



TRUSTEES' VISIT TO VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA, MARCH-APRIL 2026



MSAVLC Trustees with Dr Le Thi Cam Giang, the staff and youngsters of Hoa Binh Peace Village in Ho Chi Minh City.

Of all the responsibilities and duties given to the Trustees of a charity working overseas, the monitoring and evaluation of current projects is probably the most important and the most time-consuming one. The Trustees are charged with establishing exactly where and how the funds sent from the United Kingdom are spent by our project leaders; they must provide proof that those funds, your donations, have been used wisely and honestly in providing the services for which they were requested.

The Trustees of MSAVLC try to visit all our projects every two or three years for this work, and so last year it was agreed that a delegation should make an extended visit to Vietnam and Cambodia, it being three years since the last visit in March 2023. The delegation was made up of Mary Lidgard RGN, Honorary Secretary, Peter Lidgard, Chair of Trustees, and Jenny Gold RGN,

who has been a Trustee for some five years now, but who had never before visited South-East Asia.

The details of each project visit are outlined briefly here, but more information about our visit will be provided in future Bulletins. With projects in a number of different locations, we needed to travel around both countries, and we kept both transport and hotel costs to a minimum. Where possible we stayed in small hotels and used local transport: buses, coaches, taxis and tuk-tuks.

We discussed with all our project leaders the use of our funds, we checked all accounts, met many recipients of our aid, inspected equipment bought with MSAVLC funds, wrote many reports and took hundreds of photographs. We hope that some of the reports and photographs will over time, appear not only in our Bulletin, but also on our website and on our social media pages, as a demonstration of where and how your donations are used.

On reflection, it was a task which we found both enjoyable and inspiring. We gave all our projects at least a two-day inspection, with three days at DDSP (Disability Development Services Program) and four days with VAVA (the Vietnam Association for Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin), two days with them in Ho Chi Minh City, and two in Hanoi. We gave ourselves little or no time between project visits and travelling, so reports were either written in the evening and week-ends, or delayed until we returned home.



An Agent Orange victim in Dong Nai Province, sat in one of the thousands of wheelchairs provided by MSAVLC.

It was most rewarding to meet up with project leaders, to meet old friends and make new ones, and to see our funding being used so effectively to help so many people. Certainly it was a real eye-opener for Jenny, who not only gained a real understanding of our work, but she also gave a fresh insight into the people and projects visited.

We left Heathrow on Saturday 7th March on the Vietnam Airlines direct flight to Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon. Following a twelve-hour non-stop flight and brief rest to recover from the jet-lag, we set off to meet representatives from the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA).

We were met by our friend from our last visit to Hanoi, Ms Mai Khanh, who is now based in VAVA's Ho Chi Minh City office. She introduced us to Major General Prof Nguyen Hong Son, President of VAVA Ho Chi Minh

City, and his colleagues. They outlined their plan for us for the subsequent two days. We were delighted that they had arranged for us to visit Hoa Binh Peace Village, where MSAVLC has, over the years, provided a number of pieces of specialised equipment for the disabled children who reside there. It also meant that we were able to meet again some of the young people that we had witnessed growing up in the village.

VAVA also took us to meet two of the recipients of the wheelchairs which we funded last year, and to see the site of the proposed 'Orange Village'. There they plan to build a residential education and training centre along with a hospital and a park, for all sufferers of chemical warfare who live in the Ho Chi Minh City area.

The next day we took a seven-hour coach journey through the flat Mekong Delta countryside to Phnom Penh in Cambodia. We were somewhat bemused by the lengthy border bureaucracy which involved much queuing, form filling, taking of fingerprints, checking and stamping of passports and the paying of fees!

