

NEWSLETTER - MARCH 2004

Dear Members and friends

This month Standing Tall Australia (STAIRRSS) celebrates its first birthday! It has been a challenging 12 months and we appreciate the support of our growing number of members.

The year 2004 so far has been very interesting for me personally. I returned to Australia on 23 February after a six week trip to Cambodia, Colombia, Romania, Belgium, Switzerland and Burundi. Now, I am writing to you from Kabul in Afghanistan. I will write more later about my visit to Cambodia, where I was very fortunate to travel with mine survivors to remote villages and learn more about the work that is being done and the needs, and Colombia and Burundi, but first the news for Standing Tall.



Denise Coghlan, Director of Jesuit Services in Cambodia (originally from Brisbane) with Tun Channareth (ICBL Ambassador) and his team in Siem Reap.

The year also started very positively for our young organisation with four great developments: a new director; AusAID funding for a research project on mine victim assistance; royalties to Standing Tall from a new book; and approval of a proposal to the Canadian government.

Firstly, I am very pleased to welcome Reuben McCarthy to our Board of Directors. Reuben hails from Adelaide but is currently working with UNICEF in New York in their Mine Action unit. Not only does Reuben bring loads of enthusiasm and creativity to the Board but also has several years experience working in Afghanistan and Cambodia for the United Nations and Handicap International Belgium. Reuben has designed our new logo and we would welcome your comments.

On 1 March, Standing Tall started a new project with funding from AusAID, the Australian government's international development agency. The project will run until December 2004 and involves providing AusAID and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade with research on mine victim assistance.

In September 2003, Australia became co-chair of the Mine Ban Treaty's Standing Committee on Victim Assistance and Socio-Economic Reintegration. As co-chair, Australia has a key role in informing the States Parties on progress and problems in providing mine victim assistance, not only in the countries where it supports programs but also at the global level. The research will enable Australia to present more detailed information to the Nairobi Summit, the first review conference of the Mine Ban Treaty in November 2004, than previously available.

The funding grant is particularly significant as AusAID does not normally fund non government organisations (NGOs) that have not been accredited (a process which usually takes at least 2 years). This is an encouraging development for the future of Standing Tall as we grow and implement programs in countries where the needs are so great.

The AusAID funding will pay for a part-time researcher to supplement the work I do as Victim Assistance Research Coordinator for the ICBL's Landmine Monitor initiative. Canberra-based Stephanie Koorey has been employed to undertake this task. Steph was previously the ACT Manager for AUSTCARE, another Australian NGO with extensive experience in landmine issues, refugees and development. We are very pleased to have Steph as part of our team.

Next month, Oxford University Press will publish *Commentaries on Arms Control Treaties*, Volume 1, by Dr Stuart Maslen. All royalties from sales of the book are being donated to Standing Tall to enable us to support mine survivors and other people with disabilities in mine-affected countries. We are very grateful to Stuart for making this happen.

And for the last development, in May we will be joined in Brisbane by a young Canadian who comes with the support of their government. Canada has an intern program for university graduates (with no previous experience) to work with NGOs to develop skills that will assist them in their future careers. Mines Action Canada submitted a proposal on behalf of Standing Tall for an intern to work with me on victim assistance and also to assist with building our community base, particularly among young people in Brisbane. The Canadian government provides the intern with a living allowance while we are responsible for providing the working space, supervision and training. Interns can be sent anywhere in the world, including to developing countries. I've been told that many applicants are keen to spend 8 months in Australia! I will introduce the successful applicant in the next newsletter.

Next month, Standing Tall will conclude its project with the Azerbaijan Campaign to Ban Landmines on a needs assessment for landmine survivors in the country. I spent last week with Hafiz Safikhanov in Baku to work on the project. The needs assessment will enable program implementers to better focus their activities on the areas that the mine survivors themselves have identified as the most important.

Hafiz and his team of data collectors have been working very hard on this project in a country where non-government organisations are often viewed as anti-government. It is very difficult for us living in Australia to understand the many obstacles, criticisms and pressures that some people in other countries must face to carry out what is essentially humanitarian work.

Azerbaijan has about one million internally displaced people (IDPs) from the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh in the early 1990s. Nagorno-Karabakh remains under

Armenian control today. Hafiz's wife, Tarana, is a medical doctor working on women's health issues in the IDP population. She would welcome any support, both moral and financial, to continue this work.

As I mentioned, I am currently in Kabul for 10 days and will look forward to sharing my experiences with you next time. But now I will share a few experiences from Cambodia, Colombia and Burundi.

Cambodia

I visited Cambodia from 12-22 January. Denise Coghlan and Ny Nhar, the Landmine Monitor Researchers for Cambodia, arranged many interesting activities for me during my stay there. Cambodia is one of the most heavily mine-affected countries in the world. In January 2004, on average three people every day were still being killed or injured by landmines or unexploded ordnance. Since 1979 more than 57,000 mine and UXO casualties have been recorded, including more than 39,000 people injured. Most are civilians not soldiers. Tens of thousands of people live with the threat of



landmines in their daily lives. At one home we visited 12 mines and UXO had been removed from a field behind



their house that morning. And in another area an anti-tank mine had just been uncovered on the side of the road we were travelling along.

