

# Taiwan charity helps build crematoriums in Cambodia

By Liu Li-jen and Chen Wei-han / Staff reporter, with staff writer



Field Relief Agency of Taiwan founder Yang Wei-lin, front center, stands among schoolchildren in Cambodia in an undated photo as they hold stationery sets donated by Taiwanese children.

**Photo: Liu Li-jen, Taipei Times**

To provide relief to poverty-stricken villagers in Cambodia, a Taiwanese charity has built more than 100 crematoriums at remote villages to offer free cremation services, while donating solar LED lamps to households without electricity.

Cambodia-based philanthropist Yang Wei-lin (楊蔚齡) founded the Field Relief Agency of Taiwan in 1995 and has since committed herself to helping provide emergency aid, food relief, student aid, vocational training, schools, micro-loans and the establishment of free crematoriums and morgues in Cambodia over the past 20 years.

Based in Poipet on the Cambodia-Thailand border, the foundation is taking care of more than 100 orphans and has sponsored the vocational education of nearly 5,000 students, helping to build schools where more than 10,000 students have studied, Yang said.

Villagers who are too poor to afford funeral services at public morgues usually cremate the bodies of their loved ones on rice paddies in the open, lacking privacy and “exposing innocent children” to the events, she said.

Some villagers are so poor that they cannot buy enough firewood to build an efficient pyre, resulting in partially cremated bodies being exposed in the open, increasing the pain and suffering of bereaved families, who blame themselves for being unable to offer a proper funeral to bid a final farewell to the departed, she added.

Rain washes the remains into rivers and drains, contaminating drinking water sources and increasing the risk of epidemic diseases, Yang said.

To provide relief to villagers, and prevent farmland and rivers from being polluted, the foundation has established 109 crematoriums and morgues in rural areas in Cambodia, and has cremated more than 2,500 bodies over the past five years, giving the dead a respectful funeral service free of charge, she added.

Each crematorium is inaugurated with a solemn Buddhist ritual, during which chanting monks perform a cleansing ceremony, while the foundation gives out rice to poor villagers, she said.

At a floating village on Tonle Sap, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, a 10-year-old boy watched the body of his father — drowned during a fishing trip — being placed against a tree by the lake with thin planks of wood and set ablaze. However, part of his body, fractured by the fire, broke off and fell into the lake, Yang said.

The boy decided to become a monk and practice Buddhism after the heart-rending funeral, saying: “I would recite scriptures and practice beneficence to prevent my father’s soul from breaking apart.”

After learning that the foundation is building crematoriums in remote areas, the boy last year traveled more than 200km with his guru to visit Yang to request a crematorium in his village of Kbal Tao, she said.

The crematorium was completed last month, with 3,000 villagers attending the ceremony. The guru passed away before the completion of the crematorium, but his wife expressed immense gratitude to Yang, she said.

A crematorium costs about US\$10,000, Yang said, adding that the foundation usually pays about two-thirds of the cost and that the remaining cost is shared by locals.

The foundation’s initiative has received financial support from many big-hearted donors, she said.

The foundation also offered free solar LED lamps to villagers in Kbal Tao, one of a dozen floating villages on Tonle Sap, whose fishery resources are the livelihood of tens of thousands of villagers, Yang said.

About 820 families in Kbal Tao live in boathouses without electricity, and children commute to schools — also on the lake — by boat, she said, adding that such children are in desperate need of modern education to improve career opportunities.

The foundation spent a year collecting and transporting 820 solar LED lamps worth NT\$500 apiece — donated by Taiwanese — to each family in Kbal Tao, Yang said.

A fisherman said that candlelight was their only artificial light source, which is easily extinguished by wind, disrupting students' studies, while a fifth-grader said that he could now read at night with the lamps.

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