

## THE LAND OF FROZEN TIME

Only a motley group of a dozen people act as the caretakers of this once busy community for thousands of Indochinese refugees. At its heyday, there were about 18,000 people living together in these 365 hectares of verdant plateau in Morong, Bataan. When the Refugee Center was closed in 1994, the Government proclaimed it into a special economic zone and named it Bataan Techno Park. For 19 years, the government tried to attract businesses to locate here and convert this into a techno hub but unfortunately, it failed. By the middle of 2013, they dissolved Bataan Technology Park Inc (BTPI) which has only been accumulating losses from its operation. BCDA has now appointed us as the caretakers tasked to preserve this Park whose every nook and cranny echoes with the exuberant voices, now long gone, of human beings who have just triumphed over the greatest adversity that life could ever throw at anyone.



### Philippine Refugee Processing Center

When this was the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC), there were 285 dwelling units which were divided into 10 neighborhoods. This had complete facilities such as hospital, library, market, schools, post office, chapel, assembly hall and many others. This was established in January 1980 under an agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Its operating expenses were shouldered by the UNHCR while the land, utilities, personnel and security were provided by the Philippine government.

In one preserved photo of a whiteboard, the Center reported a total of 292,185 refugees processed from 1980 to 1990 composed of 182,597 Vietnamese, 70,240 Cambodians and 39,348 Laotians. Because of the time some people have to stay, there were even 4,120 reported babies born while a total of 252 died while in the Center. These 252 people never left the Camp. They have permanently settled sooner than they expected in what came to be known as the 11<sup>th</sup> Neighborhood – the cemetery.



Up to its closure in 1994, approximately 400,000 passed through this place.

PRPC was a second asylum camp, accepting only pre-processed refugees from the first asylum camps in Pulau Bidong, Malaysia, Bangkok, Hong Kong and Palawan. Refugees directly rescued from the Philippines shores were brought to the first asylum camp in Palawan. After a while, those who passed the screening were brought to the PRPC.

The Center became home to the refugees. They worked in the field, learned vocational skills, roamed around, danced, sang and partied like they used to back in their countries. They built places of worship of various kinds: Buddhist Temples, Catholic and Baptist Church. Some replica of the Angkor Wat can still be seen in the site. The Vietnamese also made a statue of Mother Mary who looks Vietnamese, now found at the Lolek Garden of the Pope John Paul II Shrine. The refugee's life in the camp was simple and they made friends with the local Filipino staff, the ex-pats and with the people of Morong. Even though personal affairs between them and the locals were discouraged, there were still cases of Vietnamese falling in love and eventually marrying Filipinos.

Brix Gonzales who was the Project Manager of BTPI and still with our caretaker group also relate how the refugees lived and interact with the Filipino staff of PRPC. He worked at the PRPC as Water Treatment Supervisor. He confirmed the one Vietnamese girl, who has already resettled, came back and petitioned the local boy who she left behind. They now live together happily as ever.

### **Monkey House**

Brix tells the story about the Monkey House which was their term of endearment for the detention cell of refugees who committed offenses or petty crimes. "One time, the Social Rehabilitation Center (SRC) Officer called up our office, the Engineering and Maintenance Group (EMG), requesting the Water and Sewerage Unit to de-clog and conduct flushing of the defective cell flooring. The refugees were complaining of the clogged urinal and toilet.

When our team arrived and conducted the flushing, we found out that the urinals were not clogged at all and it turned out to be just a rouse from the inmates who wanted to temporarily go out of their detention cells and take some fresh air."

Brix further related the story of how party lovers they really were. "The Refugee Program also offered social activities to eventually prepare the refugees to adjust in their countries of final destination. One of the activities then was the holding of disco or dance socials for the refugees held at the Guesthouse area. In this kind of activity, refugees usually flocked and attended in groups. It was usually conducted from 7PM up to 10PM in observance of the rules of the curfew hours for the refugees starting at 10PM. At 10PM all refugees should be in their respective billets. At about 9:45PM, when everyone is all active and in the mood for dancing, the sound system operator would announce that the music will be off by 9:50PM. The refugees on the dance floor would shout and scream and demand for an extension. The social worker people would just explain the camp policy and after a little haggling, the boisterous bands of wanna-be dancers would then grudgingly retire and leave - excitedly talking of the next dance party on their way back."



