

Shadow threatens anti-trafficker's greatest moment

By Leif Coorlim , CNN

May 10, 2013 -- Updated 1947 GMT (0347 HKT)

CNN.com

Manila, Philippines (CNN) -- Cecilia Flores-Oebanda has spent her life fighting -- as a child for some education, as a teen rebel against a dictator, and for more than 20 years against human traffickers.

Through it all are the constants; persistence and determination.

Oebanda has become the face of the Philippines anti-trafficking movement -- a woman who has the ear of the administration and the friendship of many royals and philanthropists around the globe.

But now she is fighting a battle that could truly ruin her. Fraud allegations made by Philippine investigators threaten to destroy her reputation and the anti-trafficking organization she's run for more than two decades.

When we first met Oebanda, she was lockstep with Philippine federal agents as they boarded ships and burst into the homes of suspected human traffickers.

Those agents are with the same bureau now raiding her organization's offices and charging her with illegal activity.

During two years of filming there were plenty of highs -- including a joyous Oebanda dancing on stage in front of 10,000 supporters and rescued girls with renewed hope for their future now that they'd been freed from the clutches of human traffickers.

Less than a year later, she gave a speech to a nearly empty theater.

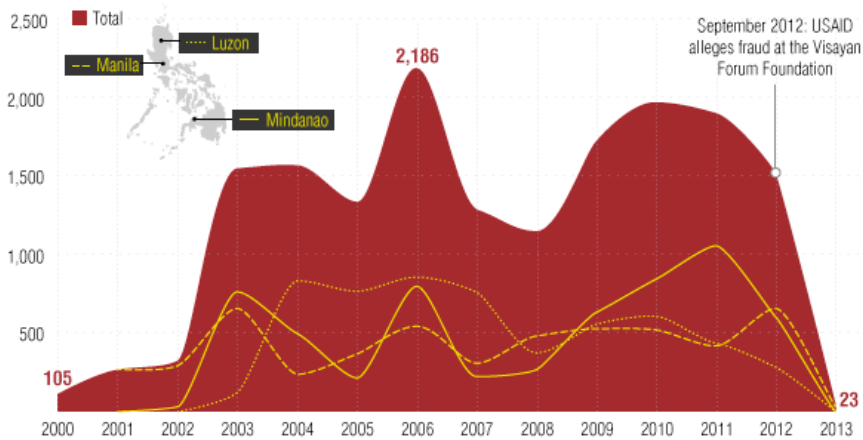
Oebanda crucially managed to befriend the Philippines' biggest star, world famous boxer and congressman, Manny Pacquiao. She convinced him to become an active supporter in the fight against modern-day slavery.

Read how Pacquiao helped change trafficking laws

There are photos of her warmly shaking hands and rubbing shoulders with dignitaries like Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, Desmond Tutu and the queens of Sweden and Spain.

But by the time we left Manila for the last time, many of the agencies she'd relied on for years had frozen their funding of her organization, the Visayan Forum Foundation.

Anti-trafficking operations at Visayan Forum Foundation centers



Cecilia Flores-Oebanda is presented with *The World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child* by Sweden's Queen Silvia on April 28, 2011. Manny Pacquiao, with Oebanda, meets girls rescued from human traffickers. The girls shared their stories with Pacquiao, who also spoke at congress in support of an anti-trafficking law. Oebanda with President Jimmy Carter at the 2008 Skoll World Forum where she received the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship. Oebanda meets with Desmond Tutu in 2008 while both were speaking at the Global Philanthropy Forum. Oebanda receives the 2005 Anti-Slavery Award at Chatham House in London on November 29, 2005. The award was presented by Lord Bill Brett, director of the International Labour Organization. Oebanda speaks before the Philippine Senate during deliberations about the Magna Carta on Domestic Workers in 2002. The legislation was designed to improve conditions for domestic workers in the country. Oebanda attends the first Southeast Asian Consultation, meeting to draft legislation on domestic workers in 2005. The meeting was organized by the Visayan Forum. Oebanda is seen in the late 1990's working in poor communities of Manila with the Child Watch Network. Oebanda's first day outside prison, with her children on February 26, 1986. She was captured while fighting for rebel forces against the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos. **HIDE CAPTION** Manny Pacquiao is known the world over for his boxing abilities, but in the Philippines he's also a national hero beyond the ring. Click through to see moments of Pacquiao's life. Pacquiao, center, and his wife Jinkee, right, display their certificates of candidacy at the election office in Alabel, Sarangani province, in the southern island of Mindanao, on October 2, 2012. Pacquiao registered to run for reelection as a congressman for the southern province of Sarangani, with Jinkee filing to stand for vice-governor. Pacquiao attends a plenary session discussing a proposed reproductive health bill at the House of Representatives at Congress in Quezon City, east of Manila, Philippines, August 6, 2012. Pacquiao gestures during a prayer rally at the Araneta Coliseum in Manila on July 28, 2012. The prayer rally was a way for Pacquiao to thank his fans and supporters for the blessings he received. Pacquiao gives a sack of rice and relief goods to a woman after floods struck in Glan, Sarangani province, southern Philippines, June 17, 2012. Pacquiao speaks to flood-affected residents at an evacuation center in Cagayan de Oro City, a southern island off Mindanao on December 23, 2011. Pacquiao is conferred the rank of lieutenant colonel by Maj. Gen. Emmanuel Bautista, left, and Brig. Gen. Alex Albano, right, in Manila, on December 5, 2011. Pacquiao sits with fellow lawmakers during the 15th Congress at the House of Representatives in Quezon City on July 25, 2011. Pacquiao shakes hands with a Special Forces Operation Course student during the 49th Special Forces Regiment anniversary at Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija, north of Manila, on June 27, 2011. During the event, Pacquiao received the Honorary Special Forces Warrior Badge, and wore the exclusive Special Forces uniform popularly known as the "Tiger suit." Pacquiao looks toward Congressman Edcel Lagman, right, at the House of Representatives on May 18, 2011. Pacquiao speaks at a news conference during the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in May 2011. Pacquiao and U.S. Senate

