

## Peace, Christmas and other subjects.

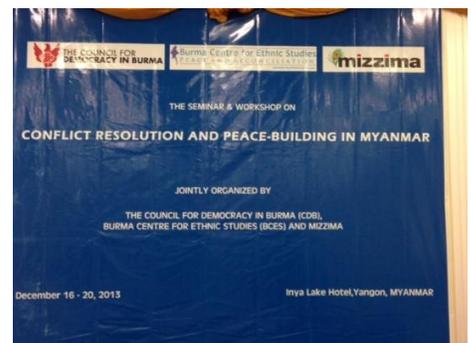
A political and personal travelogue through the challenges of Burma, Laos and Ho Chi Minh

Art DeFehr

December 14 - 31, 2013

I am writing this from a beautiful patio with a teak floor, surrounded by dense tropical foliage, noisy birds and a fresh lime soda on the coffee table. It is 4 days to Christmas and thoughts of Peace should not be hard to conjure. Except that we are fresh from dinner last night where the major distinction among the guests was the number of years they had been in prison or exile. The venue was a restaurant called "House of Memories" and is an old colonial home that served as the office of Aung San the charismatic war and independence leader and father of Aung San Suu Kyi. He was assassinated before the new Independence Government of Burma could start and 60 years of conflict with a reported million casualties has been the bitter harvest.

Leona and I are in Myanmar or what I prefer to call Burma where we have just completed participation in 5 days of seminars and workshops attended by representatives of many of the political parties and ethnic groups. The subject was Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding. The objective was to provide the mental software for people who have known only war and conflict for 60 years to learn to work together. The event was sponsored by our family Foundation with generous support of other donors.



Participants and presenters ranged from grizzled veterans, exiles who return with degrees from Harvard and other great Universities, idealistic youth and even three diminutive Buddhist nuns. Canadians as citizens (not Government) played a major role. The organizer was a Burmese exile living in Canada from the Chin ethnic group. Speakers included survivors of "generation 88" - the students who participated in the watershed events of 1988. Many died, others spent decades in prison while others escaped West and now return as sophisticated Academics and activists with experience and



advanced degrees from all over the world. Most important they return with a sense of hope! They were joined by the next generation of rising activists who cannot quite believe (with some justification) the freedoms of association and critique they now enjoy.

The unresolved issue for Burma is how to create a "Union of Burma" - the name of the country at independence because it is not really one country. The Burmans who occupy Yangon and most of the Irrawaddy river delta represent two-thirds of the population and geography, numbers and greater development gives them primacy. There are an additional 8 major ethnic groups - or 137 depending on who is counting - separated by the forbidding geography of the North and East of the country. These groups have strong internal cohesion, well-established cultures and fierce resistance to external dominance. At the same time a look at a map makes it clear they need to associate with someone. In the absence of an appropriate Constitution and formula for collaboration the conflict continues. It seems most parties have come to realize that violence will never produce an acceptable outcome so there is this precious moment in time where all parties search for alternatives. Our project brought together many of the parties not to define the conclusion but to enhance the ability to negotiate and compromise.



A number of presenters from within and without Burmese society participated but two Academics who teach Conflict Resolution at Menno Simons College, a branch of Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg played a critical facilitative role. One of these facilitators was born just across the border in Laos and could share a similar ethnic and cultural history. Although many foreign Governments, Agencies and Institutions are developing an interest in the future of Burma we were given to understand that the blending of many key ethnic groups with Government players was unique and important.

Different people understand the problem differently. The American Government has tended to believe there is a magic switch called Democracy which needs to be flicked and see the ethnic issue as a sideshow. Our Canadian Government has discovered "principles" and continued sanctions long after everyone was talking and is not yet in the loop. India, China and Thailand have regional interests which do not always put Democracy and nation-building at the top of the agenda. The EU plus Norway appear to have exhibited the greatest foresight and are leading this parade. As a group of Canadians in partnership with activist Burmese we are trying to create additional windows of communication and can afford to be flexible and take risks. (The participants were engaged and enthusiastic and any reader interested in the full details can send me a note. We are producing substantive reports and will send upon request.)

Since the ethnic issue is the critical problem to be solved I wanted to touch and feel the question beyond a seminar room in Yangon. There are 16 major armed groups (plus uncounted local militias more interested in opium and methamphetamines than lofty principles) that are key to progress. At this time 12 groups have signed a ceasefire with the military, two others have agreed but not signed and there remain two holdouts. A meeting to finalize this process was scheduled for the week of our seminar in Karen territory. One of the leaders of our program is also a key negotiator and invited me to come along. At the last minute the ethnic groups decided they had not achieved adequate consensus among themselves so the meeting has been postponed to January. The ceasefire does not imply any solution but simply a level of

understanding to create space for meaningful constitutional negotiations. This delay required a change of personal plans.

