



Australian Foreign Minister Stephen Smith talks to Sister Joan Evans near her home in the Klong Toei slum last week. (Photo - DFAT)

Smith meets 'Slum Sister'

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Australia's new foreign minister Stephen Smith had an unusual request for embassy officials organising his first trip to Thailand last week.

As well as meeting Surin Pitsuwan, who is set to take the reins at Asean, and his counterpart Noppadon Pattama, he wanted to see the Slum Sister.

It's not often that foreign dignitaries visit Klong Toei, Bangkok's biggest slum, down by the Chao Phya. But Smith was determined to meet the 76-year-old nun whose work with the poor has won her a small amount of fame in Perth, where both he and the nun hail from.

Sister Joan Evans has lived and worked in Klong Toei since 1992, helping to feed and educate slum dwellers and their children.

Smith was accompanied by Ambassador Bill Paterson, whose term in Bangkok ends today. Paterson, who is heading back to Canberra, has been a popular envoy. He's also a huge fan of the little Perth nun.

Smith's visit was a quick show of support and encouragement - much appreciated by the elderly nun, who receives regular donations from expatriates in Thailand, the embassy, plus supporters in West Australia.

House slipping into river

Asked how he could help, the Perth nun told the minister she's been struggling for years to get tax deductibility for Australians who donate to her work. That sounded achievable, but the second problem had Smith, who appeared to enjoy the visit, stumped. Literally.

"My home is slipping into the river," the nun said, with a grin.

"I see," said Smith, turning to his adviser. "See what we can find out about help for Sister's house, ah ... to stop it slipping into the river."

Her small shack - and some attached to it nearby - has developed a dangerous slant, and needs foundation support.