Our first two days in Phnom Penh were spent with All Ears Cambodia, where we observed both the projects which are supported by MSAVLC: the neonatal assessment and early screening program, and the doctor sponsorship project. We watched a number of tiny babies being screened for hearing loss, and attended a primary school hearing assessment session. We also conducted an in-depth interview with our sponsored doctor, Dr Ratanak, and sat in on an All Ears Cambodia continuing professional development session. Finally we discussed with Glyn Vaughan, All Ears Cambodia's Founder-Director our mutual plans, and checked the organisation's accounting procedures, and we were able to see exactly where and how our funds had been used.



A school hearing assessment session conducted by a clinician from All Ears Cambodia.

With time to spare over the weekend, Mary and I reminded ourselves of the dreadful recent history of Cambodia visiting Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Killing Fields, whilst Jenny visited the Buddhist Temple of Wat Ounalom.

On the 16th and 17th March we were guests of Daughter of Cambodia, the organisation which rescues young men and women from the abominable sex trade in Cambodia and gives them a new start in life. Ruth Elliot, the Founder-Director of Daughters introduced us to her staff and to a number of her clients. We heard their harrowing stories of abuse and how they had joined Daughters of Cambodia and turned their lives around.

We met with their medical and social care teams and visited their sewing, printmaking and jewellery workshops, also visiting their retail boutique, and carefully checking their accounts.

That same day we caught a coach from Phnom Penh to Pursat, a four-hour journey into rural Cambodia to meet with Pheng Samnang, longtime Director of Disability Development Services Program (DDSP).

The subsequent three days were spent with the DDSP team, going out into the remoter parts of Pursat, a province the size of Devon, Cornwall and Dorset combined, to meet some of their clients. We saw firsthand how the help given by DDSP's staff had changed the lives of paraplegics and quadriplegics in Pursat Province. They had not only provided them with physiotherapy, medical equipment, wheelchairs, water filters and latrines, but in many cases small micro-loans had given these unfortunate people a livelihood, and dignity in their community.

Following on from our three-day visit to Pursat, we had originally planned to visit the First Aid Project at New Hope Children's Home in Poipet. However, we were forced to change our plans due to the continuation of the military hostilities along the Thailand-Cambodia border. It was disappointing for us to learn that a United Kingdom Foreign Office directive advised against all but essential travel to that region. So as a result we went by car directly to Siem Reap, a seven-hour journey around the Tonle Sap, the largest freshwater lake in South-East Asia.

On the Sunday, we visited the Apopo Landmine Centre to watch a practical demonstration of landmine recovery using African giant pouch rats, (details of that visit appear overleaf.)

The next day we flew from Siem Reap to Hanoi in northern Vietnam and settled in to our fifth hotel of the trip, in the bustling Old Quarter of Hanoi.

Our meetings in Hanoi began with a visit to the headquarters of VAVA, the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin. There MSAVLC was presented with an award by Major General Do Hong Lam, Vice-President of VAVA, in appreciation of the many donations, including 3,299 wheelchairs, that the charity has given to the victims of Agent Orange, since VAVA's creation in 2004.

We were then taken to meet some of the old soldiers and their families in the Hanoi area who had been affected by the spraying of chemicals such as Agent Orange. We visited the homes, not just of the recipients of MSAVLC wheelchairs, but also of some victims who had been provided with small cash sums to give them livelihood support. On our second day we made the one hundred-kilometre road trip to the province of Ninh Binh to meet Agent Orange victims who had also received our wheelchairs.

It was unfortunate that Jenny had to return to the UK next day due to work commitments, but Mary and I stayed on in Hanoi and met up with officers from Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who are always a source of help and friendship when dealing with our projects in Vietnam. We were delighted to meet Mr Tran Phu Cuong, Director General of PACCOM, the People's Aid Co-ordinating Committee, and Ms Nguyen Thi Lan Huong, Deputy Head of the European Division of PACCOM. We discussed with them our continuing efforts to help the poorest and most disadvantaged members of Vietnam's population.

Saturday 28th March gave us an opportunity to go out of Hanoi to visit Le Duc Khai, our friend and former translator from the Highland Education Development Organisation. Mr Khai was our companion on many visits to Vietnam's Northern Highlands where MSAVLC has re-trained over 1,700 traditional midwives.

