

the past, the present, the future

Nearly a half century ago Japan began a modest technical assistance program with the central hospital in the Vietnamese city of **Saigon**. In the intervening decades, the relationship between the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the **Cho Ray Hospital** has grown into one the longest and most fruitful partnerships in the agency's history. Other Japanese financial and technical assistance for roads, ports, airports, water systems and other infrastructure is now helping to transform Viet Nam's burgeoning but creaky commercial capital into **a modern metropolis**.

Cho Ray Hospital today; Mitsuo Ishizaki and Vietnamese colleagues (below)



It was a time of momentous historical change, chaos and challenge.

The so-called **American War** was accelerating rapidly as the first of more than 500,000 U.S. troops poured into Viet Nam.

Saigon, until recent times a charming and somewhat sleepy French-style provincial city, was being transformed into a nerve center for war and international intrigue, its infrastructure groaning under the arrival of foreign soldiers, entrepreneurs and tens and then hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese fleeing the expanding conflict in the surrounding 'boondocks.'

Cho Ray Hospital, founded in 1900 as a pleasant campus of two-story buildings surrounded by green lawns and shaded by tropical trees, was geared to serve the rhythm of the colonial era and not the helter-skelter pace of conflict and mass migration.

In 1966 the then Overseas Technical Cooperation Agency (OTCA) which would later be re-named the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) began to help the hospital meet its new challenges, starting with a modest technical cooperation project to train staff in the latest clinical treatment techniques.

In the intervening years, with both financial and technical assistance, Japan has helped develop the hospital into one of the busiest and biggest in Southeast Asia, helping to build and then renovate the major multi-storey administrative and medical block, providing the latest medical equipment, training doctors, nurses and other personnel, developing specialized medical and teaching programs for thousands of other medical staff throughout southern Viet Nam and sending a steady stream of JICA experts and volunteers to Cho Ray itself.

It has become one of the longest ongoing

Cho Ray Hospital in its early days

Japan has helped develop the hospital into one of the biggest and busiest in Southeast Asia.



partnerships in JICA's history – remembered by many Vietnamese and Japanese personnel not only for the professional accomplishments of the relationship, but the deep personal ties it fostered.

The Thump of War

After studying international public law at Aoyama-Gakuin University in Tokyo and joining the OTCA, Mitsuo Ishizaki went to Saigon in 1969 as one of the first Japanese aid officials to that country, serving as the coordinator of a four-person neurosurgery team assigned to Cho Ray.

He arrived to the deadly thump of war, remembering the cacophony of helicopters circling the city's main airport and the incessant rattling of the windows in his room from nearby bomb blasts.

Needed equipment was sometimes slow in arriving because of the chaos of a wartime city. The Japanese team was often called out to handle emergency cases, because

ill-paid Vietnamese doctors sometimes absented themselves to work at private hospitals to try to support their families.

"We lived a high-risk life then," he recalled recently, "but through it all I became blessed with some intimate and cherished friends."

Cho Ray, like Viet Nam itself, underwent a wrenching change at this time. As the war reached its peak Japan provided grant aid

totaling the equivalent of US\$54 million between 1971-74 to construct a new main building including wards, lecture halls and a cafeteria. It was, at the time, the biggest hospital in Southeast Asia. Specialized cerebral surgery, general surgery, radiation and administrative departments were strengthened later in that decade.

When the war wound down a trade embargo was placed on Viet Nam but JICA quietly kept a modest

amount of assistance flowing to the beleaguered hospital, according to Hoang Hoa Hai, chief of the hospital's training and research department. "We had problems, so many problems. No equipment," the veteran of 33 years at the hospital said. "JICA did what it could and sent help when possible."

By the early 1990s when the embargo was lifted, the hospital was in a sorry state. Japan immediately resumed assistance, helping to renovate hospital buildings and providing modern equipment again for the first time in many years.

