The 'Aussie information workers'

Helen Jarvis, University of New South Wales

For my International Relations Committee column I decided to write about the impact that Australian information workers have made in Cambodia.

I was not the first Australian librarian to visit the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Margaret Bywater, from the Australian Friends Services Committee (the Quakers) had made a start on constructing a new catalogue for the University of Phnom Penh (UPP). Margaret now works as a library consultant, spending half her time at UPP, and the other half meeting broader concerns — training librarians from all around town, and sometimes from up country too. She has estab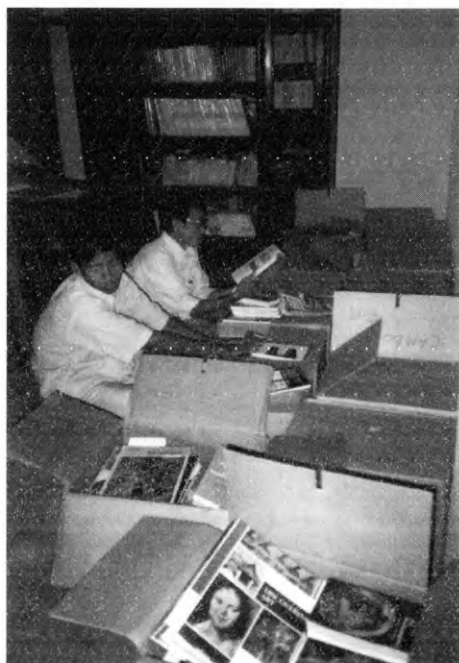lished a joint deposit site for donated books, liaises with visiting delegations and potential donor agencies, and is now heavily involved in the design of the new purpose-built UPP library.

In 1989 David Hawkins from the NSW Department of Agriculture was sent by Australian Catholic Relief to help in the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture library for two months and Gail Morrison was sent for two years as an Australian Volunteer Abroad (AVA), to be based principally at the National Library of Cambodia (NLC). As well as on the job training, Gail administered a UNESCO project, funded by a $30 000 donation from the Australian government, to renovate NLC — mainly rewiring and replumbing. Eric Marsh (from the State Library of Tasmania) followed in a similar capacity, working half at NLC and half at the UPP English language self-access centre.

Rosemary Harbridge from the Northern Territory spent three years as a volunteer in the library of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC). In other parts of the information sector Australians have also made their mark. In 1990 Sue Downie became the first Western journalist since 1975 to set up base in Phnom Penh. Sue Aitkin, whom many in Canberra first knew for her campaign to collect typewriters for Cambodia and her *Canberra times* article on the National Library of Australia's book donations to NLC, has worked tirelessly since 1991 to establish the Cambodia Communications Institute. And before that APHEDA (Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad) set up typing and basic journalism courses. In the area of cultural heritage preservation, Australia has rendered valuable assistance to the National Museum of Cambodia, with staff from the Australian National Gallery and National Film and Sound Archives playing a variety of specialist roles.

With support from the National Library of Australia and the Asia Foundation, the University of New South Wales (UNSW) has now held three BISA cataloguing workshops (in 1991, 1992 and 1994). Cambodian-Australian Saing Chou Iv from Perth, and Nereida Cross and myself from UNSW have trained around 30 librarians in basic cataloguing and, most recently, in using UNESCO's CDS/ISIS software and the Unimarc format. Joanne Cheah (formerly at National Library of Australia and now at the parliamentary library) went to NLC as an individual volunteer, concentrating on the CDS/ISIS cataloguing.

Peng Pongrasy and He Hin opening books donated by Friends of the National Library of Cambodia

A new and important dimension has been added with the AVA posting in 1995 of Peter Arfanis to the National Archives of Cambodia (NAC). This follows the sponsorship by AusAID of two NAC staff to a workshop at UNSW in 1994. A grant from the Australian Embassy in Phnom Penh has enabled the purchase of a much needed photocopier and computer, as well as basic building repairs.

The work of the Australian librarians and archivists has been made far more manageable as a result of major Australian initiatives in the wider information and telecommunications sector. Telstra (then OTC) started negotiations with Cambodia in 1988 and installed an earth station in 1990, establishing satellite connections to the rest of the world. During the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, the Australian Field Communications Unit re-established links throughout the country. Then in 1994 along came PACTOK — the packet-switched network first set up in the Pacific to link NGO's into the Internet through Australia's Pegasus network, as part of the Association for Progressive Communications domain, and Cambodia's own CCCNET went into operation.

Other countries, including Vietnam, France and the USA have also sent volunteers and consultants for extended periods of time. But in late 1995, as I sat at the computer in my Phnom Penh office e-mailing ALIA national office to ask about developments in the International Relations Committee, and referring matters to the core of professional librarians which now exists in Cambodia, I thought it was an appropriate moment to mark the work of our many friends and colleagues 'the Aussie information workers', who collectively have made a real contribution in assisting the revival of this one sector of Cambodian society. ∎

Gail Morrison, Helen Jarvis, Judy Ledgerwood — three friends of the National Library of Cambodia