

A Trip to Laos

Travel Notes: From Thailand to Laos

Mission: To Bring Happiness to Prisoners' Families

Those on the journey:

Ms Vilaiwan Phokthavi (Kep)

Mr Phuwanart Phutituan (Tohm)

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Mr Thanandorn Saiphrom (Kaew)

The five of us from the Jesuit Prison Ministry left Bangkok at 6.30 a.m. on March 14, 2013. We traveled from Bangkok to the province of Mukdahan, and crossed the Thai-Laos Friendship Bridge, and then traveled on to Suwanakhaet. Our goal was very simple: to visit the relatives of the prisoners in Thailand, those prisoners whom our team visits regularly in our ministry. Our first destination was the small village of Non-see-than, in the district of Jampohn. This is the home of the family of "Mr. Ko" and "Mr. Suksawan". We wanted to bring the letters and photographs that these two prisoners had entrusted to us, and to give them to their

relatives. When we got to the home of Ko, we were met with the smiles and warm reception of his family. They showed us how happy and joy-filled they were. It showed so clearly on their faces, in their



this village, what touched our hearts MOST was the visit with the daughter of "Ms. Da-wohn" and the two children of "Ms. Prongjit". They had received no news from their mothers for so long that they were convinced that their parents had already been executed in the Thai prison. But today, the tears just streamed down their cheeks when they heard that their mothers were still alive and were now sending them their love. **Our thought for the day.....***The tears on the children's faces, when they knew that their mother was still alive, brought incredible joy to us too.*

eyes. We gave Ko's letters to his family; and then all the villagers started to come to visit with us and to ask how he was. Many sat down and immediately wrote letters for us to bring back to him.

On the following morning, we traveled on to another village in the same district of Jampohn. In this village we intended to visit 8 more families of our prisoners. Each family seemed overjoyed to meet



us, and there were plenty of tears shed to show how deeply they felt to hear news of their relatives. One word that we heard so frequently was "doh" - a Laotian expression of happiness that means "Yes! Right! Indeed!" In

On Sunday, March 17, we attended Mass in one of the small Lao churches. Before the Mass began, the youth in the parish led the singing in Laotian melodies, loud and clear and beautiful. When the Mass began, the chanting continued: all the dialogue between the priest and the congregation, and all the readings, were sung in Laotian chant. Most interesting, most unusual, most beautiful. **Our thought for the day.....***If you can't sing well, don't become a priest in Laos! because here the Mass is the recited telling of the story of Jesus, a musical!*

On the following day, March 18, we left for Chai-pu-thong, to visit several more families of our prisoners. The first family we met was the family of "Ms Boon-ta-wee." The first person we met was her mother; but to our great **shock and hurt**, she would not receive us at all; she said that she did not want to know anything about her daughter; she did not want us to take any pictures of her or the family. What a jolt we received! Indeed how sad. How could we explain this to Boon-ta-wee when we got back?

The next houses were entirely different. They received us graciously and warmly, got us cold drinks to quench our thirst (Laos is hot!); and then they all shed plenty of tears when they got the news of their relatives, or their letters, or their photographs. Plenty of tears without any shame at all -- their relatives were alright, had food to eat, even though they truly lacked their freedom. We had the chance to tell them all to be aware of making the same mistakes that their relatives had, and of the ensuing lack of freedom and suffering that must follow. We truly did not want any of them to be separated from their family and friends. There is nothing better than the warmth and love of one's own home. That is the best thing in life!



Before we left, each family wanted us to take pictures together, so that we could take them back to their relatives in prison, so that their love and happiness could be shared in this simple way. We were glad to be this bridge of communication between the separated families. **Thought for the day.....A smile, a tear, seen in a photograph, will become strength to a prisoner!**

On the following day, we had the opportunity to have lunch with the family of "Ms. Tyyr" at the village of

Nong-wah in the district of Song-kohn. After lunch, we moved around and for the rest of this day we visited the families of several other prisoners in this same area. In the village of Nong-bua-tha, the relatives brought us to the banks of the Mekong River, just as the sun was setting. The villagers call this huge river "Kong-pa-nang". From the cliffs above the river, we could see many fishing boats at the small harbor below. The scenery was magnificent, as far as the eyes could see. As the sun began to fall below the horizon, we could just see the outlines of a small rock-island that rose above the surface of the river. The Mekong River is the source of so much life for those who live beside it.

The next morning, when we got up, we were still amazed by the beauty of the nature surrounding us, the magnificence of the Mekong River, as the sun now slowly began to rise above the horizon and to shed its light over the long running stream. It was a symbol that a new day, new life, was beginning. We too had a new task to do that day. We knew that we would begin the trip back to Suwanakhaet that evening. But first we had the chance to have our breakfast with the family of "Mr. Kraisoohn" - the food and the company of this family were truly first class! What surprised us, however, was that his family entrusted some money to us to

bring back to Kraisoohn so that he could buy some few things that he might need. When 2 or 3 other families in the village saw what Kraisoohn's family did, they decided to do the same thing, and ask us to take some small funds back to their relative. We took this as a sign that these families trusted us, and that made our team feel very good indeed. The final family of this last day was at the home of

"Ms. Bua-see" -- where we met her father who is more than 80 years old. His smile and laughter were a great joy for all of us. He immediately sat down and wrote a letter to his daughter and asked us to be sure to deliver it to her.

And then, at last, the final journey back to Suwanakhaet. That evening, at our



small bungalow, we prayed together, reviewed our week of traveling and visiting, and shared with each other our happiness and joy in this work together. Our last night in Laos. Good night, and farewell, friends in Laos!

Thought for the day....

Suwanakhaet, land of the Lao
Rice fields full and brimming,
Ancient culture

People of smiles, people of warmth
Spicy foods of eggs, and ants, and curries
Happy memories more precious
Than things one could possess

Smiles and tears from relatives
Far flung and separated

Farewell for now, friends in Laos