Not to be deterred my local friends offered to take me to Kachin State in the extreme north of the country and one of the two ceasefire holdouts. Kachin had signed a ceasefire in 1994 but in 2011 there was a difference of views about the building of some major hydroelectric projects by neighboring China. The Burmese army moved in to protect the projects, the Kachin rebels created enough insecurity so that all Chinese workers left, the Burmese military heavily bombed the Rebel capital of Laiza for two weeks and burned 120 villages. 100,000 refugees was the result and world opprobrium stopped this crazy escalation. The refugees have gone back and there is a standstill but no ceasefire agreement in place. It seemed like a good place to visit to gain some perspective.

We flew to Myitgyina, the capital of Kachin which was in the control of the Government. With the help of Kachin activists we arranged to travel 80 km north-east, deep into the mountains and into a contested area. The plan was to visit a remote and traditional village practicing slash and burn agriculture and living off of every grid. Our friends had provided funds to the village to allow them to put on a feast to welcome us – a feast in which the whole village would participate. When we reached the first military checkpoint we had a problem. An earlier foreigner traveling in the same region had behaved rather badly not so long ago and had created a problem for the military. They wanted us to return to the regional capital to obtain a letter from higher authority stating that if we passed the checkpoint the local military had no responsibility for us and any outcomes. Our local driver exhibited significant anxiety so we worked on Plan B.

We still wanted to head north toward disputed territory so opted to drive to the place where two major mountain rivers join to create the majestic Irawaddy River which literally defines Burma. Geography makes this a site with significant hydroelectric potential. When work started without local support events began to unwind as already described. (The entire trip had many déjà vu moments. The Chinese company building these hydro dams is apparently the same company I contracted to build an irrigation system in Somalia during my UNHCR days. The company invited my family to stop in Beijing on my return home in 1983 as a way of saying thank you and were great hosts). The site is exquisitely beautiful and reportedly has special meaning to the Kachin. We observed the ruins of a village destroyed and the population relocated to nice new homes in straight lines but disconnected from their historic ways of making a living. Social disintegration was apparently the result. We noted the new Buddhist pagoda built by the military Government in an area reported to be virtually all Christian. We took a short boat ride up each of the two rivers and enjoyed fresh grilled fish and warm beer on a sand bar.

The road out of the regional capital is the only connection directly north according to maps. Our transport was a car but should have been a more rugged vehicle. We were required to leave the vehicle at various points since the car would hang up on rocks or needed a little help fording streams. The road ventured into the hills and allowed us to visit with slash and burn settlements. Only 25% of Burmese have access to electricity and these folks lacked access to almost anything else we might think of as useful. The absence of Government authority plus desperate poverty has resulted in the restoration of poppy cultivation. Myanmar is now the second largest producer of opium after Afghanistan. Unfortunately the scourge is not limited

to exports. One elderly farmer explained that the children around his home were not his own. Both sons had died of opium addiction, when the mothers remarried the new husbands did not want the children of another father.....Civil war plus poverty has tragic consequences.

We had ample time to explore the Kachin capital. It reportedly had a population of 350,000 and could have been a movie set for any remote tropical colonial town of 80 years ago. We travelled from the airport - such as it was - to town on a tuk-tuk since our host felt the regular taxi wanted a fare that was too high. To put that in perspective most taxi rides in Yangon cost \$3.00! (we thought was low until we ran into the \$1.00 taxis in Saigon). The presence of tuk-tuks and motorbikes was notable since there are absolutely none in Yangon. Ho -Chi-Minh in contrast probably has more than a million motorbikes. Why the difference? This is one way to understand the meaning of authoritarian rule. There was apparently an occasion during one of the political events when the local population used their tuk-tuks and motorbikes to clog key intersections to frustrate the movement of the military. Presto an order to ban everything. Similarly the generals decided to switch driving on all roads from the left (legacy of the British) to the right. The majority of cars now have the steering wheel on the wrong side.



The markets along the roads and alleys offered the usual delights. In many countries people are jaded by the interventions of tourists and are not enthusiastic about being photographed. Not a problem on this occasion. Show them a camera and they rearrange the infants for the best view, offer a smile and sometimes ham it up. Then they want to see the photo and share in a good laugh. My Canadian partner on this trip had brought his cappuccino addiction with him. After great search we did find coffee. I asked the young entrepreneur for the strongest possible coffee and I would buy a cup of hot milk. He was amused. I suggested that he should add cafe latte to his menu and when the next

foreigner comes along offer the new beverage and triple the price - but only for future customers!



