

**I am Kongxay Bounnapha
In Ottawa since my arrival to Canada
May 4, 1979**

My Journey to Freedom has dedicated to

My lovely wife Banthom Bounnapha

**And
Our children,**

**Baylom, Asomchay, Arounsay, Aysoury,
Adisone and Aphonethip**

I am wearing a Special pin

Two important symbols:

- The map of my Heritage Royal Kingdom of Laos, the place where I was born, where I grew up and where I've escaped from;
- The Three Head Elephant Heritage and Freedom flag that has engraved into my heart and will remain there as long as I live.

Special thanks to Heart and Freedom Project that has been initiated by Carleton University and University of Winnipeg Researchers in conjunction with Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese Associations.

Before I narrate my Journey to Freedom, however, I like to provide some historical, political and social background about Kingdom of Laos.

➤ Laos history in brief

Laos is a small land locked country , within the Indochina Peninsula, bordered with China to the Northwest, Vietnam to the East and Southeast, Cambodia to the South, Thailand to the South and West, and Myanmar to the West. The statistic in 1973 has indicated that The Kingdom of Laos population stands at 3 and a half millions. The lowland makes up the majority of the 67 ethnics in the country.

➤ One important political event, just before French took over the kingdom

After a failed attempt to reclaim the western part Lao territories, now become Thailand, in 1828 by the late King Anouvong, The Million Elephants and the White Parasol was in ruin. The capital Vientiane has burnt down to ground by Siamese soldiers. The united strong Kingdom has divided into Three separated Kingdoms. In 1893 the French took over Laos and became under French Protectorate. See map

