

# MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

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216-27 Spencer Avenue, Queens Village, New York 11427 USA

www.mekongcircle.org

## Welcome to the 53rd Issue of our Newsletter



From our photo archives, in tatters but historic :at the Manila airport, 13 Filipino volunteers bound for Laos pose with Operation Brotherhood project chairman Oscar Arellano (fourth from left, front row). Others in front, from left, social worker Carola Mabilog, nurse Patricia Padre, nurse Ligaya Dagdayon. Dr. Edita Bermejo, nutritionist Felisa Ur-

bano, social worker Teodoro Cariaga. Back row, from left, Dr. Jose Alejo, administrative staff Jovito Naranjo, Jr, Dr. Pedro Joaquin, administrative staff Reynaldo Maglaya, Dr. Pedro Almendral, Dr. Maximo Baltao, administrative staff Salvador Agbayani.

## At the Birth of a Nation, We Were There

As America Dismantles its Global Aid Program, We Were Its Partners 50 years ago

Less than a month into his second term as President of the United States, Donald Trump announced in February 2025 a sweeping mandate to reform government agencies within his executive control. His goal, one of his election campaign promises, is to cut down on government programs he deemed inefficient, staffed by bloated bureaucrats, wasting tax

dollars on projects that do not make America great again. Where to begin swinging the ax?

Start with tax-funded programs that surveys say Americans dislike -- foreign aid. for one. On the block: the United States Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D). Notices went out to upwards of 7,000 employees in over 100 countries to go on leave

or be fired and let only about 270 people continue essential services while its \$23 billion annual budget is reviewed

No doubt the Agency, as with other large government organizations, has not fully adhered to its mission. There are enough horror stories of fraud and mismanagement recorded in audit reports, U.S.

Congressional hearings, media dispatches. But there are just as many, more numerous of its good work. We know this from our experience as Agency beneficiaries in Laos many years ago.

Here are two case studies of our times there as Agency employees and as contractors.



The main entrance to the USAID compound in Vientiane, Laos in the 1960s.

## Helping Build, Shoulder-to-Shoulder

In 1953, Laos had just emerged as a sovereign state after more than 60 years as part of France's Indochina colonial possession, together with Vietnam and Cambodia. It was not the best of times to gain its independence. It was poor, had the barest essentials in technical skills, infrastructure and little sense of nationhood by its three million inhabitants. Worse, it was mired in a civil war, Lao killing Lao. And to add to its miseries, it emerged at the start of the Cold War -- the Soviets vs the West. Their main proxies -- China and North Vietnam as allies with the former; Thailand and the U.S facing them. All wanted Laos'

strategic "buffer" location in their hands. For the U.S. particularly, losing Laos meant the advance of its arch enemy Communism in the region. North Vietnam already controlled two Lao provinces. Its guerrilla proteges, the insurgent Pathet Lao, contested territories of the new Royal Lao Government (RLG). Moreover the civil war in neighboring South Vietnam was percolating where the U.S. had intervened to stop yet another Communist-inspired insurgency.

That was this dire situation when the U.S. stepped in behind the RLG, with a counter-insurgency aid program to stem the spread of

the Pathet Lao. Curiously, it began with a \$2 million check that the first aid mission director Charles Yost, handed to Lao prime minister Katay Don Sasorith in 1954 to meet the payroll of the RLG armed forces.

Then mission planners looked at various Lao civilian sectors that needed urgent attention, from agriculture to industry, mining, transportation, health, the police, education. It came up against a big problem -- not enough Lao with the needed skills to do the work. One solution was to recruit Filipinos from Manila. Who else were most qualified to staff a large

economic aid program in a neighboring Asian country than Asian themselves already carrying out similar USAID (then known as United States Operations Mission or USOM) activities in the Philippines?

By 1958, the Agency had spent \$2,641,000 on these sectors. In the next year, expenditures almost doubled to \$4,242,000. And by the time it pulled out when the Pathet Lao took power, the economic aid program had consumed more than a staggering \$896 million in 21 years. It was reported that on the basis of per capita, U.S. aid to Laos was the most costly (second only to South Vietnam) illustrating the value America placed

in keeping Laos on its side of the Cold War.

Fidel Padayao, one of the first recruits from Manila in 1957, estimates that the Agency Filipino roster peaked at 175. "We were mostly accountants and engineers" the former about 20 forming the largest group. There were perhaps 80 USAID Americans."