Burma has re-emerged on the tourist map. At this stage there is almost a standard tour that includes Yangon, the ancient ruins of Bagan - a city with thousands of temples destroyed by the Mongols 600 years ago on their seemingly endless search to destroy something. A great way to get there is to visit scenic and storied Mandalay and take a boat down the Irawaddy. The final highlight is Lake Inle in Shan State. We have all seen the fishermen poised on one leg and

managing a paddle with the other. Other destinations are undeveloped or limited by the years of conflict. Given Peace, Burma will become a great destination.



The Shwedagon golden pagoda is the absolute highlight of a Yangon visit and one of the greatest Buddhist temples in existence. All visitors are required to visit the entire site with bare feet so the fact that it is kept immaculately clean was appreciated. At sunset it is a magical place. Claims to its origins reach into millennia, but the free Wifi coverage was the best we have encountered! A pleasant surprise in Yangon is the green legacy of its colonial days. The winding tree-lined boulevards, lakes and parks are very well kept and have yet to succumb to the scourge of high rise development just

beginning to show itself. ShangriLa Hotels and Novotel both had massive projects near our hotel. A Vietnamese developer had a dozen climbing cranes at work on 18 acres and announcing a high-end shopping mall, 5 star hotel and luxury apartments.

We stayed at the Kandawgyi Palace Hotel. It is presumably owned by a business tycoon of questionable repute. In an extremely tightly controlled society (reputedly second only to North Korea until recently) one can hardly imagine that the ability to build, own or manage any project occurs without appropriate relationships. An unexpected delight of that location was the wood boardwalk several km in length that followed the shoreline and meandered all over the lake, often through beds of lotus. The walk was about 4 meters wide and half meter above the water. At times it connected to small islands or passed through a pagoda. With jet lag we were awake well before sunrise the first morning and heard the strange murmur of voices from the lake outside our window. Early light revealed hundreds walking, jogging and just socializing. We made that part of every morning and observed the mix of Muslim mothers dressed in long black robes but with designer scarves, young moderns in track suits and plenty of folk of all ages just walking and visiting. Zumba music emanated from one cluster of trees, yoga classes from a small pagoda - and much of the activity before sunrise. Burma is statistically one of the poorest countries on earth yet we observed and experienced moments that give quality to life.

Sunday was our final day in Burma and we were invited to participate in a church service of the Chin ethnic group. The Chins are one of the 8 major groups beside the dominant Burmans but among the smallest of those. They are one of several tribal groups that are predominantly Christian (they claim 98%) together with the Kachin and many of the Karen. They occupy the remote hill areas of the



Northwest of Burma. The tribal people in the neighboring Indian state of Mizoram and those from the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh are all one Chin people now divided by the arbitrary lines of some British cartographer. In another flashback we now realized that some of our work in the reconstruction of post civil war Bangladesh was with these same people. We were assisting with the education of hill-tribes children through support of Catholic schools (they had motivation but no money) in the hill capital of Rangamati. Because of the continuing civil unrest that I now realize was probably a spillover of the Burmese ethnic wars the Government of Bangladesh limited their interest to border security. We were permitted access on the one road to Rangamati and those children that could hike the trails to get to Rangamati received some education.

The Bangladesh experience represented an additional connection to current problems - in this case the minority Muslim population known as Rohingyas. They live along the Bengal Bay coast of Burma and presumably are remnants of earlier times - essentially a Bengali migrant population - when these borders had different or no meaning. Virtually all Burmese groups reject this population as not natural to Burma (although the community dates back centuries) and have denied citizenship and more importantly official recognition as an ethnic group (since in a future federal system this would imply some group rights). When we hear news reports of persecution it is radical Buddhist groups putting pressure on this community with the hope they will seek security beyond the borders of Burma. Ugly and complicated. In our discussion with the ethnic leaders who had suffered much in their drive to secure rights for their own groups they exhibited little or no sympathy for the Rohingyas. Aung San Suu Kyi is notably silent on this question - but now she is a politician rather than a human-rights crusader!!

Although Aung San Suu Kyi is appreciated and honored by all Burmese out of respect for her family heritage, personal courage and her critical role in keeping pressure on the military regime - the ethnic leaders point out that her prominence is substantially a product of Western media. They would prefer to see her focus on the right constitutional outcome and less on her desire to become the next President!

I recall an event in 1973 when our agency in Bangladesh was asked to go to the Burmese border. The occasion was the sudden appearance of thousands of Muslim refugees from Burma and the Bangladesh Government of the time had little aid capacity and few if any NGO's took an interest in political refugee issues. We did and I personally showed up and used our resources as best we could. In other words the problems of today are not new!