Dr. Hoang Hoa Hai remembers in particular the arrival of a CT scanner, the first in Viet Nam. "It was used to help diagnose 140,000 patients," the doctor said. "It saved many, many lives." It was recently honorably retired, being able to assist some 20 patients per day compared with modern machines which can scan 100 patients in the same time period.

Today, Cho Ray is one of three 'core' hospitals serving Viet Nam, the others being in the old imperial capital of Hue and in the current capital of Hanoi.

It has a staff of more than 3,000, 1,700 beds and handles an estimated 100,000 'inpatients' annually and one million outpatients. In addition to providing for the health needs of a population of 31 million people in southern Viet Nam, including more than 8 million in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) itself, Cho Ray is also a teaching, research and referral hospital.

Training programs established with JICA's assistance have helped train around 4,000 medical and administrative staff throughout the region. A proposed five-year project running through 2014 will continue to strengthen these training activities.

Atsuko Nishimoto from Kyoto is the latest of a series of Japanese experts and volunteers who have worked at Cho Ray. She has completed nearly one year of a two-year assignment as an occupational therapist at Cho Ray.

"In Japan we have everything," she said recently as she worked with a patient at the main hospital building. "Here there is very little and sometimes nothing. It is very challenging, sometimes frustrating, but also very rewarding in the end."

That is a sentiment expressed by Ishizaki who formed an abiding affection for the country and the hospital, with which he still maintains contact from his home in Japan.

Each afternoon, he recalled recently, "I take a walk along the Kamo River to practice my Vietnamese" and he has also published a book on his experiences there entitled "Viet Nam, My Leisure Pursuit." ■

JICA is helping to provide new **infrastructure** in key areas as Viet Nam's commercial capital continues to expand.

new roads, tunnels, airports, ports and water systems



Towing a tunnel module into place



The international airport

One day recently passenger ferries, seagoing freighters, tourist pleasure boats and luxury liners along Ho Chi Minh City's busy waterfront were disrupted by the arrival of a huge chunk of concrete.

The imposing slab of raw material and high tech gadgetry was towed ponderously to a point near the city's old colonial center and newly emerging skyline of high-rise buildings.

It weighed 27,000 tons, including 10,000 cubic meters of concrete, measured more than 92 meters in length, 33.3 meters in width and nearly nine meters high.

Much like a submarine preparing to dive, parts of the structure were deliberately flooded and it sank slowly to the bottom of the river, settling into a muddy trench already scraped along the bottom.

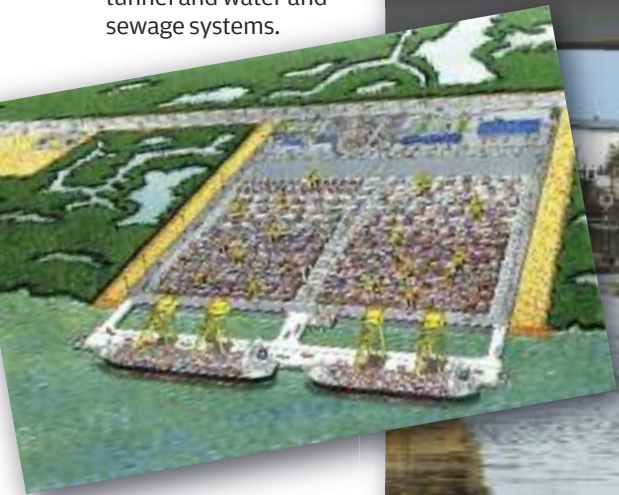
The module is one of four units which, when carefully welded together and linked to ventilation towers and 'closure sections' at each end, will, when officially opened next year, become the first

Prince and Princess Akishino at Cho Ray Hospital

Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi visits in 1998

Distinguished Japanese visitors; Choi Ray Hospital in its early days; Japanese volunteers at work today

Reshaping Ho Chi Minh City with new bridges, a port, traffic tunnel and water and sewage systems.