I visited Banteay Prieb (Centre of the Dove), a residential training school for people with a disability near Phnom Penh. Students come to the centre for a year to learn skills that will help



them to become self-sufficient including literacy training, wood-carving, sewing, weaving, metal work, handcrafts, agriculture, wheelchair

production, etc. The centre also enables students to socialise with their peers, which often is a great psychological support for those that might be coming to terms with a new disability.

Next we travelled to Battambang, one of the most heavily mine-affected areas in Cambodia.

As we travelled to some of the outlying villages we passed houses being built behind "Danger Mines" signs. We stopped to talk



to a family (already with 5 children and the sixth on the way) who had recently moved there from another district because of the chance of land to farm. When asked if they were aware of the dangers from landmines the father replied

"Better to die on a mine than to die from starvation!"

This provided a stark example of the realities of every

day life for people living in mine-affected countries who survive on whatever food they can grow.



In another village we met a 23-year-old man who had stepped on a landmine three weeks before and lost his leg below the knee. At the time, he was collecting timber in the forest to build a house for the new teacher that had arrived in

the community. Three generations lived in his household.



In Battambang, the Italian NGO Emergency runs a hospital providing surgery and care to mine casualties and others with injuries caused by traumatic injuries. The wards were full of men, women and children. The well-equipped hospital is considered one of the best in Cambodia.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has a rehabilitation centre in Battambang. The patient's rooms were quite different to anything you would see in

Australia! But the patients receive good care and prostheses of a high standard. Social activities and sport play an important role in their rehabilitation.



The next destination was Siem Reap where I visited Angkor Wat. It truly is one of the great wonders of the world! But sadly, it is also home to many mine survivors who are forced to beg or some entertain the tourist to earn an income. Poverty is a huge problem in Cambodia and is particularly difficult for a person with a disability.

From Siem Reap we spent two days travelling in the area around Samrong and Anlong Venh, the former stronghold of the Khmer Rouge. It took 5 hours to travel about 100 kms so I will never complain about potholes and bad roads in Australia again! Crossing bridges in some places was also an experience!



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Tun Channareth and his team regularly make home visits to villages in the region to assess the needs of people with disabilities. Sometimes people desperately need food so rice is provided. Other times it might be arranging for a well to be built in the village for water. We would drive into a village and within moments be surrounded by dozens of children. The arrival of visitors is always a highlight in village life!

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Colombia

In Colombia I participated in the Landmine Monitor Researcher's meeting for the Americas. Participants came from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela.

Colombia has a serious landmine problem, compounded by on-going mine use by some groups in the civil war. More than 600 people were killed or injured by mines and unexploded ordnance in 2003, including many children.



The majority of mine survivors are poor and live in remote villages far from the capital, Bogota. We met with mine survivors who still do not have prostheses, who cannot find employment, who cannot send their children to school because of the cost (about \$100 a year), and who suffer from high levels of poverty.

In Bogota, the participants attended an event for the 'Seeds of Hope' program at the rehabilitation NGO CIREC (Centro Integral de Rehabilitación de Colombia). The program aims to empower and train disabled people, including landmine survivors, to become leaders in their communities.

CIREC is Colombia's only integrated rehabilitation facility for persons with disabilities and offers support to mine survivors and other people with a disability who could not otherwise afford treatment. Sadly, many of their young patients are children suffering from birth deformities.



A lunch was organised in the grounds of CIREC to enable us meet the survivors and enjoy true Colombian hospitality.

Burundi

In Burundi I participated in the Landmine Monitor researcher's meeting for Francophone Africa in the capital, Bujumbura. Participants came from Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, and Senegal.

Burundi is a mine-affected country but the full extent of the problem is still not clear because of on-going armed conflict.

The highlight of the meeting was a field trip by ICRC plane to the National Orthopaedic Centre in Gitega, which is supported by Handicap International Belgium.

At the centre we met a young woman who was injured by a landmine in 1997 in an area that was controlled by rebel factions. She lost her leg below the knee and was only now being fitted for her first prosthesis as the fighting had prevented her from travelling to the centre. At the time she was injured she was walking along a path to collect water with her one-month old baby on her back. Her baby received shrapnel injuries but survived because she gave her first aid before dragging herself back to the village for help.



In Burundi I saw many disabled children at both the centre in Gitega and one in Bujumbura.



I was very saddened to hear that because of high levels of poverty many of these



children do not survive as their parents cannot afford the care that is needed and sometimes will give the small amounts of food they have to their able bodied children and not to their disabled child.

It was quite surreal during one of our meetings by the side of Lake Tanganyika in Bujumbura with representatives from the government to hear gunfire in the background while four hippopotamuses frolicked in the water in front!

I hope you have enjoyed reading our first newsletter. If you have any questions or comments we would be pleased to receive them by mail or email.

Until next time.....

Sheree Bailey - Director
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