Back to Sunday morning. The generals who run the country have wrapped themselves in the "Buddhist flag" which came unwrapped when they gunned down many monks in the Saffron Revolution of a few years ago. Burma today reminds of my time in the perestroika period of the Soviet Union when nothing is possible but everything is possible. The service was held in the upper floor of a three-story structure. The space looked internally like a church that could seat close to 1000 but is listed as a residence. The service also did not officially take place! We were blessed with a Christmas Concert performed by their youth choir - mainly Chin University students attending in Yangon. After the student rebellion of 1988 the operation of Universities became a random affair since the Generals feared the potential concentration of students. The simple fact that most classes now take place represents a major accomplishment. We were surprised that virtually the entire one hour concert was performed in English. This included the full range of Carols, classical music and a rousing rendition of the Hallelujah

Chorus. It was interesting that the only song performed with plenty of body motion was the one song in the Chin language. The service was crisp and the leadership included one female pastor. Church was followed by a noisy coffee hour - we could have been in many of our churches at home.

The people of Burma are gentle and carry themselves gracefully. The vendors in the markets were friendly and appropriately aggressive. We were met with smiles everywhere. The intelligentsia is thoughtful and aware of the world and realistic about their circumstances. When new nations emerged in Asia after WWII it was projected that Burma with its people and resources would be the most successful. We trust that repressed potential will have a second chance. We left Burma exhilarated but also aware that the Road to Peace does not always follow a straight line. Keep Burma and its people in your prayers.

## Laos

A remote land of forests, jagged hills and colorful tribes moving fast-forward into the modern era. The magnificent temples and Buddhist shrines speak of a time when it was part of another world. For me it represented a chance to see this remote and beautiful country through the eyes of a Laotian friend. It also represented #128 on my bucket list of countries to visit!

Our friend was born in a small town in Western Laos on the banks of the mighty Mekong which quite literally defines Laos as it's torrents exit the Tibetan plateau in the northwest and enter Cambodia in the southeast as a wide and mighty river. The Mekong nurtures agriculture, fishing and is the transportation artery in a nation with few roads till very recent times. Its hydroelectric potential is huge and is considered the most valuable natural resource of Laos. Given that the Mekong touches 6 nations the debate over its development and ownership will be more than controversial. Laos has in fact been referred to as "The battery of Asia." China is already building dams in the upstream areas under its control. We met an engineer working on a barrage-style dam in Central Laos in cooperation with Thailand to begin to capture power. This is the first dam on the Mekong south of China. If you have time on your hands just type "Mekong Dams" into Google.

Our destination was a town in an area long known as "The Golden Triangle", a name that sounds rather exotic and derives from the meeting point of Burma, Thailand and Laos and the gold is an unfortunate reference to the opium trade. Laos and Thailand appear to have pacified their areas but the continuing conflict in Myanmar creates opportunity for the traditions to continue. We decided to fly to Chiang Mai, long the Trekkers capital in this part of the world

and a delightful historic town but over-whelmed by its tourist success. We had a great local cuisine dinner with friends and headed north to Laos. The rough roads of my youth are being upgraded into a four-lane highway as a different future takes shape. We entered Laos via the brand new Friendship Bridge connecting Thailand with Laos. When you consider that the whole upper region of Laos does not contain a single town of



substance the real purpose of a substantial bridge with a high quality highway becomes obvious. Just across the border to the north is the vast and populated region of Yunnan and western China. We stayed in a local guesthouse that belonged to the family of our friend - it has already been leased to the Chinese and the menu was no longer Laotian. This will quickly become a new gateway into and out of China for trade, people and influence.



You would think that 12 disparate travelers near the end of day should not present an insurmountable problem given the magnificent entry and exit pavilions built on both sides of the bridge. Details could fill another essay but after an hour we emerged in "sort of Communist" Laos and finally located one of those pickup trucks with seats familiar to travelers who get

beyond where your American Express card works - but my mobile did! The final insult was a surcharge of \$5.00 each from the immigration folk for "overtime" - possibly there was logic to the slow procedure from their perspective! All 10 of us plus luggage boarded a vehicle challenged by 8 and with complete absence of communication pointed in the direction where we were sure there was a town. It was Christmas Eve. Four of the backpackers were from Vienna and one had a ukelele. We sang every Christmas Carol we could collectively remember and were eventually greeted by our surprised Laotian friends.



