Handicapped children in Armenia:

Special needs school creates hope for a better future
Afghanistan

– When Lailo learned to wash her hands

Six-year-old Lailo lost two siblings in early childhood. They died from diarrhoea because the family was not familiar with good hygiene. Now the village has received education in preventing diseases.

Tajikistan

– This time Saidjamol is prepared for the flood

During the past 14 years the villages along the Yokshu River have experienced about one flood a year. Saidjamol Saidulleov’s family lost almost everything when their home and land was flooded.

Romania

– Help arrived at the exact moment Olga needed it

Olga used to live in a one room house with her eight children. She did not have a job and her husband could not endure their poor situation and left her for another woman.

Armenia

– The Managing Director’s ten-year-old son visits a school for the handicapped

“You learn to not only think of yourself,” says ten-year-old Philip Wikborg Hartzner, son of Mission East’s Managing Director. He has visited one of the schools for children who are handicapped or who have learning difficulties that Mission East helps in Armenia.

Mission East

is a Danish international aid organisation. We exist to deliver relief and development assistance to vulnerable communities with a primary focus on Eastern Europe and Asia. Based on Christian values, Mission East aims to support the most vulnerable, making no racial, political or religious distinction between those in need.

Mission East currently operates in Afghanistan, Armenia and Tajikistan, and we co-operate with local partners in Bulgaria, Romania and Nepal. The assistance offered by Mission East is supported by a range of private and public donors such as the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, EU and the United Nations.

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Not just about numbers

Mission East has helped around 250,000 people in 2006. But our support is much more than a number. This magazine is dedicated to some of the individual lives we have changed with your help.

Somehow the world we live in seems to get faster and faster. 2007 is already well underway, and we wonder how it came so quickly. Life for Mission East, whether for our teams in the field, or staff at headquarters just seems to get busier and busier. There is so much to do….! Sometimes the lists of things to do are so long that we forget to take a step back and look at what we have achieved.

This magazine presents some of those achievements. And in a world that increasingly talks in terms of trends and generalizations, it also presents us with a chance to stop for a moment and focus on some individuals. Some real, individual people in different situations for whom life has changed enormously thanks to relatively simple interventions.

A child in Afghanistan learns how to wash her hands and understands for the first time how this will protect her health. A mother in Romania learns to hope again because someone reaches out to help her in the midst of poverty. A man in Tajikistan is reassured that his family is better prepared for the annual flooding. Each story is a life changed, for which we offer thanks. Thanks which is in a large part due to our faithful supporters who make the work possible – and of which we have just reached a total of 7,000, another cause for celebration!

So, we look on towards the rest of 2007 and imagine the hundreds of thousands more lives we’ll be helping change along the way. We hope that an increasing number of these will be in Nepal, where we are working towards setting up projects in the most remote and poverty-stricken mountainous corner of the country. As we look at the stories in this magazine, we draw hope and inspiration in a busy world from the thought that it’s not just about numbers. Each well, each hygiene training session, each flood early warning system, changes the lives of individuals in an amazing way. And amidst the daily rush, that thought helps us to keep going. I hope it is also a reflection which brings you encouragement and keeps you with us through 2007 – thank you for your ongoing support.

With gratitude,

Dr. Kim Hartzner
Managing Director of Mission East
The Managing Director’s ten-year-old son visits school for the handicapped

"You learn to not only think of yourself," says ten-year-old Philip Wikborg Hartzner, son of Mission East's Managing Director. Together with his classmates he has visited the Gavar Special School for handicapped and children with learning difficulties in Armenia.

One winter's day, three white minivans rolled up in front of the Gavar Special School in Armenia. During the following couple of hours, the passengers, thirty students from the International School in the capital Yerevan, got a glimpse of a world very different from their own. Far from the flat screen televisions, the mobile phones and the designer clothes they are used to. Far from warm rooms, quilted covers and the regular filling meals.

The children on the other side of the walls of this boarding school come from some of the poorest families in the country. They are socially vulnerable, handicapped and children with learning difficulties, who need extra help to survive and develop.

Ten-year-old Philip Wikborg Hartzner was one of the passengers. He has been living in Armenia since August with his mother, two brothers, and his dad, Kim Hartzner, who is the Managing Director of Mission East. That winter's day he experienced how children in one of Armenia's poorest regions live.

"As if they had never seen sweets"

The visit is part of a project carried out by the International School in co-operation with Mission East. The goal is to raise money to renovate the decaying building and create better learning environment for the children.