Our final visit was to meet up with Michael Bosowski, founder of Blue Dragon Children's Foundation, in Hanoi. We had first met with Michael in 2004, on our second visit to Vietnam. At the time he had just begun running a street shelter for homeless children.

Twenty years later, he is in charge of an expanding organisation which rescues children from crises including sex-trafficking, forced labour, and slavery, and then provides them with access to shelter, education and employment. Readers may recall that MSAVLC partnered with Blue Dragon, providing aid to stricken families following the destruction caused by Typhoon Yagi. We were given a tour of the Blue Dragon centre and discussed common interests over lunch with Michael and some of his team.

Finally, on Sunday 5th April we returned to the UK. It was a rewarding, uplifting and inspiring trip, and some of the many stories and pictures from the visit will be detailed in future Bulletins.

*Peter Lidgard,
Chair of Trustees*



We met with Mooth Sambath and his wife, who are both disabled. They have been given assistance and livelihood support by DDSP, in Pursat, Cambodia.

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John Firth,
Honorary Treasurer MSAVLC,
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msavlc.treasurer@gmail.com

THE APOPO CENTRE

Cambodia is one of the most mine-affected countries in the world; an estimated four to six million mines and unexploded ordinances still remain buried in the land. Landmines compromise the safety of local communities and prevent land from being used for income-generating activities like agriculture. People are still being injured by landmines, and so it is essential that the land is cleared.

We were well aware of this problem, and through our work with Disability Development Services Program in Pursat, we have seen the devastating effects that landmines can cause. So, when we heard of the Apopo Centre in Siem Reap, Cambodia, we were keen to learn of its activities and scheduled a visit to the centre.

The Apopo Centre is where rats are trained to sniff out landmines. It was a fascinating visit, and we were given a demonstration of how the rats worked. The rats are African giant pouch rats, with big cheeks. They take nine months to a year to train, and once trained, they are given a passport and a microchip. They live for eight to nine years and retire at about six or seven. They work for about three hours a day and get one day off a week. They are all well looked after and live in cool well-ventilated kennels, with round clay pots to sleep in, wooden tripods to gnaw on and scratch, and plenty of bedding. The rats have regular veterinary checks and vaccinations and have sunscreen applied to their ears and tails when working in the minefields!

The rats are trained to sniff out the scent of a landmine whilst ignoring any scrap metal lying around. Because of their small size, the rats are not heavy enough to detonate mines, making them a safer option than humans. They wear a collar and are attached to their handler by a lead. When they find a landmine, they scratch the ground and the handler operates a click system for the rat to hear, which instructs them to return. The rat is then given a treat, and the landmine is de-activated by human deminers.

In a previous Bulletin we recounted the story of Magawa, the rat who was awarded a gold medal for



Jordan, one of the mine-clearing rats working in Cambodia.

heroism after clearing mines from the equivalent of 42 football pitches and detecting over 100 landmines and other explosives. After a short retirement, Magawa died in 2022 due to old age, but a statue carved from local stone has now been dedicated to him, and it was unveiled in Siem Reap on Mine Awareness Day, the 4th April. The statue is a reminder to the international community that there is still a mammoth job to be done in Cambodia, where landmines remain an ongoing risk and more than a million people continue to work and live on land contaminated by mines and unexploded ordinance.

The rats are proving invaluable and many mines are being identified and destroyed. We were given the chance to hold one of the rats and I was able to hold Jordan!

*Mary Lidgard,
Honorary Secretary*

MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC AID FOR VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The charity's Annual General Meeting will be held at
Charlton Kings Social Club
Church Street, Charlton Kings,
CHELTENHAM GL53 8AP

On Saturday 30th May at 1.30 pm.

Refreshments will be provided.

All supporters are warmly invited.

There is adequate parking at the back of the club.

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