Though most of the Filipinos were posted in the capital city of Vientiane, others followed up aid projects in the provinces, helping oversee the construction of schools, roads, health clinics, the provision of supplies. A 1959 Agency report said that "41 Filipinos occupy positions as engi-

neers, automotive and diesel mechanics, electricians, accountants and clerks...Their contributions continue of high order, particularly in imparting to the Lao technical knowledge and skills about electricity, engineering, plumbing, masonry, painting and carpentry."

There was a unique dimension to the aid programs. "They were intensely operational and AID employees were directly involved in normal host-country service and maintenance operations" said a report. Hence American and Filipino Agency employees worked shoulder-to-shoulder onsite with so-called "third country nationals" mostly from Thailand and the Philippines.



Left, Dr. Primo Guevara visits a village for an outdoor health clinic. At right, Dr. Cesar Medina teaches malaria control lessons to villagers.

## Village-Level Aid, Face-to-Face

Fifty years ago, on January 7, 1957 several Filipinos lined up in Manila for a photo before they boarded a plane bound for Laos. They composed the first volunteers of a medical aid project called Operation Brotherhood. They included three physicians, one dentist, three registered nurses, one nutritionist. They landed the same day in Vientiane, capital of the king-

dom, and setup an outdoor clinic on a grassy field in the eastern part of the city called That Luang.

Within the next five weeks at intervals of about a week, four more groups of volunteers arrived, bringing the total to 44. Each group spent a few days in Vientiane before they were deployed to the provinces. They were in-

vited by the Junior Chamber of Laos, more known as Jaycees, who like their counterpart Rotarians and Lions are private civic action groups. The Lao Jaycees had seen for themselves how the Jaycees of the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam conducted an emergency humanitarian effort to assist thousands of displaced Vietnamese fleeing North Vietnam

during the 1954 partition of the country between the north and south sectors. Here was another instance where the Jaycee creed that "the brotherhood of man transcends the sovereignty of nations" was applied. The Lao Jaycees, mindful that their war-ravaged country faced death and disease as much as the South Vietnamese refugees, needed similar assistance from their Filipino colleagues.

OB Laos would replicate the successful two-year (1954-1956) OB Vietnam project. Hence among the medical volunteers were teams of agriculturists, nutritionists, educators, engineers, social workers, who would embed themselves in the villages to seek sustainable solutions to development problems. After all, what good would medicines do if patients return to the poverty, ignorance and unsanitary conditions in their villages that got them sick and destitute in the first place.

This holistic approach to development aid gave rise to fuzzy ideas of what OB was -- a Cold War counter-insurgency to win hearts and minds (which it was during its early years ?) A livelihood program that taught improved food production? An in-house educational program that turned out medics, auxiliary hospital technicians, practical nurses? It was all that. During its early years it was sustained by donations. In addition to the Philippine and Lao Jaycees, donors included the Jaycee chapters of Australia, Thailand, France, and non-governmental organizations such as the Asia Foundation. Beginning in 1963, its

budget came directly from the Public Health Division( PHD)of USAID. Between 1964 and 1969, the Agency funded it at an average of \$1.73 million a year and stayed at more or less that level till the program ended in 1975 when the Pathet Lao took over the country and expelled all foreign aid workers.

Dr. Charles Weldon, a former chief of the PHD calculated that the "cost per patient a day was about five dollars and the average cost per patient visit was fifty cents. Both the Lao and the United States were getting a bargain for the small amount of money being spent," he wrote in his 1999 memoir "Tragedy in Paradise: A Country Doctor At War in Laos." During his time in the mid-1960s, OB and the Agency operated a widely dispersed network of health stations with eight rural

Number	Station name	Date of operations
1	Vientiane	1957-1975
2	Paksong	1957-1972
3	Nhommalath	1957
4	Meuang Xay (Muong Xai)	1957-1959
5	Xieng Khouang	1957
6	Ban Ban	1957-1960
7	Nam Bak (Nam Bac)	1957-1959 [?]
8	Thakhek	1957-1960
9	Attapeu (Attopeu)	1957-1968
10	Xam Neua	1958-1959; 1959-1960
11	Xieng Ngeun	1958-1959
12	Phongsaly	1959
13	Xayabouly (Sayaboury)	1959-1975
14	Kengkob	1964-1975
15	Vang Vieng	1964-1975
16	Salavan	1965-1968
17	Khong Sedone/Vapi	[??]- 1972
18	Pakse	1968-1975
19	Houayxay (Houei Xai)	1969-1975

hospitals and about 180 dispensaries. They provided about two million outpatient visits and care for 25,000 patients a year. An impoverished Lao government "had

no adequate medical supply or logistics system to support an operation of this size and scope" an Agency report said.

