

Water project draws attention of Thai princess

Church helps ease problems facing youth in remote areas

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Church members and other dignitaries stand in front of a billboard featuring a picture of Thailand's beloved Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn.

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn personally acknowledged an LDS Charities clean water development project at the dedicatory hand-over ceremony held at the remote Mae Ramoeng Hill Tribe School in northern Thailand on Tuesday, Dec. 29.

Elder Ray Caldwell and Sister Judy Caldwell, senior missionaries and country directors who facilitate LDS Charities projects in Thailand, worked under the direction of Princess Sirindhorn to implement and supervise an authorized project titled "Clean Water System Development and Sanitation Facility Provision and Construction Project."

Princess Sirindhorn's outreach program for the less fortunate selected 29 hill tribe villages in Tak Province to benefit from clean water. Directing clean water from its source with improved or new water lines will benefit many village inhabitants.

Under the LDS Charities program, several building contractors have constructed water tanks for year-round storage as well as 12 sanitation facilities.

At present, 10 facilities are in progress with plans underway to complete all proposed construction projects for the villages by May. Upon the completion of the project, the financial contribution made by LDS Charities will amount to \$600,000.

The entire ceremonial program, supervised by royal palace authorities, followed a regimented schedule. The princess and her entourage arrived on five helicopters. The ceremony took place on the upper school campus. At 11 a.m., the princess walked on a specially raked gravel pathway. As soon as she was escorted to her special chair placed on a royal purple carpet, she presided over the ceremonies.

As honored guests, 27 Church members were invited to sit under a large shade canopy next to the princess. Among the other guests allowed to observe the ceremony were Kuning M.R. Benchapa Krairiksh, daughter of the late His Royal Highness Prince Chakrabhand Pensiri. She spent several months negotiating the water project, acting as liaison for the Church as she introduced LDS Charities to Princess Sirindhorn through the royal palace staff. The water project was dedicated in memory of the 100th anniversary of the birth of her father.

Also attending were official palace personnel, government officials, Tak province school representatives, five TV cameramen filming the occasion to be broadcast later, and Princess Sinindhorn's entourage.

Princess Sirindhorn presented token gifts to school children. Dr. Sumkiat Chobphol, Deputy Secretary General of the Office of the Basic Education Commission of Thailand, gave the first speech. The princess was then presented a copy of the dedicatory booklet on a golden tray. Thailand Bangkok Mission President Michael S. Smith spoke on behalf of the Church, using the proper royal Thai language.

In front of Princess Sirindhorn was a large metal plaque that was covered with a delicate curtain. Engraved on the plaque was: "Clean water system development and sanitation facility provision project for schools and villages in Tak Province under the auspices of Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in memory of His Royal Highness Prince Chakraband Pensiri by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

At the conclusion of President Smith's remarks, Princess Sirindhorn rose to push a button that activated and pulled the curtain revealing the plaque.

At the conclusion of the short ceremony, Princess Sirindhorn inspected two prominent billboards (one in Thai and one in English) that were designed by Elder Caldwell to relate the process and procedures of the water project with photos depicting various stages of construction plus written explanations of the Church's involvement.



Photo by Elder Keith Hardy

Church members and other dignitaries stand in front of a billboard featuring a picture of Thailand's beloved Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. The billboard explains the water project in northern Thailand and the Church's role in it.

The princess' assistants then led 25 invited guests to a private dining room where the palace provided lunch. Among those chosen to have lunch with the princess were President Smith, Bangkok Thailand Stake President Wisit Khanakham and his first counselor, President Wisan Wisanbannawit, and Elder Caldwell.

In addressing the group, the princess emphasized the necessity of maintaining the water facilities by using the proper methods of cleaning on a regular basis. She stated that she expected the principal, teachers and students to be involved in maintaining the facilities.

On the lower campus, the princess inspected a large canopied area under which doctors, nurses and dentists provided physical and dental check-ups and procedures for the students. Prior to the princess' departure, she accompanied Church members for a group photo with her standing in the center of men on one side and women on the other. She then proceeded to her private helicopter to continue to inspect two additional hill tribe school premises.

Princess Sirindhorn realizes the problems facing children and youth living in these remote areas. They face high health risks, suffering from malnutrition, illness and lack of education. The princess is actively involved in partnering with private agencies, both local and international, to facilitate the development of students at the hill tribe schools educationally, health-wise and emotionally to reach their full potential as future citizens of Thailand.

Mae Ramoeng School was selected for the hand-over ceremony because it is the largest school, with an enrollment of nearly 1,000 students, 400 boarding on the premises. The project construction at the school included a water tank, two large shower rooms — one for boys and one for girls — and three five-stall rest room facilities, all fully tiled with outside sinks and mirrors. The teachers in the Hill Tribe villages work long hours teaching lessons, preparing meals, washing dishes, nursing the sick, and encouraging and supervising many health-related programs. They live on the premises with occasional time off a few times a year.

A highlight of the water project was the startling changes at the Mae Ramoeng School. Most buildings on site were newly painted and decorated with yards of richly colored material draped in artistic fashion for the grand celebration in anticipation of the visit of the princess. For the ceremony, students in white shirts sat on mats under a canopy for three hours waiting for the princess to pass by. Many officials, including the principal and other Thai people, stated that they never in their lifetime expected to have the opportunity to be in the presence of the princess. Church members were excited to be invited guests for the memorial occasion.



Photo by Elder Keith Hardy

Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn listens as Elder Ray Caldwell gives her information about a new Thailand water project.

Other remote villages are reached only by four-wheel drive. Generally, it takes one full day to visit two or three villages. Some schools have desks, but at other schools the students sit on cement floors. Even though some schools have more than one building, most schools are single dwellings with three bamboo walls and a fourth wall fully open. Village homes are constructed of thatched roofs made of palm and teak leaves and have bamboo walls. Window openings do not have glass panes. Homes are generally built on stilts.

On a regular basis, Elder and Sister Caldwell and other Church representatives visit villages and schools approximately once a month to inspect the progress and to discuss building procedures with contractors and select the next site for construction.

Rajamangala University of Technology Lanna, Tak Province, provided engineering, consulting and inspection services for the water project.