### **Memorable Moments**

The refugees when being transported to PRPC usually arrive about midnight. This was partly to prevent them from seeing how to get there so they would not know how to get out of PRPC. On arrival, PRPC staff would conduct inspection on their baggages searching for electronic gadgets and bladed weapons which were not allowed inside the camp.



When they depart, the Victory Liner buses would line up at the UN Avenue, boarding refugees who are scheduled to leave for their assigned countries with their ubiquitous baggage in tow. Everybody would be in tears as they bid goodbye to their relatives, friends and countrymen left behind.

### **Father Daughter Reunion**

Brix shares one of the favourite endearing story about one of the PRPC drivers, Mr. Temporoza, assigned as ambulance driver of the PRPC Hospital.

"One of the Vietnamese refugee-volunteers, who was assigned at the Engineering Office doing housekeeping works, mentioned that his father is a Filipino. She showed a picture of a Filipino soldier assigned in Vietnam but she could not recall his name.

The Engineering staff noticed the resemblance of the picture to that of Mr. Temporoza. Upon checking with Mr. Temporoza, he admitted how he sired a daughter to a Vietnamese woman during his stint with the PHILCAG in Vietnam in the late 1960's. The Staff arranged a meeting between Mr. Temporoza and the Vietnamese girl and this soon turned into the father and daughter who have been searching and finally meeting each other after 16 long years in of all places – at PRPC."

Later the girl flew to the US to be resettled where she planned to petition his father to join her eventually. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Mr. Temporoza passed away while on duty at the PRPC hospital



### **Eat my house?**

There was this story that is amusing locals no end. It's the refugee's funny English. For instance, when they invite people to eat at their house, they would often say: "You eat my house?" They would refer to the local soda brand "Siprie" meaning "Sprite". "Kuyaw" was how they called an elder Filipino man. ("Kuya" in Filipino means elder brother).

Jack Naoe, worked as the Maintenance Engineer at PRPC remembers that the refugees had ready smiles for strangers. Jack now heads the caretaker team tasked to preserve whatever remained of the PRPC. He relates how the Vietnamese, Cambodians and Laotians left more than just memories. They also left their cuisine that some residents enjoy to this day.

"The long bread meat sandwich, ban mei and the noodle soup, hu tieu, which can be served sweet or spicy, are still available in Morong. In this town of about 25,000 people, a few snack houses still sell these Vietnamese fares as specialties." Jack declared.

Jack also smiled while relating the story of Filipino merchants engaged in buy and sell. They roamed around the refugee neighborhood searching for charcoal and would usually asked the refugees "My friend, do you have black firewood?" He meant charcoal with that description.

Various stories also abound on how Filipinos helped the refugees as they arrived in droves in the mid 80's. Having been floating in wooden boat and dinghies in the high seas in such hot, cramped and impoverished conditions, they usually arrive too weak and almost emaciated to Philippine shores. Jack sadly relates with tears in his eyes that day when he, as one of the PRPC staff on duty then, fetched the boat people rescued by fishermen from Barangay Mabayo in Morong. The Vietnamese were found clutching on to bamboos and were literally skin and bones. He said that he really cried in pity when he saw them so thin and barely alive. The rescuing fishermen saw them only as a small dot and when they, the rescuers, came near, they saw this small boat full of Viet refugees who they thought were all dead. The fishermen called the Camp Deputy Administrator and they were immediately dispatched to rush the refugees to the hospital.

### **Pope's Visit**

Daisy Fernando was assigned as one of the community workers at the Center and now heads our team running the Atmanda Resort. She nostalgically relates some interesting stories at the Center. She relates about the visit of Pope John Paul II to the PRPC refugee camp. The Pope held a field mass attended by thousands of refugees of different religions and belief on February 21, 1981. In honour of Pope John Paul II the Replica of Papal Shrine was built by BTPI near the actual ground where the Mas was held and was inaugurated on May 2, 2011, at about the same day when Pope John Paul II was beatified in Rome.

When he visited PRPC , the Blessed Pope prayed for love and compassion for the Indochinese refugees and sought the help of nations to accept them as they rebuild their lives in another culture after having abandoned their war torn home lands seeking refuge.

A Vietnamese refugee crafted A "Wooden Cross" and gave it to Pope John Paul II as their tribute to the Pope who inspired and encouraged them. that cross is now kept at the Pope John Paul Shrine.

### **Freedom Plaza**

The Freedom Plaza, the open space in front of Marico Hall, serves as a symbol of Freedom as man's most valued aspiration, enabling man to be fully human. The Plaza used to showcase the refugee boats used by the Vietnamese which served as a testimony to what they will do just to have freedom.



