supports the villages

VII. Volunteer Opportunities

Keeping in mind that the construction of the schools and wells is done by contractors, volunteers are welcome to assist. The exact work that the visiting volunteers would do is largely a matter of circumstance and timing. Schedule of equipment and material is subject to vagaries of weather and road conditions, among other things. Of course, one must be cognizant of local holidays and celebrations, also. That being said, volunteers can be kept occupied for up to several days at a time, particularly if the volunteers are doing home stay in the village.

VIII. HOME STAY

A, As Part of Our Trip

We did a two day/one night home stay in Teme Popoum, the last village we visited. Random notes:

1. The headman and elders of the village greeted us as we stepped out of the car. Proceeding from the road to the house, we walked between two rows of villagers who applauded us along the way.
2. We were the first foreigners to stay at the village.
3. We were invited to stay in the only house in the village with a bathroom. It is a detached building next to the pig sty. Those of you who have traveled in Asia will understand that the shower was two fifty gallon drums of water (which the village had purchased for our visit) along with a small bowl. The toilet was a ceramic hole in the ground with a five gallon bucket of water and a small bowl.

4. The rest of the village uses the surrounding forest/brush for relieving themselves and the river for bathing.
5. The house consisted of two rooms. One was the bedroom for the owner and his wife. The other was a large room for sleeping, watching television, etc. Eating was done on the front porch.
6. As might be expected, eating was a major activity during our visit. Various fruit, pork salad, fish, sticky rice, and more.
7. Also enjoyed a moderate amount of Beer Lao and some of the local whiskey made from sticky rice.
8. There were short speeches made by several of us at the first and last meals. Although my Thai is passable and similar to Lao, one of the SVA people translated for me.
9. We were honored with a baisee ceremony which consists of some prayers by the holy man and ends with the villagers tying string bracelets on us. (Note: animism is prevalent in the provinces.)

B. Other Home Stay Observations

Our home stay was very rewarding for us and, based on what we heard, for the villagers as well. Having a school built (Construction at Teme Popoum will begin as soon as a sponsor is finalized.) and having foreigners stay are significant and proud moments for the village. There was much good conversation, serious and otherwise. One of the questions posed to me was why I thought just one wife was enough. The headman and I also learned that each of us had been in the military, me for the US Air Force and he for the Pathet Lao Communists.

There are any numbers of considerations that go along with a homestay in Saravan province:

1. miles away from medical care
2. malaria is a real problem in the area; it would be wise to take the appropriate anti-biotic before and during the stay
3. dengue fever is also present with no prevention available
4. some caution needs to be exercised when eating; not a bad idea to stock up on Imodium A-D
5. living arrangements are communal, so do not expect much privacy
6. communications beyond the village can be problematical; certainly no internet; mobile phone service is intermittent if it exists at all
7. speaking of communication, unless someone from SVA is along to translate, you may find yourself with no way to converse with the villagers; if you can speak Lao, or Thai will suffice
8. the villages generally have no funds to support visitors, therefore SVA often provides supplies and/or funds for things such as potable water and food

Although this is just a partial list of things that come to mind, it is not intended to scare off potential home stays. Home stays can be a part of volunteering and a great experience for all involved. Being active with volunteer work is a rewarding part of home stay. Of course, all home stays must be coordinated through SVA.



The cooks of Teme Popoum



Some children of Teme Popoum



Convenience store and gas station



Baisee ceremony

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Immediate Opportunity

There is an immediate opportunity to build a well and toilet at the school location in Teme Popoum. For an estimated \$4K - \$5K US, a source of fresh water could be provided not only to the students but to the entire village, improving health and hygiene. This would also serve as a starter project for SVA/MiVAC cooperative efforts. Both groups could learn how to work together, an experience which would progress to larger projects.

Note: The flow of money for a project should be mentioned here. It is really quite simple. Contributors send money to SVA-Japan. These contributions can be designated for specific projects. In this case, MiVAC would send funds earmarked for the well and toilet in Teme Popoum. SVA-Japan forwards the funds to SVA-Laos. SVA-Laos then selects a contractor who is provided the funds for building the well and toilet. SVA-Laos has responsibility for overseeing the contractor.

I recommend that MiVAC pursue this opportunity.

B. Short Range Opportunity

(There is actually an immediate opportunity to sponsor a three grade primary school in Teme Popoum. A sponsor has not been finalized for this project. Estimated cost is \$30K US. My assumption is that MiVAC would prefer not to make such a commitment at this time. If MiVAC is willing to make the commitment now, I would support a MiVAC decision to sponsor this school.)

The goal of SVA is to build 3 – 4 primary schools each year. Thus there will be numerous opportunities in the near future to sponsor schools. One likely candidate is Kieng Tangle, the village noted about which has no

school but does have 100 potential students waiting. The plan is to build a three grade school next year. This would give MiVAC a few months to fund raise, advertise its school project in Laos, and also for MiVAC and SVA to learn about working with each other.

I recommend that MiVAC pursue supporting a school in Kieng Tangle.

C. Middle Range Opportunity

Given that SVA is expected to remain in Laos for years to come in support of education and literacy activities, it would seem to be in the interests of MiVAC, SVA, and the children of Laos to develop an ongoing link between MiVAC and SVA. Assuming the funds could be raised, MiVAC could sponsor one or two schools a year. Support from MiVAC would be not only monetary but through the visits of volunteers as well. Wells and toilets could be included as part of each school building project. SVA and MiVAC are two strong organizations with the shared goal of improving the lives of people in conflict affected area.

I recommend that MiVAC make an ongoing working relationship with SVA a part of MiVAC's operating structure.

D. Longer Range/Other Opportunities

MiVAC and its people have significant experience and much to offer in support of various activities in conflict affected area. Among these are skills in construction of buildings and wells/water supplies, health and hygiene training, and decontamination of UXO affected areas. Laos is a country in need of all these activities.

It is reasonable to think that beginning immediately and continuing into the foreseeable future, MiVAC can develop an ongoing presence in Laos which includes not only supporting the educational activities of SVA, but extends even further. UXO decontamination work can be pursued by contacting other NGO's doing this work in Laos. Health and hygiene activities can likely be done in cooperation with other organizations, including SVA. It is feasible that at some point MiVAC could be registered as its own entity in Laos as an NGO. It is critical at all times in doing work and developing relationships in Laos that MiVAC remain cognizant of and act in accordance with laws, guidelines, and restrictions of the Lao PDR government.

I recommend that MiVAC's governing board work towards the goal of establishing a long-term presence in Lao PDR in pursuit of activities which it deems to be in the best interests of MiVAC and the people of Lao PDR.