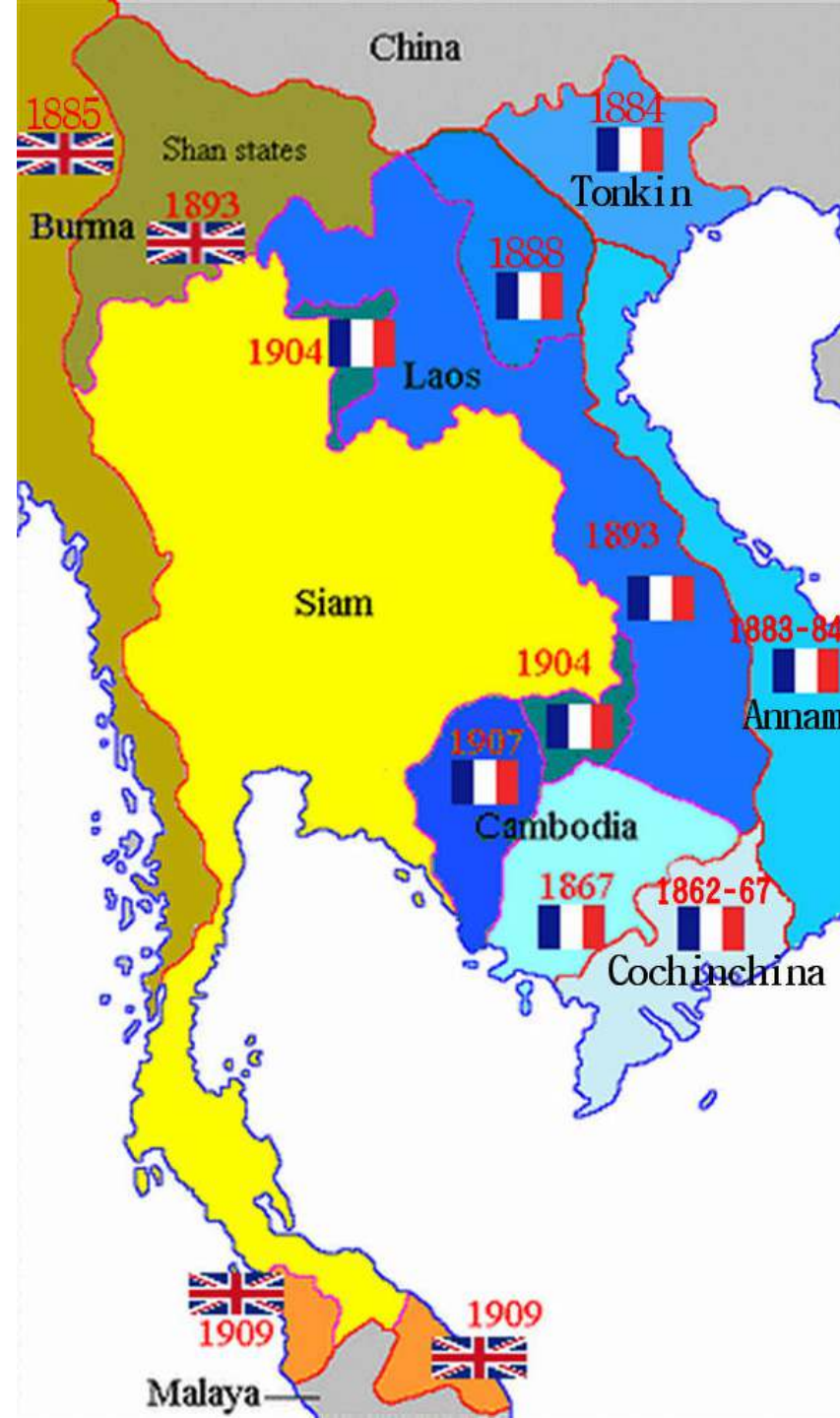
➤ Religion

By nature, Lao people are humble and tolerant. Most Lao people practice the Theravada form of Buddhism.

The Chronology of French colonization of Indochinese Peninsula.

France has colonized the Indochinese peninsula in different periods:

- In 1862- 1867 South Vietnam, then called Cochinchina;
- In 1882-84 Annam or central Vietnam;
- In 1867 part of Cambodia and the other parts in 1904 and 1907;
- Kingdom of Laos has been conquered in three separated periods, 1888 Northeastern part, the north, central and southern parts of Laos by 1893 and the North western part in 1904.



Root causes of the conflict in Indochina.

- ❑ The three distinct counties, Laos , Cambodia and Vietnam, became irritated by the French Authorities and struggled to gain their independent. On May 4, 1954, assisted by the Chinese military advisors and equipped with Chinese weapons the North Vietnamese defeated the French in Dien Bien Phu, marking the end of the first of the Indochina war.
- ❑ In an effort to end the conflict, Paris granted an additional measure of Independence to Laos in 1953, Franco-Laotien Treaty of Amity and Association;
- ❑ On May 7, 1954 the Geneva Accords reaffirm the full Independent, territorial integrity, and Neutrality of Laos.
- ❑ Newly independent, the Royal Lao Government installed with the help of France and USA. The leftist Lao factions has promote their existence under the Vietnamese assistance. Laos has dragged into the so called Vietnam war or the second war of the Indochina war between USA and Vietnam. Laos continued to safeguard its independence. But as Vietnam war intensified, North Vietnam defeated USA.
- ❑ In 1975 the Leftist Guerillas, the combination of Lao factions and Vietnamese, marched into Vientiane and proclaim a new country name Lao People Democratic Republic.
- ❑ That's where my Journey to Freedom has taken shape.

My journey to freedom

September 1975

Just before, My Mother land has become officially a Communist State, I returned home, Vientiane, from Paris, France. I have completed successfully the Customs Rules and Regulations Training course for over a year.

One month later, I've learned that Lao people in Vientiane encountered new form of changes. I have to adjust to new vocabulary such as radical and feudal reactionaries, Rightist bandits, American imperialists, grievance hearing and so on...There were protest everywhere. Lao capital has become an anarchy city and nobody can be trusted. As a former public servant, I kept myself in a very low profile.

