

Report Concerning Cup of Hope International's Water Filtration Project: Cambodia

Friday, June 16 – Battambang, Cambodia.

This day—the gotta-be-some-kinda-record day, the ultimate-exercise-in-patience day—started out beautiful. It was the first day in a while that we were out and about seeing the countryside not too long after sunrise. A mini-bus picked us up from our guesthouse in Siem Reap at 6:00, two loaves of French bread (very light, slightly sweet with a scattering of black sesame seeds) were forced on us at another stop, and then we were off across a far-reaching flat land of rice paddies and water buffalo herds. The dirt roads we bounced along were literally “highways” elevated on burms to escape the flooding of the fields. The houses rose on stilts that shortened in length as they mounted the road's shoulder, allowing the fronts to open onto the road. With the houses built in this manner, the villages were linear with structures lining each side of the highway. These communities were alive with early morning activity—groggy children propping open hinged bamboo walls, making their way to school in uniforms and bare feet, and workers catching rides on crowded motorbikes.

After about an hour, the pot-holed, rutted road came to an end at a canal where a number of boats were moored. “That cannot be the boat,” we mumbled with growing consternation. But as we slipped down the bank and stepped into a decidedly unwelcoming craft, all hope sank under the brown, milky water. The ticket stub had lied. It alluded to a speedy, possibly air-conditioned boat worthy of plying the mysterious murk all the way to Battambang. Instead, we got a right-angled wooden bench and a



roaring, sputtering motor.

The first forty-five minutes of our ride took us out across a corner of Tonle Sap—the largest fresh-water lake in Southeast Asia. *This place is barely earth, and certainly not the earth we've known. It is water and desert. A water desert. It is glare. And a sharply angled wedge of haze above and liquid below whose apex is a horizon somewhere behind the blur of its closing planes. It is—*

civilization? First, a few floating houses, then expanse, then a sudden roofed platform on slender stilts with a front yard of fish-net fencing to corral whatever swims below, then expanse, then the propeller spraying mud, then floatillas of water plants—happy gatherings of the lone drifters lost at brown sea. Green and Brown; Brown and Green; a sudden human in a slpping hat slinking through Brown and Green. Then Tonle Sap inconspicuously placed us up a river and the floating villages began.

In this flat land of endless shimmering rice fields partitioned by sparse, low trees, the river is a world within a world. From a boat riding low in the water, you can see only

the coming bend and the cushion of greenery on the banks. There are communities that share this lower level. The brown water is their ground. It supports their houses, moves their vehicles, and grows their food—the fish. Their porches, mini-marts, and mechanic shops float. Most elements of daily life float in these riverine villages. Including, of course, things like solid human waste. We saw a naked boy squatting over the brink of his front porch going #2. A short while later, we observed another child dip a cup into the same water and take two long draughts. This vividly highlights our original purpose for visiting Cambodia, yet another purpose is becoming apparent: to provide us with what will likely turn out to be the most memorable images—and subsequent sensations—of this entire trip...

How many more in this wooden box with two benches and a deck hand who runs over the sheet metal roof to check on a propeller that skips over and sprays mud? But the shuttles keep coming from the floating houses—driver hunched up front with a son, a sister, a grandmother dressed in their best for the big city. Then they're on with a bump, bob, and step, carrying a small suitcase or a rice-sack-turned-tote-bag. A young mother. A daughter, maybe four years old, but astoundingly grown-up. She doesn't smile once, but she has her purse with a plastic baggie of white rice, pencil, and an electronic hand-held game that plays Ode to Joy? Yep, Ode to Joy, and she does everything her mamma says. And a son, maybe one, so cute it hurts, squatting as his yellow poop flows steadily from his baggy underwear through the cracks in the deck of the boat (then into the water source). Eight hours in a boat with no diapers and no toys save an empty soda can with a few pebbles? Not a problem—not even an issue. There is an amazing lack of “taking issue” here. We are sitting on top of each other, but one more—why not? Stand for eight hours? Not an issue. This is so far from America. This is a wholly different and incompatible consciousness. By the way, he ate a chip off the bottom of that boat—and his mom gave it to him. Is hygiene overrated? Surely we western humans are obsessive because these people are beautiful and they don't smell...

After crawling the rest of the way up the river, hugging the cut banks for lack of depth (palm trees increased, and more “ground-houses” instead of “water-houses”), arriving at a “dock” (slippery set of metal stairs) in the pouring rain, getting mauled by hotel hounds, haggling for a price, we sleep now to awake to the day of purpose.