"They were not really familiar with technology," Philip Hartzner (left) says about the children at the school in Gavar. "They did not know what a television and a mobile phone is. I took out my mobile phone and they all wanted to look at it. They were pointing at it and looked like they wanted to ask me "What does that thing do?""

"Their beds were really hard. I tried lying on one of them and it was like I was lying on bricks. I would never be able to fall asleep if I went to bed there."

By Tania Maria Lüders Rusbjerg, Mission East Journalist

"I can't imagine a school like that in Denmark. It wouldn't have been allowed - they would have pulled it down 20 years ago. Parts of the school were OK because the toilets and showers had been renovated by Mission East. But the windows were so rotten that you couldn't open them. It is not so bad in the winter but, when it gets really hot in the summer then it is a problem that the children can't get fresh air in the room while they sleep," says Philip.

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Getting the right education is crucial to these children’s future. The one thing Philip remembers most from the visit is how gifted the children turned out to be in spite of their handicaps. “I was surprised and impressed to see how talented they are. I had never imagined that they could do all the things they could do. Some of the boys were building furniture and the girls were sewing dresses. They are good at totally different things from the ones we learn at our school. They are not good at reading and writing but they can create things with their hands. The school helps them to be really good at what they do so they can get jobs afterwards.”

When all the children had eaten lunch the students from the International School handed out the gifts they had brought from home. Bags with sweets, biscuits, and pies. “The youngest kids were ecstatic, running around and showing their gifts to the adults. It was very moving to see them so happy about so little. In Denmark it is quite normal to get sweets once in a while without it being a special occasion – when I go visit Grandma and Grandpa for example. It was like they had never seen sweets before,” Philip says.

If I had enough money…

Philip’s teacher, Mrs. Gillis, saw what a great impression the visit made on her own students. “Although the facilities were clean and basic and there were improvement projects in progress, our students were moved by how little these children have, and the stark contrast when compared to their own lives.”

Philip adds: “You learn to not only think of yourself. You see how good you really have it. After the visit I talked to my best friend who comes from a rich family in Armenia. He had learned that there are many people in his own country who is living under much worse conditions than himself. It was nice to hear.”

Philip has no doubt how he would help the children if he could. “If I had enough money I would first of all give them some heating. Right now they have these big ovens that the children run around when they play. The ovens are really hot and the children can burn themselves badly if they accidentally touch them.”

“And then I would buy them new beds, paint, new windows and better food.”

Philip looks forward to visiting the school with his classmates again in March.

Mission East in Armenia

For decades the handicapped in Armenia have been considered a disgrace to society and their families. Too often they have been hidden away at home. They don’t get the right medical treatment, and their right to go to school and learn to develop their potential is not respected. Mission East seeks out families who need support to give their handicapped child a better future.

In 2005 Mission East played a significant role in the introduction of a new law that gives right to an education for all, including the handicapped. And in November 2006 we received the official approval of a new national special education curricula that caters for the needs of children with learning difficulties on their level.

At the Gavar Special School, Mission East has helped renovate toilets and showers to keep the school functioning and to help more parents want to send their handicapped children to school.
600 children are left out of the school system

By Tania Maria Lüders Rusbjerg, Mission East Journalist

Only a fraction of the handicapped children and children with learning difficulties living in the poor Geghar- kunik region go to school. Mission East is working on changing that.

In Armenia where people with handicaps or learning difficulties are viewed as having less potential than others, it can be hard to convince parents that their handicapped children need to go to school to develop their talents. Surveys show that at least 700 children in the region need special education. Despite that fact, the only school for children with learning disabilities only has about 100 students even though it has room for twice as many.

Mission East supports the Gavar Special School. We work on special education curricula for children with special needs, and we help renovate toilets, showers, the kitchen and washrooms in the decaying building.

Renovation is a key to education

The renovation of the school plays a significant role in getting more children with special needs to become a part of the school system.

Having a handicapped child is often considered as such a great shame that the children are being hidden away at home.

When Mission East has found the families and helped the parents understand, how important the school is for their children, it is crucial that they find the physical surroundings acceptable.

Rotten windows, missing floor boards, and unsanitary toilets help maintain the reasonable mistrust they have for the system. Decent conditions on the other hand make the parents trust that people will take good care of their children.

Mission East has helped the school increase the number of these students at the Gavar Special School from less than 30 to about 100 by finding families with children who need to go to school and by renovating the buildings.