National Proclamation day

December 2, 1975

The announcement from the loud speakers, installed all over the capital, has stated that everyone has to be at the Thatluang court in the early morning for National day. I showed up at my department at dawn, identified myself and got in line.

That day, Thatluang court was flooded with people

At one point, the head of my group has shouted out that, if there is a bomb explosion or gun shot do not disperse, but stay silent within the group. This was what I called human shield tactics for political gain.

Fortunately, everything went well. Now, Laos has become Officially LaoPDR.

1976-1977

I've been assigned to work on multiple positions in various fields that were not related to what I have been trained for. I have seen multiple violations of human rights, people being rounded up and arbitrarily detained. One scenario that has shaken up my entire life was that a friend of mine was accused as a USA spy against the State, without proof, was arrested before my eyes and his crying family. He has not been seen ever since.

I've heard some rumors telling me that I will be next. Luckily nothing happened.

I was sent to the so-called re-education camp for over a month not knowing how my family was doing. I have learned a lot how to survive in such precarious conditions.

Grievance hearing

I have attended in a so-called grievance hearing where a big crowd of people gathered in a boxing arena. One man climbed up the stage and shouting and crying denouncing how bad the old regime was. He continued to shout that he got tortured by the American dogs. The crowd was cheering and clapping their hands and chanted :

Down with American...three times.

1978

These experiences have given me a sense that I should keep adjusting myself at any circumstances. I realized that I was living in a jungle of bandits, I have to be smarter than them.

The longer I work with the Communist Regime, I've noticed that my liberty and my freedom diminished progressively. I have to learn how to respect the leaders and their oligarchs. No One was allowed to criticize any wrong doing of the Party members. The Party was considered as Supreme Commander or God.

Family discussions

We can no longer figure out how our future is going to be? How our children will survive when they grow up? We have so many questions without answers. But we have to come up with our final solution.

Contact the Human smuggler Group

Talks were initiated. 2 weeks later, face to face meeting with the leader of the group. The amount of Ransoms were discussed. Many years of our saving needed be sacrificed. The escape plan was made only between my wife and I. We have six children. It too risky to bring them at the same time. We have decided that two of our daughters will go with my mother-in-law in Savannakhet, central part of Laos. My wife and my 2 daughters flew to Savannakhet to meet my mother-in-law. The escape was very risky, but was successful. We got the news back that my mother-in-law and my two daughters were in the hands of my brother-in-law in Ubol Refugee camp, Thailand. My wife flew back to Vientiane.

Final decision

The full amount of ransoms were made. The appointment was set: November 28, 1978 at 7:30 am at Thanaleng Port. Early morning that day, my family and my friend's family showed up at the port. The head of the smuggler group greeted us. They gave a sign that we should be boarded right now and recommended us to sit at the bottom of the boat. We saw many people in the boat, but did not know them.

November 28, 1978

This mid-range boat, belong to the human smugglers, look exactly like in the right picture. Normally it was used for commercial transportation. But on that particular day there were only human.

My mind was spinning because we were in a very risky business and my family's life depend on all of us. Can we trust these smugglers? What if they informed the cost guards we will be arrested and our family will be executed.

Hundred and hundred questions went into our mind. But our determination was already set, at any cost.

We stayed calm and kept our hope alive.



A little bit over 9:00 am, the boat left Thanaleng port heading southward. As we sailed along the Mekong river, everyone of us was very nervous. We did not know what will happen to us. We were thinking between life and death. The daylight was gone. The night set in. The boat slow down and stop in a small village. We did not know where about. The head of the group told us that we are going to stay here over night and will sail tomorrow in the early morning.