Our friend departed Laos at age 7 and remembers hiding in holes in the ground as American bombers came to save them. Her father was a general on the US side and this put her direct family into jeopardy. Mother with several small children paddled a canoe across the treacherous Mekong at night as the children bailed to stay afloat. Five years later this family would find refuge in Canada where they eventually created successful new lives for themselves. The less compromised relatives had remained in Laos and this resulted in feasts and reunions at every turn in the road.

The story of the flight across the river brought back personal memories. My mother together with two female friends all at the age of 22 were determined not to live under Stalin. They travelled to remote Eastern Siberia in 1931, swam the mighty Amur River into Manchuria and made their way unsupported to Harbin and later the West. All three went on to earn advanced University degrees.

The grandmother or matriarch of the family had died recently and now mother and granddaughter were returning to perform the appropriate Buddhist ceremonies. The fact that the Canadian generations had become Christian did not present any impediment to a wonderful ceremony in the temple where even the guests could participate. That evening there was a gathering of the clan where the tying of ribbons around wrists by elders - together with appropriate incantations followed by





plenty of food represents forgiveness, friendship and Community. I somehow felt my God could figure out all of the good intentions! That was Christmas Day 2013.

We were up before sunrise on the 26th. As we waited for the inevitable pickup truck the local Buddhist monks walked by as they accept their daily gift of food. The saffron figures

mist seemed like a blessing for the day. Our had chartered what is referred to as a "slow trip from the far west of Laos some 300 or so upper Mekong to Luang Prabang. A slow boat



in the morning group of 10 boat" for the km down the is the standard vessel at least upper Mekong



transport along the and is about 100 feet long and 11 feet wide. It can carry 80-100 passengers and the back one-third is the residence of the family that operates the boat. The captain or pilot operates from the very front for reasons that became obvious. The boat is not actually that slow and operates at 25-30 km per hour plus a current that is extremely strong at points. The so-called fast boats are the shallow draft but much smaller speed boats more typical of Thailand and operate with the long tailed prop and a giant engine. I estimate their speed at about 70 km per hour and to fully appreciate the driving conditions there are bench seats, there is no sun or wind protection and all crew and

passengers wear motorcycle helmets. The entire stretch of the upper Mekong is filled with rocks - not shiny round pebbles but many thousands of jagged protrusions of bedrock. The water level can vary by 10 meters or more. There is no GPS and there were no river markers until the last couple of hours approaching Luang Prabang. I spent time next to the pilot as he went from one side to the other - very close to some rocks and far from others. Frequently the whirlpools and side currents were so large and strong they forced a significant response from the pilot. The commercial trip on these boats is normally two days. With a charter and pre-dawn start he agreed to gun it full speed and we arrived just before sunset in Luang Prabang. If anyone cares to take one of the great river trips in our world - put this on your short list.



Luang Prabang is an absolute anomaly in Asia and represents one of the great destinations in a world becoming modern too quickly and generally with bad taste. Luang Prabang was a royal capital on a smaller scale as a contemporary of the last great years of the mysterious Khmer Empire we all celebrate at Angkor Wat. The French colonial empire to its credit took a historic Buddhist town and added a graceful French flavor. It somehow survived the wars and intense bombardment of the sixties and seventies. When Communist Laos decided to join the real world after it's neighbors had all bowed to reality, this little gem simply required a few

entrepreneurs with taste and was helped by the protection afforded by a Unesco Heritage designation. Today the temples are stunning and the graceful French architecture houses world class boutique hotels, great restaurants, coffee shops and offerings of quality arts and crafts. To add spice there is a vigorous night market and plenty of Riverside patios to cater to every taste and budget. Luang Prabang is built on flat terrain and given its compact nature there is no reason to do anything but walk or ride a bike. We spent four delightful nights and had no agenda other than to explore every corner and eat well.

We had no political agenda in Laos but became aware of the challenges that will face a nation of 6,000,000 sandwiched between powerful neighbors. They face plenty of internal problems as the many tribes still living in a traditional manner will enter the modern age pulled by the attraction of the cities and pushed by the development that damages their forests, changes their rivers and impinges on their opportunities. Like aboriginal peoples everywhere modernity will be a challenge. The majority lowland Lao will have their own issues. With increased access commercialism will invade them from every side. China is on the move, the Vietnamese are no less aggressive and Thailand will believe that Laos is simply an extension of their country.

The land itself carries the poison of years of undeclared war as the US treated both Cambodia and Laos as a place that could be bombed as if no real people lived there. Many areas of the country are essentially uninhabitable given the millions of cluster bombs still lying around. As most of the world signs up to permanently ban the production and use of this abominable weapon there is at least one notorious holdout - the United States of America. I understand that more tonnes of bombs were dropped on Cambodia alone in the non-existent war than were dropped by all armies in all of WWII. I recognize there are other really bad actors in the world but at least they do not claim to be the world's greatest democracy and the "exceptional" nation!

