

SOUTH EAST ASIA: REGIONAL PROGRAMMES

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Special report focusing on Institutional Development & Capacity Building in Laos

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A longer-term focus on capacity building and development programmes have increased the operational effectiveness of the Lao Red Cross (LRC). Despite the achievements, a lack of funding threatens to undermine the progress made, and the LRC urgently requires further support to maintain the planned programme.

The context

The Federation has been represented in the Lao PDR since 1992 and has worked with the National Society during a period of transition. In this period the Lao Red Cross (LRC) has grown and changed and is increasingly recognised by the general public for its role in blood collection, relief and health activities. There are now 15 provincial branches established out of a total of 18 provinces. In addition to the Federation offices, five Participating National Societies have established offices in the LRC. The Federation delegation is working to co-ordinate plans and activities and to provide general support to the LRC.

Latest events

Since 1992 the National Society has undergone a transformation and the process of capacity building and development of programmes have contributed to making the Society more operationally effective. A development plan was written with the following three activities forming the basis for the 1999 Emergency Appeal:

- ♦ to develop the operational capacity of the staff at both headquarters and branche level through the institutional support programme;

- ◆ to harmonise and co-ordinate the programmes supported by five PNS partners;
- ◆ to develop planning skills and work towards a vision for LRC over the next 3 - 5 years.

Steady progress has been made in all these areas but the Federation's work is now severely curtailed by a lack of funding. Unless significant funding is received before the end of 1999, the planned activities will be further reduced, and the Federation may have to consider withdrawing the delegation from the Lao PDR.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

The development plan published in January and distributed to interested donors at the partnership meeting in Kuala Lumpur in February has so far met with a muted response. However, efforts continue in the following areas:

Developing the human resource capacity of the LRC at the national and provincial level •

Senior staff are receiving training in English language and computer skills. Satisfactory attendance and pass rates are required for students to continue into the next term. The first workshop on the project management cycle for senior staff and branch managers has been conducted by the NET Foundation, an NGO from North East Thailand. The second course is planned in October. Several study tours for branch managers have been organised by the PNS (for example the Netherlands Red Cross recently sent 9 staff from the southern branches to visit their neighbouring branches of the Vietnamese Red Cross).

Financial management and reporting are two areas where more training and support are planned.

Facilitating the planning process and assisting the LRC to formulate an integrated Red Cross/Red Crescent activity plan •

A planning workshop for the LRC was held in February. This was a significant first step involving senior management, branch leaders and all partners in the process of joint planning. Discussions focused on agreeing to a general outline for the National Society's objectives. Since July a Lao consultant has been employed by the Federation to follow this process, and among other things, will assist the LRC to revise and update the five year plan. Regular trilateral meetings have been held with PNS partners and the LRC to discuss policy matters and to integrate development activities and strengthen programmes.

Strengthening the governance capacity of the LRC •

The LRC constitution will be reviewed by a working group -- a major task since the constitution dates from 1955. Each branch has a committee structure which is set by the provincial governor but there is flexibility within this structure and branches need to be encouraged to recruit their committees from a wider base. There are several branches which have an active volunteer membership who participate in a range of activities. Nevertheless the national context in which the LRC operates will continue to place constraints on the Society for the foreseeable future.

Facilitating the process of branch development •

The goal of the LRC is to have an operational branch of the Red Cross in every province. Some of the branches are increasingly taking initiatives with fundraising and programmes. Each of the branches receives financial assistance and support with training and service programmes from a PNS. The Netherlands, Australian, Swiss and Danish Red Cross are all currently assisting the LRC in developing the branch activities and programmes.

The Vientiane City branch has been re-activated after a long period of dormancy. The City Council has donated a central site for the Branch office and with Federation assistance this has now been renovated and equipped. A committee and four staff members have been appointed and the branch will soon be officially opened. Similarly the branch for the Vientiane province is being re-activated and the committee and office staff will be strengthened. A number of resources have been prepared in Lao

language, with videos translated and distributed, and Guidelines for Branches are in preparation. An active campaign for World Red Cross red Crescent Day and the Millennium launch was held which the branches joined enthusiastically and used as a vehicle for fundraising and publicity.

Providing programme support especially in the areas of health and information •

Under a new decree recently adopted by the Lao Government, the LRC will be re-structured and strengthened. New staff will be hired and the departments re-organised. This restructuring will be completed by end of September and is expected to provide a basis for the LRC to meet the increasing demands placed on them.

Health Department:

The Community Based First Aid (CBFA) curriculum is under revision with the goal of establishing a national curriculum and a set of standards for all First Aid taught by the LRC. The water and sanitation projects that are carried out in various provinces need to be more closely linked with the provincial health authorities and partners such as UNICEF and the Water Department. To further this objective the regional watsan delegate will make two visits to the LRC, and three staff members will attend the regional water workshop in Bali in September.

Information Department:

The Information Department receives support jointly from ICRC and the Federation. The Head of Department will visit Thailand in September for a study visit with ICRC and the Thai Red Cross. Successful press conferences were held for all major events including the launch of the World Disasters report and the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Conventions. Videos translated into Lao language have been sent to every branch and dissemination kits are being prepared. A dissemination workshop is planned for the end of the year so that each branch will have the capacity and the materials needed to disseminate information in their provinces.

With the ongoing co ordination process between the five PNSs and the LRC, programmes are integrated and working in harmony.

The Federation facilitates the following two programmes with the LRC with funding provided by by the Japanese Red Cross Society:

- ◆ The national blood programme which has a nine year agreement (1995 - 2003): In November 1999 a mid term evaluation will be made by the LRC, Ministry of Health, JRCS and Federation. Currently there is a National Blood Centre in Vientiane, and in each of the five branches a provincial blood laboratory is based in the provincial hospital. The goal of the Millennium Campaign is to recruit 2000 new voluntary blood donors.
- ◆ the disaster preparedness plan is a three year agreement which will decentralise the capacity of disaster response, intending to create a network of volunteers around the country who can respond effectively and quickly to disasters in each region.

Outstanding needs

Because of funding constraints, the 1999 development plan has already been severely reduced, and the Federation is considering the possibility of withdrawing the Delegation. However, even the reduced plan will not be possible unless funds are forthcoming to continue the development process into next year. The LRC has requested Federation assistance in the priority area of institution building for at least another one to two years, and therefore funding for the development process is urgently needed.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The LRC enjoys good relations with the five neighbouring National Societies and is actively participating in the events in the region and internationally for the first time in many years. Relations

with the media are very cordial and four Press Conferences have been held this year in connection with special events. The LRC maintains its close links to Government and is strongly supported by Government. All LRC salaries are paid from the Ministry of Finance, and the Red Cross buildings and the land they are on have been donated by Government.

Contributions

See Annex 1 for details. Please note that the list of contributions covers the entire South East Asia regional programmes, and is not Laos specific.

Conclusion

The Federation recognises that development and growth is a long-term process, and in collaboration with the LRC has structured the programmes based on this approach. Laos is emerging from a period of isolation and is now more open to external elements. While effective initiatives have been established and every effort should be made to continue, the lack of capacity and resources (both financial and human) and the potential for effective programme management remain limited, and the LRC requires ongoing support from external sources.

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