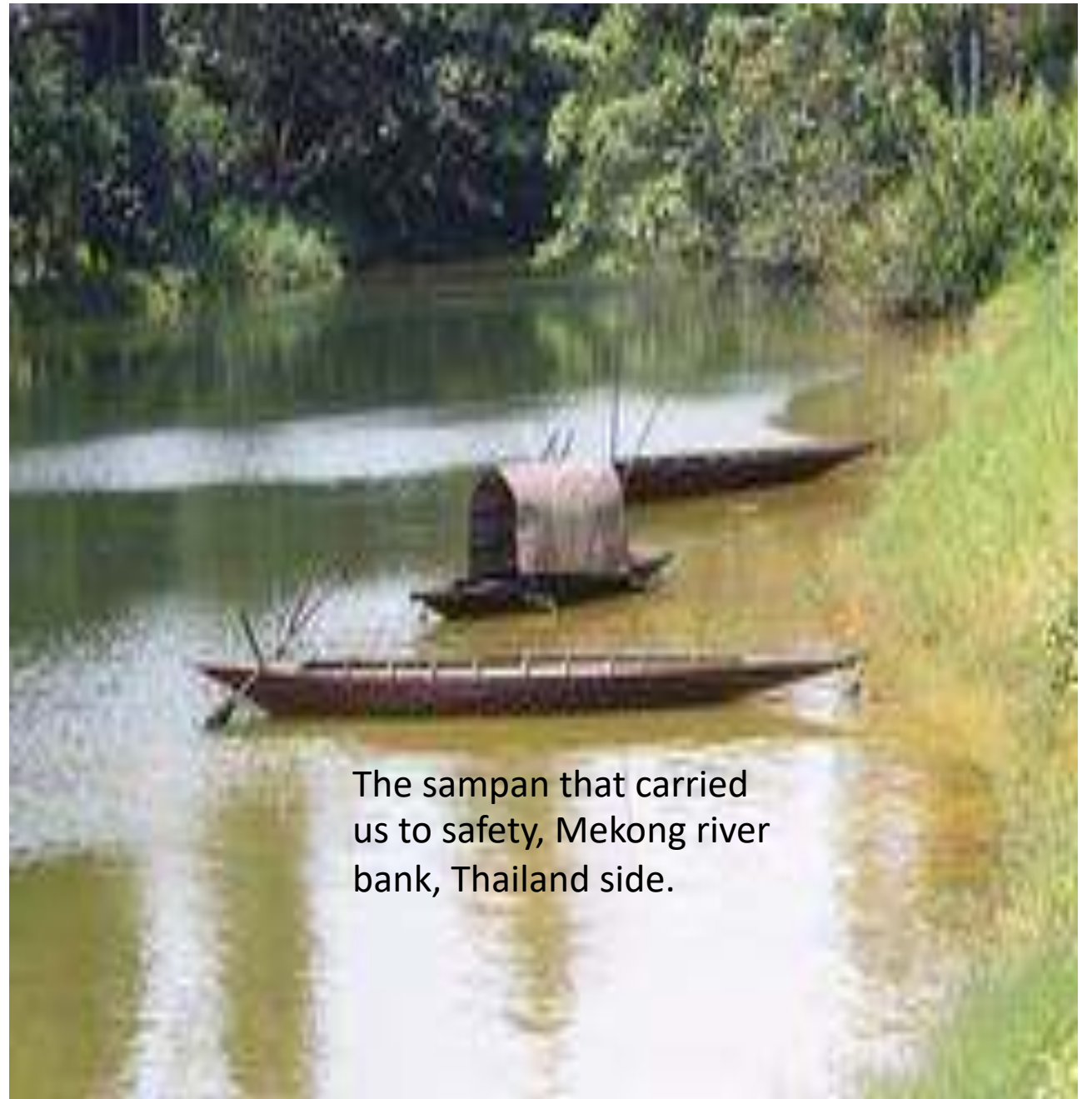
November 29, 1978

At dawn, the boat started moving. After sailing for about half hour, suddenly the head of the Group told us: NOW it's time to go. It's was 5:15 am. We started quickly wake up our kids, picked up our belongings and got down to a sampan.