### **New Years Eve in Vietnam**

Leona and I arrived uneventfully on an Airbus 320. We had visas, the entry process did not require filling out an entry card and we walked through customs without slowing down. I recall being in Hanoi about 20 years ago when the US decided to permit normal trading with VietNam. This was big news back in America. My local VN colleagues enjoyed reporting the Vietnamese response on their television. They had an evening newscast with a dozen or so items from around the country and the world. At the very end that evening the announcer stated rather matter-of-factly "by the way, America has decided that they will now do business with us" and ended the newscast. The important part of that story is that the VietNameese as a people never viewed America or Americans as an enemy. They simply believed the country was theirs and they should be allowed to figure out how they wished to govern themselves. A strange sentiment! We have all played the mental game wondering what kind of country VietNam would be today if the VietNam war had not taken place.

My first visit to Ho Chi Minh (HCM) or Saigon was under rather different conditions. It was early 1981 and VietNam had more or less defeated the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia the prior year. I say more or less since many Western nations including both Canada and the USA could not come to terms with the reality that recognition of the newly installed Hun Sen government

in Pnomh Penh somehow added too much credibility to VietNam. The response was to keep the Khmer Rouge guerrillas alive on the fringes of Cambodia with the help of Thailand and China and quite unbelievably to recognize the KR as the legitimate Government at the UN for another 8 years. A group of us had played a major role in the landbridge as it was called the prior spring. This was a re-supply of Cambodia from the Thai side through the jungle and past four competing armies to allow agricultural life to begin again. The politics already referred to prevented the UN from performing this essential role so all parties ignored global politics and simply solved the problem with a strong dose of entrepreneurial creativity and created a role for a few rogue actors like our group. The following spring some agencies wanted to repeat the process. My colleague and I agreed to consider the possibility but only if we could meet and discuss these ideas face to face with the VietNameese now in power inside Cambodia. We were advised that "the VietNameese hate your guts and will never invite you to visit" but they are a realistic people and produced invitations within 24 hours. They were in fact curious to meet us and we had fascinating discussions.

Commercial flights were a distant dream so we boarded a WWII bomber still somehow flying in Indonesia and departed from Singapore destination Pnomh Penh. The flight was carrying medical and other supplies for a private relief agency. There were no seats, certainly no seat belts and the staff seemed to be carrying on maintenance as we flew. As we circled the airport to land we noted that the rice paddies and jungle in all directions were full of abandoned aircraft. The agency person became agitated and stated he did not know where we were but it was not Pnomh Penh. It was in fact Saigon and after landing the pilot rushed back to assure us we would be treated well. The pilot was a bit entrepreneurial and hidden behind a curtain in the tail of the plane was a brand new American aircraft engine. It was duly replaced with several valuable antique ceramic elephants and we were given the freedom of the locality for several hours. The agency person demanded to know if he had been cheated by carrying a smaller than contracted load - the pilot said "No - empty tanks!" We had arrived with zero fuel and VietNam was short of supply. We negotiated for 5 gallons which got us into the air and we glided into the even more derelict and unlit PP airport at dusk. We landed very hard, blew both tires and ended in a rice paddy. We all went into the still abandoned PP for dinner - then the pilot flashlight in hand headed back to search the jungle wrecks for a couple of wheels or tires that matched his axles and took off next morning. These memories were very much alive as we negotiated the crowded streets on the way to the luxurious Park Hyatt.

Some distant and faraway lands sometimes play a pivotal role in our lives. All Americans had their lives and politics altered by VietNam but so did others. My engagement with the anti-war movement of the sixties and the contemporaneous civil rights events elicited the interests of the FBI, resulted in the loss of my security clearance and the subsequent cancellation of my diplomatic appointment in Canada. I never could figure out which issue might have bothered them more!

Before diving into the new HCM I needed to deal with a few ghosts from the past. We walked to the Majestic Hotel, a relic of the French colonial heyday and enjoyed a beer on the roof garden. My father was in Saigon in 1968 with colleagues involved in economic development. Their intent was to fly



north to Dalat. The night before their departure was the start of the infamous Tet offensive and they were trapped in the Majestic for 8 days as fighting raged in the streets around the hotel.

