

Govt takes action against malnutrition

□ PANYASITH
THAMMAVONGSA

THE ministries of Public Health and Agriculture and Forestry held a national advocacy meeting on nutrition yesterday to increase awareness on malnutrition and nutritional issues.

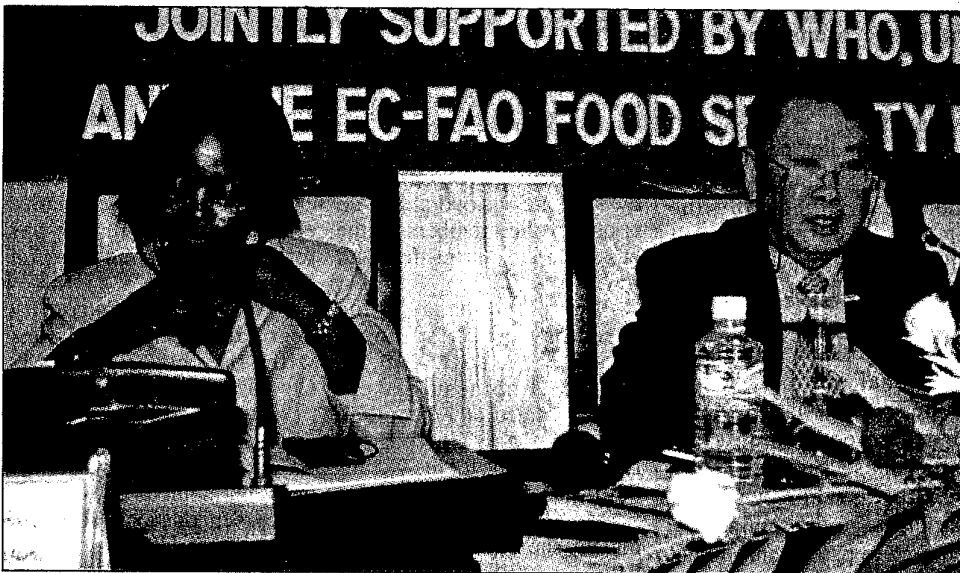
The objective was to find ways to reach the goals stipulated in the government's National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy and the Millennium Development Goals.

Health Minister, Dr Ponmek Dalalay, said in his opening statement: "In terms of malnutrition, 40 percent of our children are underweight and are not as tall as they should be, which indicates the problem is widespread."

He added that anaemia and vitamin A deficiency in children frequently resulted in slow physical and intellectual development. Unfortunately, these deficiencies were wrongly perceived to be normal by the community.

He also said that lack of education was one of the core problems, and its impact was widespread, long-lasting and irreversible, in particular with respect to the high-risk group of mothers and children.

"In this era of globalisation many significant advances have been made in science and technology, especially in biomedical technology. We know the impact that malnutrition has on human beings, and we know that it can be avoided and



Health Minister Dr Ponmek Dalalay (right), with UNICEF representative, Mrs Olivia Yambi.

prevented by using simple scientific tools," he explained.

He added that the ministry needed to provide information and education and develop a community-based capacity for protection against disease and malnutrition.

To reach these goals, there has to be a thorough and accurate understanding of the root problems of malnutrition, Dr Ponmek added.

Malnutrition is closely related to poverty and to communities which practise slash and burn cultivation. This kind of farming is not only inefficient but also has massive environmental impacts.

He pointed out that malnutrition in urban areas was also the result of a lack of education.

"The situation demands that we implement the following actions: reduce malnutrition through correct nutrition in particular in pregnant women by adding iodine to salt, encourage intake of vitamins A and E, distribute information, increase education, expand immunisation coverage and prevent and cure all diseases," he said.

The UNICEF representative, Mrs Olivia Yambi, said "Malnutrition is a core issue at the heart of reducing poverty and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Poor nutritional status perpetuates the cycle of poverty and malnutrition and has a direct impact on losses in productivity due to people's poor physical status and other losses caused by diseases linked with

malnutrition."

She stressed that malnutrition lessens the chances that a child will attend school regularly, and lowers performance rates and the ability to learn. Malnutrition also increases health care costs; the economic costs are also high and hamper poverty eradication efforts.

The meeting was organised at Don Chan Palace Hotel in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Children's Fund, the World Food Programme and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations through the EC-FAO Food Security Programme.

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