When we saw a small range sampan, floating along side, in hiding position, on the right side of the big boat, we realized that they bought this sampan in that village. We've loaded our belongings, the kids and women. All men, my friends and myself, were jumping into the river and swimming with our clothes on. No time to get undressed. The last words from the head of the Smugglers : good luck to all of you and at the same moment his hands pushed the sampan toward the shore. The sampan load capacity was just enough to hold on. Water was calm and warm. If one more additional passenger, the sampan would be sinking.

The distance where we hit the water was about 150 meters, but swimming with clothes on created a lot of water resistance. I was exhausted at about 25 meters before reaching the shore line. At that critical moment between life and death, I took a big breath and push my body downward to the bottom of the river. Luckily I was able to reach the bottom. Otherwise I would have drown. Using my two feet I pushed my body upward as strong as I can to reach the surface and catching a breath. I kept repeating these steps few times until I got to the shore. I was fainted and lied down on the ground with heavily breathing. We are in Thailand aren't we? I asked my friends.

At the village over night stop, the smugglers bought this small size sampan. They estimated that the sampan can hold the load, four of our children, two women and some belongings. That was the max load.



The sampan that carried us to safety, Mekong river bank, Thailand side.

After 10 minutes of rest and lot of massages from friends, I regained my strength. As we walked up the Mekong river bank, we've met a middle age man. He was so kind to us. We told him, the sampan on the shore is yours. He offered us hospitality a small breakfast. We've realized that we were at Distrik of Phophixay, Nongkhai province.

The Thai Immigration Officers were informed. We waited until 8:30 am. The Officers came over as we gave him full report on our journey. He checked our belongings and got detailed information about us. Paper work was done. We were transferred from the man who has given us warm hospitality to a Buddhist Temple. We spent the night there.

November 30, 1978

The mid-range pickup brought all of us to a new location called " Illegal Entry Detention centre ", located right in front of the Lao Refugee Camp, Nongkhai, Thailand. We were among 800+ people within this detention center.

I have a 1979 14+ minutes video clip about this Detention Center.

The center was not adequate to hold such numbers of people for many reasons:

- The center was completely blocked by high sheet of metal fences;
- Its has one house and one long bamboo hut;
- Toilet was overloaded and no water to clean up, so people will ease themselves or urinate wherever they can;
- Hygiene was reduced to almost zero;
- Human feces odor filled up the center.

We stayed in the center for 10 days

Food was distributed twice daily, Lunch and supper time. We did not take a shower, but we bought a gallon of 20 liters of water to clean up ourselves with wet towels. The day was long and tedious. We walked around, talked and slept. Luckily there was no rain at all.

December 10, 1978

We were setting free from the hardship of detention center. Thai authorities call up our names and we formed a long line. There must be at least over 200 people. We walked toward the refugee camp. Luckily, we've met a friend that will leave the camp for Australia the next day, so the room will be free for us. Well, it was not really free, we paid for it. The room was 4x6 meters. It should be OK for my family. My friend's family went to other building.

Lao Refugee Camp

It consisted of two separated camp. One camp for Hmong and the other camp for Lowland Lao.

Within the camp there were many long bamboo buildings. We were in the building number 2. I have no idea how 30,000 to 45,000 Lao refugees can fit in it. But we made it.

Family re-union

Once installed in the camp with a secure room for our family, my wife made a connection to my mother-in-law in Ubon Lao refugee camp, Thailand. A week later, my brother-in-law came to Nongkhai Lao refugee camp with my 2 daughters. It was an emotional day.

Under the umbrella of UNHCR

Now we were under UNHCR watch. I 've heard that each refugee family should get food assistance \$ 10.00/ day. But what we got was far from the reality. To be able to survive we sell our belongings, getting some money and buying food.

Daily routine in the camp

The camp was over crowded and dangerous. We were always in high alert. We spent most of the time with family and keeping ourselves safe. Eight of us needed each other and stayed united as one. I spent my time with a lot of reading, book, magazines, news paper. Big news was the Chinese waging war with the Vietnamese under the code name “ teaching the lesson to the Vietnamese “.

