The road to recovery
Reconstruction gives villagers fresh hope

Rosa Ellen
Kampeng Cham
and Frey Yeng provinces

The site of Koh Pur village’s new bridge may still be nothing more than pillars in a dusty crevice in the road, but when the link is finished — some time in December, authorities say — it will be a welcome relief for the village that was all but washed away in last year’s catastrophic floods.

When the record floods hit Kampong Cham province, villagers were caught out. The swelling Prek Koh Kor river burst over the road connecting the community to Phnom Penh and, before they knew it, the village’s wooden bridge had been washed away.

“Everyone was affected,” Koh Pur local Yim Thuy, 63, said. “The water was chest-high and we had to travel everywhere using boats, and it took time. We were short of everything.”

When the water receded, the mud turned to dry dust and the village was serviced only by a flood-destroyed former road.

Koh Pur, and the beginnings of its new bridge, was the first stop on a press tour by the Asian Development Bank-led Flood Damage Emergency Reconstruction Project yesterday.

Work on a new bridge in the area, which will be able to withstand rising floodwater, began in July after the Ministry of Rural Development identified the area as a priority job.

Yesterday, blue-clad construction workers went about drilling concrete foundations in a large, dusty pit, watched by curious locals who have been keenly observing the bridge’s progress since it began.

The construction work could draw back some of those who abandoned the village after the floods, mother of two Phon Lea said, cradling her infant daughter in her arms.

“The worst thing was that the water stayed there a very long time,” Phon Lea said.

“The crops were destroyed and we couldn’t earn a living . . . some of the villagers migrated to other places. Some returned and some did not. I think the company is recruiting
Reconstruction gives villagers hope

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there... he is 14, but he looks very big,” she said optimistically of her son.

The initial government-led emergency response to the flood employed local labour to deal with the immediate damage to roads and bridges, but a second stage of serious restoration projects, such as the Koh Pur bridge, involves heavy machinery and less manual labour.

The ADB is financing six bridges for the reconstruction project, two of which are on National Road 11 in Prey Veng province. The existing wooden bridges were built in 1993 and would not hold if faced with another deluge from the Mekong. Nev Chann, the project manager for one, said, “In two weeks, the water is expected again,” he said. “But the [new bridge’s foundations] are solid.”

A 27-kilometre stretch of road that connects the flood-affected districts of Srey Sauthor and Koh Sotin was one of the first rural roads to be completed under the flood damage restoration project, which has 524 kilometres of roads to repair.

“This is built for the future,” ADB deputy country director Peter Brimble said of the Koh Pur bridge. Further along National Road 11 Em Roeun, 58, nervously awaits this season’s floods. She was unprepared for last year’s when the wetland behind her house in Peam Cho district’s Peam Koh village was inundated with water from the Mekong.

Water more than two metres deep washed away fully grown mango trees, as well as Rouen’s rice crops. Her farming land has not recovered, so she is living on her savings.

“Her neighbour, Nov Theang, who has her household things packaged and ready to take should the river flood again, said her household still wasn’t eating enough food or earning as much as they had before.

“If we had money, we could move. Everything is in packages, so that if the water comes, we’re prepared.”