Saigon is a melange of its VietNameese, Chinese, French and American past. Each has left a legacy that creates a greater whole. A unique but important legacy is the role played by the ideas of Baron Haussmann, the famed French city planner who ripped up Paris in the 19th century to create the magnificent Avenues and traffic circles that characterize the Paris we know. His influence is responsible for the magnificent character and graceful character of both Saigon and Phnom Penh. These roads were designed for flow (and beauty) rather than stop and start traffic lights. Add a million or maybe several million motorbikes and you have a totally unique experience. There is only one way for a pedestrian to get across these great boulevards. You gear up your courage and start walking and the motorbikes flow like water around you - stopping can be catastrophic! Do not try this in Bangkok - you would be dead in a nanosecond!

HCM today is a city and region that is a global manufacturing powerhouse. Scores of visitors arrive daily to do business and others to enjoy what is one of the most delightful cities of the new Asia. With only 48 hours including New Years Eve we kept the agenda light. We appreciated the modern art of the post-war era. War themes appear at times but are more pathos than heroism. We managed to find some unique and contemporary lacquer and did check out the modern shopping malls that are becoming as Asian as rice. The 1899 Opera house featured a cross between Cirque du Soleil and a Percussion band. The outdoor restaurants in alleys were our very preferred choice for dinners. Modern coffee shops have already left Starbucks behind. New Year midnight was celebrated in the roof garden of the Rex Hotel -



another legacy of the French. It's more infamous use was the locale for the daily VietNam War briefing. We were pleasantly surprised that the crowd represented a mix of locals and tourists with many families and children. We enjoyed the fireworks across the river - visible between two high rise towers. As HCM rises this view will soon be history.



I have related to VietNam in the 60's as anti-war activist in America, a refugee worker in the boat people camps of the 70's, participated in the development of Canadian refugee policy that grew out of the boat people crisis, hosted and employing thousands as they reached our Canadian shores, organizer of landbridge activities on the Thai border as VietNam pushed from the other side, some controversial shipments from the Canadian Foodgrains Bank as we attempted to balance politics, irrigation programs through IDE in the 80's and 90's and finally simply normal business transactions as our family furniture companies made VietNam an essential and ordinary part of our routine. Finally Leona and I made our first short visit as tourists in 2013. Time passes and one forgets that this remote place has played so many important roles in my life. Maybe it is good that we are able to forget.....

## How do you spell Democracy in Burmese?

The operative word in Burma was transition. We know where Burma is coming from but as I return to Canada the question is transition to what? One purpose of the political travelogue that precedes is to remind that history and certainly political development do not proceed in a straight line. Our Burmese colleagues were very explicit as they attempted to temper our expectations. They hope for a different and better future but speak of 10 or 20 years.

I do not need a political analysis written by others to understand the winding path of freedom and good governance or lack of it in this part of the world. My personal wanderings will do. Starting in the West, India is the giant neighbor often billed as the largest democracy in the world. I was there when Indira Gandhi started her speech to mark the 25th year of India's independence with the words "the greatest achievement of India is that we have survived." It is an incredibly messy, dysfunctional and corrupt system but if you take a post-Partition beginning that statement at least is true. However, if good governance and equality of citizens (consider the caste system) is a value then India is a challenging example.

Pakistan fails the test of unity plus every other test relating to governance. Leona and I were privileged to participate in the building of a new nation after the brutal civil war of 1971 that reportedly took 3,000,000 lives. While Kissinger famously called the new Bangladesh a basket case he carries some of the blame for that. Kissinger and Nixon needed the assistance of West Pakistan leadership to create the opening to China. Deliberate silence on the atrocities in East Pakistan was part of the price for a ticket to Beijing. Bangladesh holds elections that prove nothing as two aging begums compete for worst-performing Government. Again, another example we do not wish on Burma.

China is the colossus to the north and has a more than passing interest in the political development of Burma. The story of China is well known and does not require my comment except to speculate that an authoritarian and centralized authority may be preferable for China rather than a raucous democracy.

The entire world shared the events in Thailand these past weeks as the Yellow Bangkok faction challenges the legitimacy of the Red faction that holds power. Political commentators frequently characterize this as a struggle between an urban elite (which is also predominantly Chinese) and rural folk. This is likely an oversimplification. I have lived through several of the Thai military coups and all Governments seem adept at debasing the already marginal constitutions. Democracy with a weak institutional structure and weaker political culture produces the outcome we see on television. Thailand cannot even blame any colonial masters for its mess!

Laos is facing modernity and a Communist regime trying to find its place in a modern world. Time will tell if it can develop beyond its violent and authoritarian past.

Cambodia is not a direct neighbor but very much a part of my personal experience. The Government of Hun Sen installed by VietNam and blessed by a gigantic and overall successful UN effort somehow has been able to win every election for 33 years. With recent news dominated by Thailand, Egypt, Syria and South Sudan the world has failed to notice that the people of Cambodia are in the streets of Pnomh Penh saying enough already.