A week later, I wrote a letter to the Canadian High Commissioner in Singapore. I have stated clearly our that our family liked to re-settle in Canada.

At the same time, we got two godfather contacts from Ottawa, Giangudo Fucito and Andre Reny. We got the answer from the Canadian High Commissioner in March, 1979 and our godfathers as well.

We got the interview, some times in April 1979, with Canadian representatives.

By the end of April 1979, we got the confirmation from Canadian Representatives telling us:
May 1, 1979. Few steps needed to be done prior to departure, such as:

- 1- Medical checkup by International Committee of the Red Cross Geneva (ICRC)
- 2- Canadian immigration Record and Visa;
- 3- The bus will be leaving the camp tomorrow morning;

May 2, 1979

The Bus full of Lao refugee started leaving the camp. My heart was pounding and my mind was crying, bye...bye my beloved mother land, my relatives and friends etc...

Arrival Suan Plu Park, Bangkok, Thailand late afternoon. We slept over night in the park.
So far, we've been in the refugee camp, Thailand for 5 months and 3 days.

May 3, 1979

In the morning, a group of Lao Refugee were called up and loaded into a bus and headed to Done Muang Airport. Everyone of us were checked and boarded into the airplane.
When the airplane took us to the air, my heart was filled with safety and freedom. On the way to Canada, we got transit at Paris airport.

Canada has become my country from today: May 4, 1979

We arrived at the Mirabel Airport, Montreal late in the afternoon. We waited for a while, then we boarded into an other air plane. We've landed at the Ottawa Airport in the evening. We met our godfather, Andre Reny, who drove us to the apartment that has been rented for us prior our arrival.

It was a long and exhausted travelling day, but happy to be able to breath the air of FREEDOM.

Starting a new life in Ottawa

Laos has a humble culture and tradition. I was young, full of energy and ready to stand on my own feet to take care of my family. My children were too young to understand this brand new land: Canada. All of us have language barrier. My wife and I have to attend language training courses call ESL – English as a Second Language- for three months sponsored by Canada Employment Centre.

Our Children were registered in English School. They were sitting in the dark, not knowing what the Teacher was talking about. Adapting to new culture was difficult, not for me, but it will for my children. It might created a cultural shock. I came up with new idea that a combination of Canadian and Lao culture then make a synthesis out of the two. The process seems to be working. As the months and years passed by they have managed to get on their own feet.

Fortunately, I had background in French Language, my ESL went quite well.

To cope with the influx of Indochinese refugees coming to Ottawa, Marion Dewar, Major of Ottawa has setup a sponsoring network called "Project 4000 ". In 1979, she led Project 4000, in which Ottawa residents sponsored 4,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian refugees. The Ottawa people – Group of Churches, Sponsor Groups and even individuals- have heard the Major's appeal.

It was the first job that I had in Ottawa: Project 4000 Co-ordinator of Interpreters.
Project 4000 was very successful.

Mean while, my wife had her first job in a Restaurant, cooking French fried, dressing hamburgers etc...

When Project 4000 winding down, I decided to go back to Algonquin College, learning technology. While working, I kept updating my skill set, study Networking Technology.

Finally, I got good job with Nortel Networks as a Hardware Developer, CDMA department (Recognition award). The over 100 years Nortel Networks was facing financial crisis started selling out it businesses. Ericsson has bought CDMA. I was transferred to Ericsson and worked until my retirement, Sept. 6, 2013.

Becoming Officially Canadian Citizen
January 26, 1984

I was the reign of Liberal Government under the Prime Minister Pierre E. Trudeau.
I received warmest congratulation letters from the Prime Minister himself, the House Speaker Lloyd Francis, and the Secretary of State Serge Joyal.

I think that I have made a good decision in re-settling in Canada. Today, my Children are well educated and become independent and self sufficient, having their own family. I think that my life is a success.

Canada and its people have given my family a very warm welcome. From my stand point, Canada is the best country to live: just to name a few, Security, excellent Healthcare system, good Well being system, champion on Human Rights and democratic system.