Nor did it have the necessary number of trained Lao medical personnel. The arrival of the Filipinos covered a critical shortage. In all, 602 served over 18 years (1957-1975) in Laos for two-year contract terms. At any one time, 100 were on the ground, living together under one roof, some on conflict zones between government forces and the Pathet Lao insurgents. Eleven died from accidents, plane crashes, a heart attack. One was fatally shot by a soldier at a street checkpoint during the intermittent military coups of a civil war.

Immersed in the placid rhythms of village life, with a culture so much like their own provincial origins but also exotic in other ways, their sojourns transformed young lives and forged life long ties with their Lao hosts. There are Lao children today, delivered by OB physicians, with Filipino nicknames. Sadly, after half a century, these children, half of the present seven million population, know nothing or little about OB. The few who remember, their parents, are aging fast. There are no memorials to their service. Lao written history does not record how the Agency and OB, its contract partner, contributed invaluable roles to its early nation's survival.

***Over 18 years, Operation Brotherhood conducted its projects in 19 sites all over the country.***

## A Unique Role in Medical History

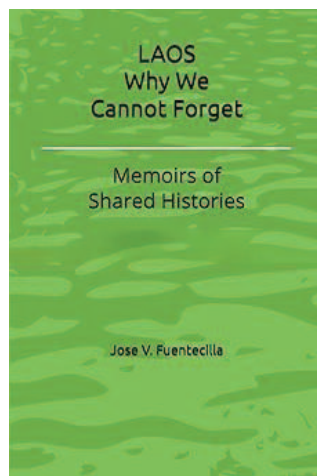
Apart from the longevity of its presence in the country, OB's scope extended to parts underserved by the government because of its limited resources. Of the 19 OB sites or field teams (see table), six stayed from 10 to 18 years. Vientiane 18 years; Sayaboury 15; Pak-song 14; Kengkok 11; Vang Vieng 11, Attopeu 10. We had the occasion to visit a number of them during four trips in the 2000s.

The clinics and classrooms and paddies where team members demonstrated improved livestock and planting techniques have long vanished. The bamboo clinics have been replaced by brick and mortar structures. Kathryn Sweet who studied the history of Lao medicine for her doctoral dissertation with the National University of Singapore argued that Lao's health system underwent a succession of political regimes -- French colonial, American post-colonial and the present socialism. Each imposed its own way of providing health care. She writes that OB's post-colonial role is "unique in Lao (medical) and perhaps in Filipino history, one non-governmental working consistently over 18 years."

## Our Memoirs, Now Digitized

"Laos Why We Cannot Forget: Memoirs of Shared Histories", first released as a softcover paperback in July 2024, is now available as an ebook, or in an electronic format for your Kindle or other digital reading device. Mostly composed of first-person accounts of their sojourns in Laos, it also describes our origins as employees of various agencies in Laos, where we worked and what we did, what it was like to survive a war zone, in short, about our lifetimes fully lived.

An appendix lists the names of 602 Filipinos who served, for a year or for as long as 18 years with Operation Brotherhood. Others tell of their adventures with Air America Laos, Eastern Construction Company, the United States Agency for International Development. Another useful index lists resources -- videos, books, and our website ([www.mekongcircle.org](http://www.mekongcircle.org)).



Both paperback and the ebook can be ordered from Amazon. For a fuller description of its contents,

go to our website and open the July 2024 issue of our Mekong Circle Newsletter from the "Newsletters" index. The list of OB names is published there.

Another digital version of our history "Filipino Pioneers in Laos", at 20 minutes, in English and Lao, has been up on YouTube since 2018. A much shorter version at 2 minutes was uploaded on Tiktok in December 2024. Here is the Tiktok link: <https://www.tiktok.com/@la10906/video/7201404280018898219>

## We Lived Through Historic Times

Most us arrived in Laos, in our late 20s or early 30s, in awe and very impressionable at our first overseas posting. Today, after almost half a century, we are now in our late 70s or early 80s. We set foot in Laos, not knowing that we would find ourselves frontline witnesses to its struggle to nationhood a short time after its birth.