School would have been closed down

Lavrik Arevshatjan has worked at the school for nine years. He has no doubt that it would have been closed down if Mission East had not been there.

“Mission East has done a great work here. You have taught our teachers here how we should work with the children. Through the combined work of Mission East and staff here at the school, the school was saved, through the introduction of new educational...
reforms, and through the improvement of conditions of the children with special needs here.” Mission East’s special education curricula was officially approved in November under the project “Towards Education for All” carried out by Mission East and local partner Bridge of Hope, supported among others by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

“Now, as a result of your work, we have separate curricula for the children – one for children with moderate learning difficulties, and one for children with severe learning difficulties.” About the renovation work he adds:

“You have literally prevented the collapse of the entire school.”

Mission East continues its work at the Gavar Special School which is still in need of a comprehensive renovation.

Even though the school has new toilets and showers, parts of the building are still in a terrible state.

This is what the students at the International School had to say after their visit to the Gavar Special School:

- The kids might not be talented in reading and writing but they are gifted in other ways. I was amazed when I saw how they worked wood and yarn. So please help them however you can, so they will have a better future.
  Alain Tamazian, Armenia

- Sometimes the children were handicapped. Even so, the children were very artistic and talented. I think I couldn’t even make as talented work as them.
  Betty Vardanian, Armenia, Canada

- They need better environment and home. They need our help!
  Maja Fiedler, Germany

- We went there to help them grow in friendship with them. When we left they were full of joy and happiness.
  Guadalupe Alvarez, Argentina

- Even though these children have a place to sleep and food to eat, they still need your help.
  Lizzia Schack, USA

- The roof is in danger of collapsing and needs to be replaced.
  Maggie Ryan, USA

- We experienced what it was like there. The children need help.
  Sophie Alexandra Gringer, USA
Lailo is six years old. She is an inquisitive girl living with her family in the remote mountain village of Murkan in the Warduj district. The family lives in very poor economic conditions. Her mother Soro is a widow with nine children. Two of Lailo’s other siblings died in early childhood from diarrhoea. Two deaths that could have been prevented if someone had only told the family about personal and household hygiene.

Afghanistan has one of the worst child mortality rates in the world. One in four Afghan children dies before his or her fifth birthday. Many such deaths are from waterborne diseases, and other illnesses transmitted by poor hygiene practice.

Before Mission East came to the village, Lailo and her family used to go to the toilet out in the open, and every summer all they all used to have diarrhoea. Now the situation has changed because of

When Lailo learned to wash her hands

For families in poor and isolated areas like the mountain village of Murkan in Afghanistan, sharing basic knowledge and skills like washing hands - knowledge that the rest of us take for granted - can literally make the difference between life and death.

By Muborak Ismoilova, Public Health Coordinator, Afghanistan

“It's the first time that someone has come to our place and has explained about hygiene education.”

Lailo, aged six

Lailo is six years old. She is an inquisitive girl living with her family in the remote mountain village of Murkan in the Warduj district. The family lives in very poor economic conditions. Her mother Soro is a widow with nine children. Two of Lailo’s other siblings died in early childhood from diarrhoea. Two deaths that could have been prevented if someone had only told the family about personal and household hygiene.

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a Mission East project supported among others by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Mission East has assisted them to build a latrine by their house and has also installed a clean water supply system in the village. So now the family has both nearby toilet facilities and access to safe drinking water.

“Dirty people can be caught by many diseases”

Lailo, like other girls in the village, attended health education sessions with her mother given by the Mission East team. They learned basic information about how disease is spread, and how to prevent it. Now she knows important times for hand washing and loves putting her learning into practice. As Lailo says, she is also proud to share such knowledge with her friends. “I have learned some hygiene rules, about washing hands and so on, that I didn’t know before and I like doing this for real!”

“It’s the first time that someone has come to our place and has explained about hygiene education. I think this education is very important for us because dirty people can be caught by many diseases!”

Now Lailo and her family members are healthy and really appreciate health education that has been provided by Mission East health promoters. Many thousands of lives could be saved each year if people had clean water rather than drinking from rivers and other contaminated sources, and if people knew basic measures to take for personal and household hygiene in order to prevent spreading disease. This is exactly what Mission East is aiming to achieve as part of our ongoing work in remote areas of rural Afghanistan.

“I think this education is very important for us because dirty people can be caught by many diseases!”