This is what I call Canada, the land of Generosity, the land of Opportunity and the land of Prosperity.

Thank you Canada for giving my family the opportunity to get

- good education,
- walking alongside with every Canadian,
- enjoying the democracy and freedom and human rights,
- progress and moving forward into the prosperity.

Thank you.

Ottawa, June 1, 2019



CANADIAN IMMIGRATION RECORD AND VISA - FICHE D'IMMIGRATION CANADA ET VISA

J 0128 07012

DO NOT USE / RESERVE

HEADQUARTERS' USE ONLY - RESERVE A L'ADMINISTRATION CENTRALE

MODE OF TRAVEL - MODE DE TRANSPORT: **AF33 PAPI S**

SURNAME, GIVEN NAMES - NOM DE FAMILLE, PRENOMS: **Bounnapha Kay**

NAME FLAG INDICATOR DU NOM: **2 BOUN**

BIRTH DATE / DATE DE NAISSANCE: **03 08 1942**

PLACE OF BIRTH - LIEU DE NAISSANCE: **SAVANNAKHET**

COUNTRY OF BIRTH - PAYS DE NAISSANCE: **LAOS**

CITIZEN OF - CITOYEN DE: **STATELESS**

SEX - SEXE: **979**

MARITAL STATUS - ETAT MATRIMONIAL: **1**

ACCOMPANYING FAMILY MEMBERS - MEMBRES DE LA FAMILLE QUI VOUS ACCOMPAGNENT

NAME - NOM	AGE	RELATIONSHIP - LIEN DE PARENTE
BOUNNAPHA Banthom	34	WIFE
BOUNNAPHA Baylom	12	SON
BOUNNAPHA Asomchay	11	DAUGHTER
BOUNNAPHA Arounsay	10	DAUGHTER
BOUNNAPHA Aysoury	9	DAUGHTER
BOUNNAPHA Adisone	8	SON
BOUNNAPHA Aphonthip	6	SON

NAME, ADDRESS, RELATIONSHIP OF CLOSEST RELATIVE OUTSIDE OF CANADA: **NIL**

I CERTIFY THAT MY ANSWERS TO THESE QUESTIONS ARE TRUE AND CORRECT

COUNTRY OF ISSUE - PAYS DE DELIVRANCE: **LAOS**

EXPIRY DATE - DATE D'EXPIRATION: **02 06 1989**

EDUC. QUALIF. / ANNEES D'ETUDES: **05**

YEARS OF EXPERIENCE - ANNEES D'EXPERIENCE: **00**

INTENDED OCCUPATION - EMPLOI ENVISAGE: **NEW WORKER**

O.I.C. NUMBER / D.C. NO

AMOUNT OF MONEY TO BE TRANSFERRED TO CANADA: **NIL . 00**

REGULATIONS - REGLEMENT: **A 78**

PRIORITY - PRIORITE: **P 1**

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DATE OF MED. ASSES. / DATE DE L'EX. MED.: **14 02 79**

APPLICATION SERIAL NO. - NO DE SERIE DE LA DEMANDE: **E 01 24 2 86 0 3**

IMMIGRANT - IMMIGRANT: **1**

CONDICTIONS - CONDITIONS: **00**

MONEY IN POSSESSION / ARGENT LIQUIDE: **100.00**

SIGNATURE OF IMMIGRATION OFFICER: *[Signature]*

REMARKS - OBSERVATIONS

NAME OF OFFICE AND CODE NO. - NOM ET CODE NUMERIQUE DU BUREAU: **2702**

LONG STUDY / ETUDE LONGITUDINALE: **1 - YES - OUI**

UTILITIES - LIBRES

This is the structural building for Lao Refugees to live. We 've there for 5 months and 3 days.



1979 Nongkhai Lao Refugee Camp

This is a dispensary that treated patients within the camp



Part of the daily life in the camp

