

December 1992

Letter from Laos

Larry: This letter is not very personal but want to mail before I procrastinate any longer. Great being here. Met a friend of yours - Supanya, in LA last week. Will write again soon. Bob Percequia.

This was a real "trip", returning to Laos after having left 17-plus years ago. This is one of those rare places that one can return to and find things about as they were when you left - physically (almost no new buildings), the attitude of the people (in the case of Laos, still friendly), economically (may have gone back a few steps) and culturally (the Lao are still Lao). It's great! Bicycles are the main source of transportation on the streets, although motorcycles are rapidly moving into first place. They don't sell my favorite, heavy-duty 'transport' bikes any more, so I have had to buy the Taiwanese version of a 'mountain bike'. I can get to anywhere I need in town in less than 20 minutes!

This "trip" began last March, when I was asked by a long-time friend from Peace Corps days if I would be interested in taking a position with an NGO (Non-Government/non-profit Organization) in Laos to work with a refugee resettlement program. My first, second and continuing reaction was "of course"! The process then became complicated with approvals for the program and with funding. By September, it was time to fish or cut bait, so I submitted my retirement papers in anticipation that the program would be approved. It was and I retired from USAID on October 30, 1992, arriving in Laos on November 21.

There were no regrets about retiring from the government. I had been growing increasingly cynical about the non-development mix of politics, regulations, auditing and accountability ad-nauseam and the general drift away from rural development towards urban enterprise activities, democratization, the movement of funds from the third world towards eastern Europe and the Russian states, the lack of leadership in the organization and the incestuous nature of awards and promotions at the higher levels of management. Enough was enough.

On the other hand, I was thoroughly enjoying Egypt. Although working within the Egyptian bureaucracy was difficult, the Egyptians are very friendly, talented and sincere people and some progress was being made in the agricultural research program with which I was involved. There was a lot of openness and integrity among the Egyptian scientists and they were sincere in their efforts to do good research. They were hampered in part by a bureaucracy that did not/could not decentralize decision-making and financial responsibility.

Egypt was a great place to live. Although I did a lot of traveling and touring, I did not begin to scratch the surface of what Egypt has to offer. The history, places and monuments are mind boggling. Of places that I have lived and worked, Egypt is one of those that I would like to return to and actually spend some time living there.

SUPANYA ROHITASTIRA



I am currently living in Vientiane, the capital of Laos. This is where my office and home will be, even though the project will require me to spend at least half of my time in resettlement sites outside of Vientiane. At the moment, I am staying with an old friend of mine, with whom I previously worked in Thailand, and his family, while I look for housing. I would like to be able to rent a traditional Lao wooden house, but they are hard to find as the Lao prefer to live in them and build concrete houses for rent to foreigners. So I may have to settle for a concrete, stucco type house. Some of those are quite nice also. Recently I looked at a wooden house that is owned and occupied by a 70-plus year old Lao woman. It would take some fixing up and she is asking for a rental fee of KIP 300,000 per year, which amounts to about \$35 per month! Most other places the rents will be eight to ten times that amount. Actually, I think that she was making a mistake and would increase the price if I do decide to take it and have her fix it up.

The project I am working on involves the voluntary repatriation of refugees from camps in Thailand back to their provinces of origin. The project is under the auspices of the UN HCR (High Commissioner for Refugees), who is providing the funding for the materials needed by the returnees to build their villages and begin agricultural activities for their subsistence. The project will be working with the Lao Ministry of Social Welfare to ensure that the returnees receive the material assistance they need initially, and then provide advice and training to further develop their agricultural base, initiate health and sanitation programs, build and equip schools, assist in the development of relevant, non-formal and adult education curricula for the villagers; organization of community activities for development, consideration of micro-enterprises for sources of non-farm/non-agricultural income, and other relevant activities as needed. Most of this will be accomplished through training programs at the village site, bringing in local and foreign experts as necessary, and sending Lao staff/government officials out for specific training programs. The whole idea is to make the village, through the program, economically viable and self-sustaining over the long term.

