

Sunlabob goes to Sumatra!

In January Sunlabob Rural Energy Systems became the first Lao company to provide **development assistance** overseas. The four man team from Sunlabob traveled to Nias Island in Indonesia to provide solar energy to 250 new houses built by UID (United in diversity) to house victims displaced by the Tsunami of 2004 and earthquake of 2005. During their two week stay the team successfully trained four local technicians and a village committee to run the project in the future. In addition, the team found time to install the first 50 systems in the houses of those people in most pressing need as well as a community centre. The remaining systems are expected to have been installed by the newly trained local Sunlabob technicians by the end of this month.

Sunlabob Master Trainer Mr. Thongdeuan Phengnapa commented “it is a proud moment for us to be able to share the lessons we have learned in rural Lao to help similarly disadvantaged people elsewhere in the world. It shows that our Lao experience is applicable anywhere in the world where isolated communities will not have access to large scale energy distribution systems for many years to come”.

The Sunlabob crew, which also included Mr. Sili Khounphannavong (Master trainer), Mr. Khamsing Khouthsavannh (Master Technician) and Mr. Lloyd Osborne, was accompanied by three translators from Jakarta.

Nias is an island off the western coast of Sumatra, Indonesia. It is located in a chain of islands parallel to the coast, separated from Sumatra by the Mentawai Strait. The island is located at 1°6'N 97°32'E, and covers an area of 4,771 km² which is mostly lowland area of ± 800 m above sea level. Nias is the largest of the islands off Sumatra that are part of North Sumatra province. This area consists of 131 islands of which Nias Island is the biggest. The population in this area is about 639,675 people (including Ono Niha - the native inhabitants of the Island, Malay, Batak, and Chinese).

Nias is an internationally famous surfing destination where, as they wait for waves, surfers can often see sea turtles swimming below. Nias was part of the famous Hippie trail of the 1960s, particularly traveled by surfers, which lead to Bali. It has been the site of several international surfing competitions in the past. Despite the storied history of surfing in Nias, international surfing in Nias has slowed down especially (but not specifically) due to the recent earthquakes and resulting tsunami.

Though isolated, the Nias Island chain has been trading with other cultures, other islands, and even mainland Asia since prehistory. Some historians and archaeologists have cited the local culture as one of the few remaining Megalithic cultures in existence today. While this point of view is hotly debated, there is no doubt that Nias relative geographic isolation has created a unique culture. Nias is home not only to a unique human culture but also endemic fauna which differ from other areas of North Sumatra because of the island's remote location. The Sunlabob team was treated to the sight of huge fruit bats, flying lizards, troops of monkeys and a wealth of exotic birds, not to mention the numerous fish species that contributed to their diet whilst on the island.

Nias is best known for its remarkable diversity of festivals and celebration. The most well known events are War Dances and Stone Jumping, a manhood ritual that sees young men leaping over two meter stone towers to their fate. The music of Nias, performed mostly by women, is noted worldwide for its haunting beauty.

The predominant religion is Protestant Christianity. Six out of seven Niasans are Protestant; the remainder are about evenly divided between Muslim (mostly immigrants from elsewhere in Indonesia) and Catholic. However adherence to either Christian or Muslim religions is still largely symbolic; Nias continues into the current day celebrating its own indigenous culture and traditions as the primary form of spiritual expression.

On December 26 the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake struck a few kilometers north of the island, creating tsunamis as high as 10 meters. 122 people were killed and hundreds more rendered homeless.

On March 28, 2005, the island was again hit by the 2005 Sumatran earthquake, initially presumed to be an aftershock following the 2004 quake, but now regarded as the second-most powerful earthquake in the world since 1965 and twelfth-most powerful ever recorded. At least 800 people are reported dead, with the possibility of more than 2,000 casualties. Hundreds of buildings have toppled, and many thousands have been made homeless. Nias's coastline has changed markedly with the tsunami and earthquake. In some areas, the coast has moved over 50 m inland. In other areas, as much as a further 100 m of land is exposed from the sea. The uplift of land has been recorded as being as much as 2.5 m. In 2007, almost two years after the earthquake, there are still tens of thousands of internally displaced persons living in camps throughout Nias.

Following the earthquake, many international aid agencies have moved in to assist in rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts. Oxfam, Save the Children Fund, World Vision, Surf Aid, Caritas International and UID are some of the international NGOs represented in Nias. UN agencies represented include UNORC, UNDP, UNICEF, UN-Habitat, WFP, IOM and UNIDO.

It is in this context that Sunlabob was invited to the Island to help restore living conditions for many of the displaced islanders by providing the equipment and expertise necessary for them to maintain and manage their own village level solar energy systems.

The Sunlabob team was based in Sirombu village on the west of the island, a once beautiful beach front community for which fishing was the main source of livelihood. Mr. Sili Khounphanavong commented “it was quite distressing to see the devastation wrought by the Tsunami and subsequent earthquakes. Dotted amongst the more resilient coconut trees were the remains of totally flattened houses and broken fishing boats carried inland by the huge wave”. Despite the enormity of the tragedy the Sunlabob team was heartened by the positive attitude shared by the community which is determined to stand on its own feet once more. Taking control of their own electricity supply is seen as an important step in this process, something in which Sunlabob is proud to have assisted.

When the time came to leave the team agreed that they had all learned from the special experience, through which a unique bond has developed between Lao PDR and the island peoples, for which they would like to say “saohagolo” (thank you and good luck).

Sunlabob Rural Energy Systems will continue to support Sirombu village in their efforts to develop a self-sufficient energy system and in re-building their proud community.