The five boats which were rescued by the Philippine Constabulary along the beaches of Bataan were all placed at the Freedom Plaza. All the boats appear too small and not fit to navigate the treacherous high seas but each boat successfully made the 850 km journey from Vietnam to the Philippines. Not all the boats made it to freedom. No one knows how many perished from the huge waves or storm out there. Out of the five collected, three boats deteriorated because of the elements and one boat was shipped back by the Vietnamese to be in their Museum. However the biggest boat was preserved and transferred to the BTPI Museum, and now is one of its highlights.

The Freedom Plaza is now the Freedom Park and will be preserved by us.

Their stay at the Center signals the end of their traumatic days at their countries of origins including the end of their perilous journey they took aboard those wooden boats braving the high seas.

Virtually all refugees before arrival at PRPC had been confirmed that they had been accepted to resettle in the West. They were therefore upbeat and positive looking by the time they arrive at the Center. They have already made the difficult decision to leave their country of origins in search of a brighter future. This stage in their life was therefore an optimistic era that these refugees cherish to remember. A great number of these refugees have come back to relive their memories or bring their present families especially the children to see for themselves this moment of their life.



Daisy summarized her work at PRPC by saying that her experience in PRPC was unique and fulfilling. Working in a multi-cultural set up is indeed taxing but at the same time was also a privilege to be a part of the United Nations – an organization representing one of man's great ability to help people in need. The Center finally closed its door in the late 1994 when refugees also stopped coming. The site went into disrepair and was immediately eaten by the jungle. Luckily, the government noticed it, took it back and preserved what were still standing. It converted the entire Morong town into an economic zone with the original PRPC area as its main zone.

There were still recent visitors who were former refugees. There was a group who wanted to preserve and improve the cemetery which now is but a plain tract of grassy unmarked land except for the tell-tale signs of people buried there. Now that we are the caretaker, we intend to trace these people and see what we can do to preserve the memories of the dead and keep the land they now permanently reside as holy and, if possible, untouched.



These stories still permeate the now silent, peaceful and idyllic place punctuated only by the gentle breeze and flaps of the wings of local birds. A number of the larger buildings and Dormitory type buildings have been preserved but are now locked and closed. How we wish these land will once again buzz with human activities but for now we think that it will probably still take some time.

The Museum maintains and preserves the legacy of the former PRPC and is part of the tourism attraction offered on the side by the Atmanda Resort. Brix, Jack and Daisy are still excited as ever to share these stories with people who come and stay at Atmanda Resort and Ecopark. Atmanda offers an idyllic location and reasonably priced accommodations for people who wanted to commune with nature or simply take a respite from the harried hurly-burly of city life. It has two Apartelles with a total of 12 rooms enough for a family of six to stay together. There are ample conference rooms and air-conditioned covered area for occasions such as weddings, baptism and corporate seminars and training. The wide open space can be used for outdoor activities and even sports training programs. It has an Olympic size swimming pool available for sports enthusiast training for competitions. Its location relative to old Subic Base makes it an ideal training ground for tri-athletes, bikers, and runners. They could stay at Atmanda for extended periods without thinning out their wallets.

Atmanda is temporarily operated by us as we look for interested third party operator willing to take over the management of the Resort as a private commercial enterprise. For now, considering the locations and available facilities, we are busy targeting government offices who need an out of town venue for their training and strategic planning exercise.

**Note:** If you are interested to venture into the hospitality and tourism related business, you can get in touch with us and we can jointly find a way to turn over to you the operation of this park steeped in history and significance. You can visit its website at [www.atmanda.com](http://www.atmanda.com). You can meet these guys who not only get to work in this place but also get to relive those days that marked the height of human spirit – when people willingly go to the extremes just to be free. For us who take for granted our freedom, perhaps these stories can remind us how and why we should treasure it.

**Harlie Llave**, the Author, is the General Manager of BMHI, which is a wholly owned subsidiary of BCDA. One of its current projects is the preservation of this historical site including some of its remaining buildings and facilities. BMHI is also looking for interested groups or individuals willing to make productive use of the rest of this well secured mountain plateau.

Ref.: <http://atmanda.com/news-and-events/>

**Look MUCH more here: [www.refugeecenter.philippineculture.ph](http://www.refugeecenter.philippineculture.ph)**