There are about 30 NGO's working in Laos, involved in a wide range of activities, in addition to resettlement programs. The total combined contribution is probably less than \$5.0 million. This pales in comparison to the multi-million dollar loan and grant programs of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the UN Development Program. However, these latter programs may soon overwhelm the technical and bureaucratic capacity of the Lao government and could eventually do more long-term harm than good, in terms of debt servicing and recurrent cost burdens. The NGO's do a lot more hands-on work and training of the Lao involved in their programs, in contrast with the larger donors who generally want to bring in foreign 'experts' to ensure that the programs are actually accomplished.

There is not much sustainability in this latter approach. The Lao seem to recognize this shortcoming, but may be unable (and in some cases unwilling) to stem the flow of this 'donor' assistance, due to their increasing need for development resources as the economy grows. They may, in the final analysis, have to take the bad with the good.

Laos still lacks sufficient infrastructure for development - roads, telecommunications, rural electrification - and more importantly, lacks adequately trained technical and administrative personnel. There is also a shortage of resources for export and foreign exchange earnings. Most of the Lao personnel trained in the west in the years before the Revolution (pre-1975) have since left the country and haven't returned. Many of the current Lao government and private sector personnel have been trained in socialist countries, which hasn't prepared them well to deal with the new economic push towards capitalism and a market economy.

The biggest challenge to the government now is to be able to balance this move towards a (hopefully stable) market economy with the increasing (and possibly overwhelming) offers of external assistance, while simultaneously getting sufficient indigenous staff trained and infrastructure in place to efficiently and effectively utilize this assistance. All I can say is "lots of luck"!

Communications to and from Laos are problematic and slow, but they do work. My local address is provided below. However, in order to avoid potential difficulties, I have left my financial and other personal matters in the capable hands of my son Bill. He is currently in Columbia, South Carolina trying to make a go of an import/export trade business and is also working on the development of a market newsletter. For food/fiber and housing, he works with TempHire Agencies and substitute teaches. I think that he'll do OK, but the process will be slow and at times painful. Such is life!

MuMu is in her final year of college at Arizona State University. Although she will graduate in May, she will still have to take a couple of courses during the summer session to finish up. MuMu's plans are to then take a year off from school, work and then go back to graduate school to finish her degree in interior design/decorating. She has been holding steady to this goal and I am sure she'll make it in due course.

How about a little bragging!? When I visited MuMu in mid-November, prior to departing for Laos, she signed us up for the annual Phoenix 10-K (6.2 miles) run. I have never even run 3 miles non-stop in my entire life, although I have been working towards 5-K over the last 3 months. MuMu had never run 10K either, although she had gotten up to 4.5 miles recently. The weather was great on run-day and once we got going, things just fell into place. I was flabbergasted when it became obvious that we were going to actually finish the race. Even though our time was just under 70 minutes (the winning time was 28 something), we were ecstatic!

I spent 2-days in Bangkok on the trip to Laos. What a mess! I would not consider living there anymore and do not even have a desire to visit. It seems to be growing like one of those science fiction 'globs' - messy and out of control. And if you have ever heard anything bad about the traffic in Bangkok, it's true and keeps getting worse, exponentially. By way of example, one of the new 'fads' in the vehicles of those who can afford it (a growing segment of the Bangkok population!) is to install a TV and VCR in the back seat for those frequent times when traffic is stalled and it takes forever to get from point A to point B. Cellular phones, of course, are prominent and FAX machines in cars are not far behind.

I was hoping to get lost here in Laos, away from the gruesome news of the world; the tragedies being perpetrated on people by politicians and leaders in the name of ethnicity, nationality, religion; the incompetence, inability or indifference of the rest of the world to do anything about these situations; the persistent, open-ended, unanswerable question of "why"? But even here in Laos, the news is alive and well (?), people talk about these things, the newspaper and magazine images and descriptions don't go away, and no one can hide from it. I have concluded that there are no answers, that these tragic, seemingly senseless situations have been going on since the "big-bang" and will just continue, that this is the natural and historical nature of our universe and the only difference now is the media and our immediate and persistent knowledge of the details. There are many good things happening in the world - people being good to other people. And there are many bad things happening in the world - man's inhumanity to man. It will always be like this and unfortunately, we will continue hear and see all too much of the latter. Sadly, that's just the way it is!

I hope that you will write one of these days. My address is: 'me', c/o UNHCR, [REDACTED] Lao P.D.R. In the US, I am using my son Bill's address, which is [REDACTED]

Bob Perrequin