Fostering Engagement with Laos While Promoting Human Rights

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By Deena Mansour, Associate Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center of The University of Montana pursues a dual mission: to foster mutual understanding between the people of the U.S. and Asia, as well as to foster ethics in public affairs. Over the past thirty years, we have developed a number of programs in support of this vision -- always with the spirit of Mike Mansfield as the driving force in our carefully designed programming.

When thinking of Mike Mansfield and Asia, many observers tend to identify him with East Asia. This is largely as a result of his tenure as Ambassador to Japan and role as a professor of Far Eastern history. However, throughout his years in the U.S. Senate, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were of great concern to Mansfield. Soon after his election to the Senate in 1952, he began a series of fact-finding missions throughout the region and delivered a speech entitled, “The Situation in Laos” on the Senate floor in June 1955, in which he raised concerns over Vietnamese incursions in Laos. Mansfield was heavily engaged in the region through initial strong support of Vietnam’s Diem in the late 1950s, to evolving into open criticism of the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In recent years, the Mansfield Center has had the opportunity to foster greater relations between Montanans and the people of the Lower Mekong Delta, primarily those of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Laos in particular seems to hold allure for many of our Montana exchange participants. People laugh when I say this, but Montana is similar to Laos in so many ways. Like Montana, Laos is landlocked,
with a largely rural population of just under seven million citizens – the least populous country in the region. Laos features mountains and rivers and relies on natural resources for its income: through mining, logging, agriculture, eco-tourism, and dams. The people are kind and generous – just like our Montanans.

Laos became engaged in the Vietnam War as parts of the country were occupied by North Vietnam for use as a supply route. As a result, Laos is the most heavily bombed country in the world per capita, with an estimated 270 million bombs dropped on that country by the U.S. Of those bombs, about a third remain as unexploded ordnance. As made abundantly clear during former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to Laos one year ago, the U.S. has an enduring legacy in Laos. Visiting an artificial limb center, Secretary Clinton met 19-year-old Phongsavath Sonilya, who lost his forearms and eyesight when a U.S. bomb exploded three years ago.

In broadening relationships between the U.S. and Laos, we’ve been fortunate to promote travel by both students and professionals, in fields ranging from the sciences to economic development. Through our exchanges, we’ve become strong partners with the first non-governmental organization created in Laos: the Participatory Development Training Center, or PADETC. PADETC’s origins trace back to 1980 when its founder began a program to support food security for poor rural communities. PADETC has evolved toward a greater mission to support sustainable development and poverty reduction.

PADETC’s founder is Sombath Somphone, the eldest son of a poor farming family who experienced poverty and hunger, fleeing temporarily to Thailand to escape the war. He eventually earned a scholarship to study education and agriculture in the U.S., returning to Laos to improve the
lives of poor farmers. Sombath received numerous awards for his work, including the Asian equivalent of the Nobel Prize, the Magsaysay Award.

In a stark reminder of the state of human rights in Laos, Sombath disappeared six months ago, as he and his wife were driving separately from his office in Vientiane to their home. A police security video shows him being stopped at a police checkpoint and taken into custody. Despite attention from international observers, the Lao government has failed to explain his disappearance. As the U. S. Embassy in Vientiane stated, “Mr. Sombath is widely admired for his peaceful and constructive focus on improving his country....Continued inaction on this case by the Lao authorities could erode progress made over the past years and damage the country’s international reputation, potentially raising additional questions about the Lao Government’s commitment to uphold the rule of law and engage responsibly with the world.”

As the Mansfield Center pursues its dual mission, we stand together with the friends and family of Sombath as they work to facilitate his return. As we maintain our relationships with governmental and non-governmental organizations in Laos, we work to educate colleagues on Sombath’s disappearance, with the hope that he will soon be returned.

To learn about our continuing engagement with Laos and more about Sombath, please see our website, at www.umt.edu/mansfield.

On behalf of the Mansfield Center, I’m Deena Mansour.