

# Alternative energy on the rise in Siem Reap as solar salesman sings his way to success

Neb Panny attributes success to his ability to 'paint a picture' of the environmental benefits of home solar power

BY JASON LEAHEY

TWELVE kilometres from downtown Siem Reap, the Phouy family live in the most popular house in Khwean village – thanks to a working black-and-white television.

Though the government provides no electricity to the village and the family's generator lies broken in a corner, the Phouys have not only a working TV, but also electric lights.

This is because they have a home solar system, and it has changed the way they live, as well as the lives of their friends and neighbours who constantly drop by to watch TV.

"I do not have to spend much time to care for the solar system," says Phouy Oun, the family matriarch. She nods at the useless generator. "We do not have to spend money on fuel."

The Phouy's solar system was purchased from KC Solar, a Khmer purveyor of home photovoltaic (solar) systems, solar thermal water pumps and wind generators. Founded by environmental entrepreneur Khut Chanrith in Phnom Penh in 2006, the company's 25 employees are spread between offices in the capital, Battambang, Kampong Cham and Siem Reap.

With only three employees and a small office in Siem Reap,

the company presence is modest. But that does not seem to bother local sales supervisor Neb Phanny.

After signing on with KC Solar, Neb Phanny broadened his understanding of climate change through the environmental education sessions Khut Chanrith delivers every month when he inspects each of his company's sites.

Neb Phanny now sells solar modules with the zeal of someone selling a gospel of global consciousness.

"My product is the environment," he told the *Post*, "and I have to sell my product to the people."

Rural families are Neb Phanny's primary customers. As opposed to wind generators, which he said are only viable near the sea, and solar thermal water pumps for producing hot water – a luxury not much in demand, in his experience – electricity that can be produced anywhere the sun shines is a hot commodity.

A major selling point is that his home solar system is guaranteed by a 25-year warranty and requires little maintenance and no fuel. For a rural family reliant on gas-powered generators for electricity, solar panelling is an option that effectively costs nothing beyond the initial price



Australian Brian Fox and the Phouy family with their television in Siem Reap. JASON LEAHEY

of purchase.

But that price is not cheap. The most popular home system costs US\$1,200, although the Rural Electrification Fund, a World Bank program, provides a \$100 rebate. Neb Phanny conceded that it is well beyond the monthly income of many people, adding that his costumers "are not too rich, not too poor", and that he sells an average of four or five systems a month.

The majority of customers are Khmer, though Western doctors outfitting rural medical clinics are frequent customers, as are Westerners who sponsor Khmer families, like the Australian who paid for the Phouys' system.

Brian Fox was a member of the Australian Army's Assault Pioneers serving in the American war in Vietnam. During a Siem Reap holiday in 2005, the Phouys' second-eldest daughter, Mao, sold the Foxes some postcards.

"We bought her postcards – the only postcards I bought the whole trip. My wife and I went to the market, bought her some clothes. She gave us a little piece of paper with her email, and so we started emailing."

Emailing developed into the Foxes sponsoring the Phouy family. He rebuilt their house, bought Mao a new moto and mobile phone, and pays for schooling and food. He also

bought the solar system to provide electricity, but he is not entirely comfortable with the results.

"I wish they didn't use the electricity so much to watch TV," he said on a return visit before Christmas, watching 10 neighborhood kids crowd around the set. "But you can't force our ways of doing things on them."

Hands-off home energy is a growing market in Cambodia, and KC Solar's early entry gives it an edge. Neb Phanny works hard to preserve. In its first two years, KC Solar has sold 2,000 systems, and the general sales trend points up.

"When our customers come to buy our solar system, we also explain that if we don't help the environment, everything will change very fast, very fast," Neb Phanny.

"The problem is that most people do not have much money to spend the first time. They cannot afford to buy, but they can sit and consider. I paint them a picture: If we help the environment, the environment will help us."

"Do you know Mr Louis Armstrong? He has a song called 'It's a Wonderful World'. It describes everything about nature: 'I see babies cry; I see the blue skies'..." Then, as an explanation of what he means, he starts to sing. ■

## Siem Reap gets waste plant loan

BY PETER OLSZEWSKI

SIEM Reap's water woes are rapidly being corrected, with the latest move being the earmarking of part of a Korean loan to build a wastewater filtration station on the Siem Reap River.

Funds for this will come from a US\$120 million loan agreement provided by the Republic of Korea Economic Development Cooperation Fund, which was signed on December 30.

Meanwhile, Siem Reap's traffic continues to snarl as more roads are dug up during the course of the wastewater management project, which is being overseen by the Japanese company NJS Consultants Co Ltd. The Ministry of Tourism has ordered the work as part of an initiative under the Mekong Tourism Development Project.

The \$11 million project, officially started in June 2007 and funded by the Asian Development Bank, is scheduled for completion mid-year.

The project, covering western Siem Reap, will dramatically upgrade wastewater management and commence at National Road 6, the dividing line between west and east. ■