Saturday, June 17—Battambang, Cambodia

The boy's hand is something simple hygiene and a bandage probably could've saved. He is a boy in one of the families with a new water filter. He was sleeping when his mat caught fire, and the back of his hand was badly burned. This was a month ago. It is hard not to gasp. The hand is infected beyond description—ok, maybe it's like a...well—the flesh bubbles up like the meat of a lobster tail butterflied and boiled. The wound and other places are still stained purple from the dye of the mat. They ask us for medicine, but all we can do is pray in Christ's name for this tiny boy who warily crouches before our outstretched arms...All we could do was pray? What else is there? Really. For his hand, for this contaminated water problem, for this fledgling organization with a life and soul-saving vision...

Our driver stopped the car about 200 yards from the church because the dirt road was too mangled to continue. We walked the rest of the way with Sambath, a genuinely kind man keenly interested in all of this who we met just last night and invited to come along, and So Phorn, a young, strapping college student and our translator for the day. Duen and Keuv, along with Duen's wife and son, met us on the porch of the church and we immediately sat down to talk. A few words about Duen and his brother-in-law and partner, Keuv: they both have kind eyes and are very quick to smile. These smiles stem from an inherent desire to humbly go above and beyond what is necessary to serve people in need. They are honest. They are strong and dark from working in the sun, and they are eager to do whatever it takes to get any job done, no matter the size. In short, they are the right men to run this water filter business. Having been welcomed with love, we felt confident to commence with our many questions. Here's what we found:

There are currently 30 filters installed in homes and 10-15 sitting in the front yard of the church waiting to be delivered. They can be built at the rate of one per day when money for materials is available—\$15 for each filter including two brand-new buckets for water storage (one of Duen and Keuv's special touches).



Money is a huge issue. Duen and Keuv have not been paid (they should have \$90 each—\$3 dollars per filter), and the payments they collect each month from filter owners are inadequate for any immediate needs, so they are saved until enough is accrued to buy materials. They have recently received some money via Savi, but either it was not enough to pay their wages and buy equipment in addition to building more filters, they don't feel comfortable using the funds for anything other than filters, or it has

not been communicated to them that they should use the money for anything they need, including their own wages. With all of this in mind, the establishment of a credit union is imperative for the success of the business. If each family could receive their \$30 loan from this credit union, Duen and Keuv could have immediate funding to build filters, get paid, and the rest would go toward interest.

There is an immediate need for a specific piece of equipment that will assist in lifting and lowering the filters onto and off of the truck. Duen knows exactly where to buy this pulley mechanism and has priced it at about \$100. This need should not go unmet! As of now, both men and their entire families are needed to assist in the lifting and transport of filters. Their backs are aching, and just the other day, Keuv's toe was smashed by a filter that fell when a makeshift dolly failed.

The above uncertainties and inadequacies highlight perhaps the most critical need: improvement of communication. As in all relationships, nothing is accomplished without clear, healthy communication. Trying to correspond with people in a country with a seemingly non-existent infrastructure makes it especially difficult, and we feel the primary correspondent between Cambodia and Cup of Hope has lacked honesty. Much prayer is needed in this area. Also, those who are contributing financially to this project should realize that it is the more logistical—and less glamorous—elements that need the most funding at this time. Available monetary resources should be entrusted to Cup of Hope with the utmost confidence that they will be used in the most effective manner to bring about present, future, and long-lasting impact.

There is one more issue that is rather disturbing. It is unclear who initiated this practice, but families who are unbelievers are being charged twice as much per month as those who believe in Christ. What?!?! Is a quick conversion worth a 25-cent savings? We pray not.



But lives are still being changed. As is usually the case, the positive points can be spoken of concisely, but this should not undermine their significance. Our survey of the four families who own filters in the immediate vicinity of the church showed the filters working adequately. According to the families themselves, overall health and general satisfaction with daily life have improved. Kids refuse to drink any other water besides the clear life-sustaining liquid that trickles from the filter spout. Adults

rejoice in the relief from the burden of having to boil water. No more stomach aches! Smiles, smiles, and smiles. Water is flowing through the filters at much slower rates than expected, but these exceedingly patient people, again, take no issue. They've barely even noticed. Slower usually means cleaner, anyway...

Upon reflection, the project feels precarious—kind of like the father of the boy who burned his hand tapping his cigarette ashes into a scattering of straw as we left. But there is always prayer, and in Christ, there is always hope.

We spent the rest of the day in our third-floor hotel room watching the rain come down in incredible volume—the bicycles and the motorbikes making V-shaped wakes in the flooded street below. It appears that God put rainy season on hold just so we could take a hurting road to a hurting people and find the hope that waits in their smiles.

Submitted by Tim and Krysten Koehn, Cambodia Correspondents for Cup of Hope International