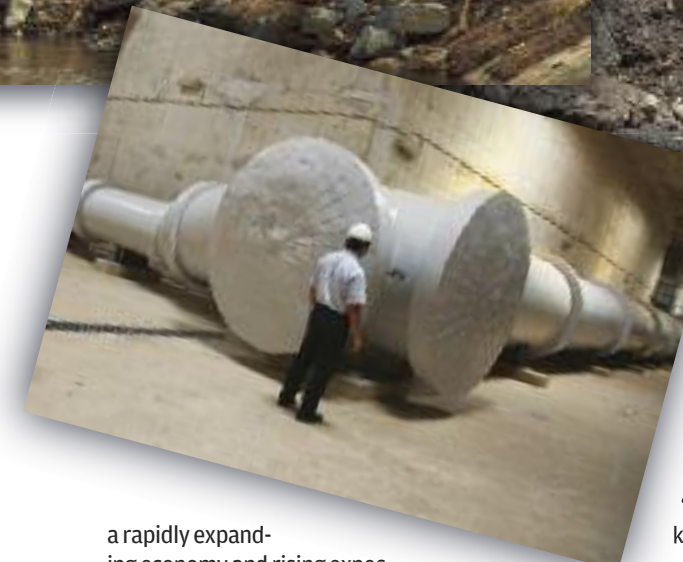
Projects are sometimes eye-catching, but often mundane and almost hidden from public view.

underwater traffic tunnel in Viet Nam, and indeed the whole of Southeast Asia.

The tunnel project is part of a multi-year, multi-billion dollar yen commitment by Japan to help Ho Chi Minh City to build a modern system of roads, tunnels, power plants, water and sewage systems, railroads and ports to meet the needs of the country's major commercial center and a population which is expected to increase from eight to 10 million by 2025.

Development experts have increasingly concluded that providing basic infrastructure such as new roads and ports is key to overall economic growth and tackling related social issues like providing better education and health facilities.

Japanese financial and technical assistance for several years has been helping Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi tackle the problem of replacing colonial-era systems with modern networks which can meet the demands of



a rapidly expanding economy and rising expectations of 86 million, mainly young Vietnamese.

Projects are sometimes eye-catching, but often mundane and almost hidden from public view or knowledge.

During the Viet Nam war, Saigon's (as it was then known) Tan Son Nhat airport was briefly the world's busiest as hundreds of American bombers and fighters daily lifted off to support the conflict.

A 27 billion yen loan helped transform the airport into a gleaming, highly visible terminal, since 2007 welcoming an increasing number of tourists and businessmen.

A massive transmission line and a thermal plant providing power to the region have already been completed.

Saigon River Tunnel

The 1,090-meter Saigon River tunnel is part of a 90.6 billion yen, 21.8-kilometer-long, multi-lane east-west highway project,

linking the country's major Highway One route from Hanoi and the north, skirting main population and business centers and then linking into the existing system west of Ho Chi Minh City.

When completed, the road network will reduce traffic congestion at many current choke points, increase the flow of traffic between ports and the interior, help improve the environment and beautify the city along a currently polluted canal system and link 'old Saigon' with a rapidly developing part of the city known as Thu Thiem.

According to Hoang Minh, vice director of Ho Chi Minh City's flood control program, the urban area will need 12 water treatment plants by 2025 compared to two currently in operation.

In the city suburbs, a gleaming new complex, constructed with the help of a 28.3 billion yen loan is helping to meet the current crisis, treating some 141,000 cubic meters of water per day and serving 430,000 city residents. A second phase of the project could eventually expand coverage to two million people from this plant within five years.

In addition to financial support JICA has been helping to train local administrative and water experts.

Other projects are planned including the construction of a deep-water port at Cai Mep-Thi Vai near Ho Chi Minh City and the first line in a new urban rail-road system. If the bidding for that is successful it will represent Japan's biggest single investment in the city. ■



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The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is the world's largest bilateral development organization, operating in some 150 countries to help some of the globe's most vulnerable people.