Lailo, aged six
10

Claudia, Maria, Olga, Sefora, Ana, Sara, Rozalia og Aurica often had to go to bed hungry because their parents could not afford food. Today the family rent some land where they grow vegetables.

Help arrived at the exact moment Olga needed it

Olga used to live in a one room house with her eight children. She did not have a job and her husband could not endure their poverty and left her for another woman with a better economic situation. Olga’s story is a story about help that arrives when it is needed the most.

By Felicia Rotar, Director of Solia Speranței (Mission East’s partner in Romania)

37-year-old Olga lived in a small one room house with her husband and eight children. The house was not heated. In summer time that was fine because the family was outside all the time. But the winter was a disaster. They improvised a stove with the material they had. Each day they had to collect wood from the village to make a little warmth in the room. Very often, the children had to go to bed hungry because their parents could not afford to buy food.

Olga’s husband worked as a shepherd. Because he was away from home most of the time, Olga had to stay at the house and look after the children instead of finding work.

“I knew that I was not alone anymore”

One day Olga’s husband left her, saying that he could not endure the difficult situation anymore. He found a woman who was better off financially.

“It was unbelievable to see Solia Speranței coming with things that I needed exactly at the point of my life when I needed it the most.”

Olga Pop
Olga’s world fell apart. Every day was a challenge for survival. The girls tried to encourage her and spent a lot of time in the village looking for work. One of the girls had to travel to Spain to find work so she could send money home to support the family.

In that desperate time Solia Sperantei, Mission East’s partner in Romania, heard about the family. They made sure that Olga and her daughters were given monthly parcels with medicine and food.

“It was unbelievable to see Solia Sperantei coming with things that I needed exactly at the point of my life when I needed it the most. Since that time I knew that I was not alone anymore. A hope came in to my life and since then I have been able to face all of my problems,” Olga says and adds, “And they are not few.”

**A decent place to live**

After eight months, Olga’s husband, Sabin, returned and asked her for forgiveness. Through Solia Sperantei, Mission East has been able to help the family get on their feet and help themselves to be able to afford a decent place to live. They bought a house and are renting one hectare land on which the children aged 10 to 19 help Olga grow vegetables. Sabin has got a job in the forest.

“We are very pleased with all we have now and we give thanks to all the people who have helped support us financially, materially and spiritually. Without them we could not face life.”

Mission East works with the organisation Solia Sperantei (“Messenger of Hope”) to help the most vulnerable groups of people in the Cluj-Napoca region. Orphans, sick, elderly, Roma families and single parent families are receiving food, clothes, medicine, school materials, and seed. But the assistance is not only material. With support from Mission East, Solia Sperantei offers psychological and social assistance. To Solia Sperantei it is important that the help brings a hope of a better future, and the organisation values encouraging families to take care of themselves in the long term.
This time Saidjamol is prepared for the flood

Saidjamol Saidulloev’s family lost almost everything when their house and land was flooded. For three months they lived out in the open where Saidjamol’s wife gave birth to the child she was expecting.

In 1998 the rain had been intense for ten days in the village of Afghondeli. At about 9 a.m. on May 5th, the level of the river started rising. Saidjamol Saidulloev’s family of 22 members aged six months to 78 years lived about ten metres away from the bank of the river. Saidulloev’s land was a 3,600 square metre property consisting of a family home, a shed for cows, goats and poultry, storage for fodder, grains and household items.

When the river flooded the family could barely save some of their essential things and lost most of their assets and valuables including some livestock.

The waters left them without food or any basic amenities, living out in the open for three months. For shelter they found a ‘cot’ - a traditional metal platform on which Tajik people sit outside to eat in summer and spring. The cot was covered by a tent.

In such a precarious situation Saidjamol’s wife gave birth to their eighth child. Saidjamol was forced to sell off all the animals in order to buy food and construction materials to
rebuild his house, using just 400 square meters from the original 3,600 square meter of homestead land as stagnant waters had accumulated on the rest.

23,000 people affected

“Hundreds of homes have been destroyed, 8,000 people evacuated and thousands of hectares of fields and pasture submerged by the flooding that for over a month has laid waste to the shores of the Pyanzh River in south-eastern Tajikistan.” the news agency AFP wrote on July 18, 2005.

Unfortunately in Tajikistan, the former Soviet Union’s poorest country, these kinds of headlines are not exceptional. Villages in the area along the Yokshu River where Mission East is working, supported among others by the European Commission’s humanitarian aid department, ECHO, have experienced 13 floods in the last 14 years. These floods affected around 3,000 families, about 23,000 people, in 19 villages with a total of 1,370 homes and 1,554 hectares of land incurring direct flood damage.

