U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

# SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

## Cambodia's Men in Uniform Educate One Another on HIV Risks

FOR THE THOUSANDS OF YOUNG MEN in Cambodia's military and police forces, occupational hazards include long periods away from home, persistent peer pressure to drink alcohol and engage in sexual activity, and the temptation of brothels that are often located near barracks or camps. Looming over the daily choices these men make is the threat of HIV/AIDS—a scourge that has spread steadily among Cambodia's populace, often being carried by men who visit sex workers, and who pass it on to their wives or girlfriends.

Since 1998, a peer education program to encourage safer sex practices and to raise HIV/AIDS awareness within the military and police has made significant inroads to stem HIV transmission. In collaboration with Cambodia's Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Interior, a U.S. Agency for International Development-supported initiative by Family Health International (FHI) aims to reduce the number of HIV infections by promoting abstinence, condom use, and fewer sex partners.

> "Before, while I was going out, I did not know anything about the risks of the enjoyable places with girls. After I finished the training, I understood that I had to make a lot of changes."
>
> – Cambodian soldier

More than 7,000 peer educators have been trained to discuss decision-making and negotiation skills in the face of peer pressure from their comrades, how to assess and reduce the risks associated with HIV infection, the socioeconomic impact of AIDS on individuals and communities, options for HIV testing, and HIV/AIDS stigma and discrimination. Military and police commanders also play an important role by selecting peer educator trainers and by offering feedback on the program within their units. Their stamp of approval has been key to the program's success.

While the initiative centers on serious discussions of HIV risks, educators try to lighten their messages with entertainment. The uniformed services peer education drama festival, launched in 2002 with the help of faculty from Cambodia's Royal University of Fine Arts, recruited drama teams to portray real-life stories, attitudes, and practices associated with HIV/AIDS. And peer educators and trainers plan special events to mark World AIDS Day, the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial, Cambodia's annual Water Festival, and the 2nd National AIDS Conference.

The results of HIV/AIDS peer education have been remarkable. HIV prevalence among urban police dropped from 6 percent in 1998 to 3 percent in 2002. The percentage of Cambodian military reporting sex with a sex worker in the previous year dropped by more than half between 1998 and 2001, from nearly 70 percent to 32 percent.

As of early 2003, more than 71,000 military and police personnel had heard the USAID-sponsored messages, and more than 700 force commanders had participated in HIV/AIDS sensitivity training. Nearly two-thirds of Cambodia's national military force have participated in the program, and coverage is expected to reach 80 percent in 2003.

Photo courtesy of Family Health International

Nearly two-thirds of Cambodia's military have participated in the HIV/AIDS peer education program.

*Cambodia, October 2003*

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