The neighborhood is rounded out by Malaysia with a race and religion based democracy, Singapore with its benign dictator and a growing migrant underclass and one could add Sri Lanka. We were in Columbo in 1983 and our departure preceded by 24 hours the detonation of the large bombs that marked the beginning of the ferocious war with the Tamils.

Quite a neighborhood!! With those realities what should we expect from Burma? Until recently Burma made a very short list of the most authoritarian, secretive and enigmatic states in the world together with Albania and North Korea. I have visited all 3 in the past 16 months. Albania has clearly exited this category and North Korea deserves its reputation. Burma has been exceedingly authoritarian and the effort to impose control over ethnic minorities has been brutal but I do not sense the effort at mind control and ideological idiocy represented by NK. Better informed Burmese may correct my opinions!

We can look further afield with mixed conclusions. Latin America has improved significantly in the past 30 years - including our second home of Mexico. Africa ranges from the celebration of the end of apartheid and at least to post-war regimes in a few places like Ethiopia - but few examples of divided societies getting it together. I spent time in Somalia in the 80's as a senior UN official and no comment required. Think Kenya and this week South Sudan. I was present in South Sudan in the early 80's and heard the news on BBC that sharia law had just been declared. A colleague commented "we did not hear a shot but a war just started." It raged for the next 20 years and real peace is still elusive.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall came down and in 1991 the whole Soviet Union splintered. I missed the wall coming down but was with Yeltsin and others inside the Moscow barricades to witness the end of at least the Communism that had been so destructive for my family. The nations that could be pulled back into the European orbit have generally developed well - Russia and the rest are various shades of governance disaster. Putin actually had coffee in my Winnipeg office shortly before becoming President. Clearly I had no positive impact! We had the temerity to organize four Soviet Union wide Conferences on Business and Ethics even during Communist times. I can only think that without our input the level of corruption might be even worse! Taking the longer view we have developed a private University, LCC International in Lithuania to serve the post Soviet Union region and create a new generation that understands values.

The Arab Spring has become the Arab winter and we all read enough of that news.

That leaves the major democracies of the Western world. Can Burma really learn much from us? Canada has spent its entire existence struggling with one minority. The First Nations may identify more with some of the ethnic groups in Burma but my guess is that the Burmese groups would be ecstatic if they accomplished the Canadian level of recognition. Western European Governments are essentially defined by their national differentiation and struggle with both old and new minorities. Some like Greece simply struggle with accountability and should re-read their Plato and Aristotle.

That leaves the United States of America. The development of the USA and its Constitution represents an incredible breakthrough for its time - if you ignore another century of slavery and a second of Jim Crow. One would like to think that progress is not limited to science and technology and includes the ability of the human species to continually improve its systems of governance. Recent performance suggests that is expecting too much as we sadly watch the US become ungovernable and put at risk it's ability to lead the world with vision.

The structure of the United Nations is a magnificent attempt in our time to govern across the chasms of experience and history that separate us. Regrettably the UN is in reality nothing more or less than a reflection of us individually and collectively. The European Union represents a slightly more hopeful example since they still remember the collective disaster that forced them together.

There have been some attempts at philosophical development of a superior Asian approach to successful governance. Possibly the best-known promoter of these ideas is Kishore Mahubani located currently in a think-tank in Singapore. An early book was a small volume entitled "Can Asians Think" asking the questions if Asians can move beyond material striving and develop a philosophical base for their approach to governance. This evolved into the promotion of "Asian Values" or the acceptance and benefit of a more structured and somewhat authoritarian society. I met Kishore on many occasions during the years I attended Davos. He was very convincing at the time but as Asian societies hit bumps in the road the idea that limited democracy is somehow superior is losing its appeal.

### **The Future of Burma**

Attempting prophecy given the litany of bad global and regional Governance would be foolhardy. In Burma's favor is the collective, recent and painful memory of what has not worked. Burma will need clarity of vision but realism about pace and particular outcomes. Current constitutional ideas as I understand them are all based on a Federal system but the identity within the Federation will be based more on ethnic/racial identity rather than only geography. As the country modernizes and the peoples mix I fear for a policy and identity that is too fixated on racial differentiation – history has not treated those policies well. Possibly Burma can show the region and the world that it can create space for all of its people and an adequate level of governance integrity. The rest of us can be supportive when asked but the Burmese will need to make this their game. We hope the outside players have the grace to also give them space rather than intruding with their own ambitions.

Burma is in transition - but transition itself has no direction.