One of the villages affected is Saidjamol Saidulloev's village, Afgondeli. Afgondeli is situated in the Michurin Jamoat of the Vose district in Tajikistan and is positioned on the washed-out banks of the river Yokhsu. 84 families of this village have been affected by the recurring floods. They were unprepared when the floods came and could do little more than saving their lives by taking refuge in the higher area.

Taken by surprise

When Mission East spoke to Saidjamol on the recurring floods and its impact on the families, this is what he had to say: “We have been taken by surprise each time floods came. We lost

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90 percent of the Saidulleovs family’s land is flooded. The picture shows what is left of the family’s home after the flood.
During the last 14 years villages along the river Youkshu have experienced approximately one flood a year. 1,370 homes are in danger of direct damage.

Mission East in action:
- Through a modern radio network system Mission East makes sure the population in the valley is warned of the imminent flood.
- At the village level, people have been trained to respond quickly by moving out of their homes with their “in case of flood” kit containing things like their important personal documents and some foodstuffs to a flood-secure location, following an agreed route.
- Village Response Groups have been formed and trained to seek and rescue flood victims in collaboration with government emergency services, which have also been supplied with communications equipment and training.

I feel that if the flood comes this time I will be better prepared to save my family and others.”
Saidjamol Saidulloev

“Accident waiting to happen

Another major flood is an accident waiting to happen and it is with this in mind that Mission East continues to work. Various measures have been put in place to ensure that the potentially affected population are warned in time and know how to respond accordingly.

We realise that we can not stop the floods completely, as this would require activities well beyond Mission East’s capacity and mandate. But what we can do is help limit the impact of the floods. In this way, while villagers are still likely to be physically affected, they nevertheless have a better chance of protecting their own lives and those of their family. For people like Saidjamol, this is hope enough to build on for the future.

I feel that if the flood comes this time I will be better prepared to save my family and also others.”
Saidjamol Saidulloev

“Everything to it. We wanted some forewarning regarding the flood. But none was coming. But now after Mission East’s intervention we have got an early warning system in our village that will tell us at least five hours in advance of any increase in the level of water in the river. And most importantly, we have also a village rescue group that has been trained to extend immediate support to help families in distress to move to safer place, save livestock and other valuables and also to give first aid. I feel that if the flood comes this time I will be better prepared to save my family and also others.”
A representative from the MOES (Ministry of Emergencies) says, “Our staff is also trained in evacuation. And the early warning system gives us immediate information so that we feel better prepared, unlike previous times. We have also carried out practice evacuation drills with the communities.”
Getting the job done

How does it happen, all this project work you see in the Mission East magazine? Who are these people who build clean water systems, help special schools and run kitchen garden projects? Could you give up your ‘creature comforts’ to join a field team in the frontline of the action? What does it take to be out there, face to face with people in need, and striving to help them solve their problems on a daily basis?

Mission East has expatriate and nationally recruited staff working in Afghanistan, Armenia and Tajikistan, as well as its head office staff working in Denmark, Belgium and the UK. This year we expect to start new projects in Nepal, too.

Our work straddles both relief and development and whilst some development programmes have longer running times, the relief projects are often of shorter duration. New proposals and programmes are constantly being planned and implemented as longer term strategies are worked out.

The range of posts we advertise is extremely broad. We look for staff with particular specialties – water and sanitation engineers, special needs educators, logisticians and agronomists amongst others are all regular features of our job ads.

We attract a dazzling array of individuals from different backgrounds, cultures and locations. We are looking for staff with previous humanitarian experience, people who understand the relief and development context and, most importantly, have the right mix of specific skills to bring to the post.

If you know of someone who may be interested in working for Mission East, or if you yourself would like to register as a speculative applicant, please visit www.miseast.org/apply where you will be invited to complete our application form.
Help where it is needed

Last year Mission East extended urgent relief and long-term development aid to more than 250,000 people in Eastern Europe and Asia. Our work is only possible due to the donations that we receive from private individuals and other donors.

You can help us to help the needy by making a donation using the donation slip or via Mission East’s website www.miseast.org. You can donate an amount of your choice online, using Visa or MasterCard.

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If you would like to make a donation to Mission East but prefer not to do it online, we would be more than happy to receive a cheque from you. With your support, Mission East can continue to transform lives.