Consider that the first Filipinos with USAID were posted in 1956, only two years after it gained its independence from France. In 1957 the first OB volunteers setup their first aid clinic in That Luang. This short timeline below from BBC illustrates that since its independence, Laos had never experienced a day of peace.

**1954** - Laos gains full independence as a constitutional monarchy as French withdraw following defeat at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu by the Viet Minh in North Vietnam.

**1960** - Fighting breaks out between the Royal Lao Army and the communist North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao forces, leading to civil war.

**1960s** - The United States intervenes in the region in a bid to prop up its ally South Vietnam against North Vietnamese and Viet Cong attacks. Laos is subject to extensive bombing in US attempts to destroy North Vietnamese sanctuaries and to rupture the supply lines known as the Ho Chi Minh trail in southern Laos.

**1973** - Vientiane ceasefire agreement divides Laos between the communists and the royalists.

**1975** - The Pathet Lao seizes power and replaces the monarchy with a communist government.

We lived through the civil war, the American and North Vietnamese interventions, the cycles of coups and rounds of government changeovers. Lao historians describe this as their 30-year struggle against the French, the Japanese and the Americans. The guns have gone silent. Laos is finally at peace.



Top, the OB 100-bed hospital in Vientiane opened on June 30, 1960, here shown under construction. It stood on the junction of Nong Bone and Phone Keng roads in the That Luang district and was demolished in 2001. For incoming volunteers (see below), it was their portal to the city and orientation base before they were assigned to their provincial posts where the rhythm of life moves in placid ways (right). For 40 years, the hospital became a city landmark, locally called Ohngmo Pilipin (the Filipino hospital) or Ohngmo OB. On August 30, 1973, the government renamed it Settathirath in honor of a 16th century Lao king whose statue sits at the nearby That Luang shrine,



# OB House: An Ancestral Home, Now A Pilgrimage Site

On the corner of Nongbone Road and 23 Singha Road , in the That Luang district of the city, a two -story residential building stands, bearing touches of French colonial architecture. We have no records of when it was built and the owner’s name, who we were told fled the country after the 1975 takeover of the Pathet Lao. A blue and white sign says it is the government office that monitors the city’s water system.

On November 23, 2018, a group of Mekong Circle members climbed up the oversized stairs to the second floor. Excited, chattering, heads turning like tops. A man emerged. Who are you? What's going on? Sir, we explained, this was our home , beginning in the late 1950s. It was our ancestral home, if you will, where we shared these bedrooms. Sorry, he said, it is a holiday, the rooms are locked. Heart break for all.

On the first floor, there was a dining hall and more bedrooms. Facing the street, a cement courtyard for basketball and outdoor parties. At the back, the dormitories for our Lao student nurses. Over the years, the dining hall and kitchen underwent expansions. Several bungalows behind the house provided more living quarters, During our 2018 visit, all these additions had disappeared.-- the extra bedrooms, dormitory, bungalows, mess hall. The second floor verandah was now glass-enclosed. From here. you can gaze out at the golden spire of the That Luang temple, some 10 walking minutes away.

The OB House is the only standing structure that is a reminder of our years in Laos. There is no trace of the OB Vientiane Hospital, demolished in 2002, having served the city for 42 years, For those of us who have visited Vientiane, it is the now a pilgrimage site.

Nurse Fely "Pinky" Casher, during her 2008 visit. she said "Of all the landmarks that remain of the old Vientiane, OB House brought back the most profoundly nostalgic memories of my stay in 1967 to 1968. As I saw the window of my old room, I could almost hear the shuttle van arriving from the hospital bringing us back for lunch or dinner. Seeing the OB House again reminded me of some life-altering conversations that took place here."



Late 1950s



1960s



2018



Left, OB Annex, located diagonally across the street from OB House was partitioned into communal quarters for single males and separate units for married couples. An open balcony wrapped around the front.

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## Circle International

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Mekong Circle International was founded in 1975. It is a non-profit organization incorporated in the State of California, USA. Its founding members served in Southeast Asia and other countries as technicians and advisers in various fields, among them education, public health, engineering, social work, development aid, and humanitarian work. An affiliate, Mekong Circle Philippines, is based in Manila. Comments on this issue are welcome and can be emailed to [fuentecila@aol.com](mailto:fuentecila@aol.com).