Nuns by the Truckload:
Making Use of One of Cambodia's Richest Resources

A new and exciting era in RACHA's health promotion initiative began Saturday March 4 when 30 Buddhist nuns were mobilized to disseminate correct breastfeeding information in Pursat town. The event marks a proud milestone in RACHA's efforts, due not only to the great success of that day, but also due to the precedent that it sets for the future use of Cambodia's religious leaders in health promotion and health education.

On March 2, the nuns were taught about correct breastfeeding by RACHA staff, and Saturday's procedure was explained. It was originally planned that the nuns--split into two groups--would receive a half a day of training, but the 15 who attended the morning training session had so much fun and were so enthusiastic that they showed up at the afternoon session to join in.

That Saturday, residents of Pursat were surprised to see an "army" of about 30 nuns traveling throughout the town in two large trucks trimmed with banners describing correct breastfeeding practices. At around 8 o'clock in the morning, the convoy arrived at the Pursat market, the busiest area of the town. The nuns quickly descended on the shoppers and sellers, stopping women--and some men--to explain correct breastfeeding and to pass out flyers with two simple messages: 1) mothers should start breastfeeding immediately after delivery to make sure their babies get the first milk ('Colostrum'), and 2) every mother should give her baby only breastmilk for the first 6 months after birth.

Their high level of enthusiasm, leadership ability and the great degree of deference they were accorded by the people made the nuns excellent health promoters. Even when some of the nuns ran out of flyers they continued to approach women, explaining the importance of their teaching. By the
event's end, nearly every woman--and many men--were clutching the correct breastfeeding flyers, thus demonstrating the promotional power the nuns wield.

This event is significant because its success set a precedent, demonstrating that religious leaders are willing to, and are enthusiastic about, promoting good health practices in their communities. Training nuns, and eventually monks and members of the lay clergy, to be health educators is sure to have a dramatic impact on RACHA’s health promotion efforts. Buddhism remains the single most unifying structure in Cambodian society. Those who represent Buddhism embody the most enduring traditional system of leadership and guidance for the vast majority of Cambodians today. Its religious leaders at the local level—monks, nuns, and the lay clergy—collectively constitute an important social body that can greatly influence the beliefs, attitudes and behavior of the general public.

The RACHA staff is pleased with the success of the Pursat correct breastfeeding campaign, and intend to mobilize nuns, monks and lay clergy, in support of a variety of reproductive and child health issues in the near future.