Oebanda's story goes far beyond those snapshots with the rich and famous. The oldest daughter of 12 siblings, she began working as a 5-year-old and would sit in the back of her class, smelling of the fish she had sold, and the trash she had sifted through.

As a young mother, she fought for the survival of her two children, whom she gave birth to while in a squalid prison cell as a captured enemy of the Ferdinand Marcos dictatorship.

Years later, as the executive director of an acclaimed charity, she would build a gleaming new safe house for children victimized by human traffickers. The money for the building came from J.K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series.

The transformation from rebel commander to leader of an anti-trafficking organization is not as stark as it may first appear.

Oebanda says in both cases she's considered herself a freedom fighter and she was motivated to protect young women and children from exploitation as a way to honor her comrades who died in the jungle while trying to save her and her unborn son.

In 1982, Oebanda was a rebel commander who had spent five years fighting the Marcos military.

At 16, she had quit school and fled into the jungles of Negros,

Majority Leader Harry Reid exchange flags in Washington on February 15, 2011. Pacquiao waves as he joins hundreds of other runners in Manila on October 10, 2010, to raise funds and environmental awareness to help revive the Pasig River, a heavily polluted major waterway that cuts through the city of 12 million. Pacquiao joins Harry Reid, a Nevada senator, on the campaign trail at the Orr Middle School in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 29, 2010, ahead of the midterm U.S. elections. Pacquiao tries out whitewater rafting to promote tourism in his district in New La Union in Maitum, Sarangani province, on August 14, 2010. Pacquiao attends a session of the Lower House as congressman representing his home district of Sarangani during the State of The Nation address of President Benigno "NoyNoy" Aquino on July 26, 2010. Pacquiao listens during the turnover ceremony for the new commanding general of the Philippine army at Fort Bonifacio on July 23, 2010. Pacquiao takes his oath of office as congressman at the provincial capitol in Alabel, Sarangani province, on June 28, 2010. Pacquiao holds his daughter Queen Elizabeth as he talks to members of the media during his victory party for winning a seat in parliament -- held jointly with her birthday celebration -- at a convention center on the southern island of Mindanao on May 15, 2010. Pacquiao celebrates with local officials during his proclamation as congressman of Sarangani province in May 2010. Pacquiao plays billiards at his recreational center in General Santos, Mindanao, in May 2010. Pacquiao places his ballot into a vote-counting machine in Kiamba, Sarangani province, on May 10, 2010. Pacquiao greets supporters during a campaign rally in Kiamba in April 2010. Pacquiao, center, greets supporters with presidential candidate Manny Villar, right, and vice-presidential candidate Loren Legarda, left, as he starts his campaign for Congress in March 2010. Pacquiao poses with his certificate of candidacy next to his wife, Jinkee, after filing in the town of Alabel, Sarangani province, on December 1, 2009. **HIDE CAPTION** In these rarely seen photos, taken by Manny Pacquiao's personal photographer James Dayap, we take a glimpse at the boxer's training regimen for the Timothy Bradley fight in June 2012, which would become one of the most controversial bouts of his career. Pacquiao was awarded the title "Fighter of the Decade" for the 2000s by the World Boxing Organization (WBO), World Boxing Council (WBC) and the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA). At the age of 14, Pacquiao moved to Manila, the Philippines, and started boxing. For a time, he lived on the streets. Pacquiao trained in Los Angeles for the welterweight title match against Bradley. The WBO welterweight title fight was held on June 9, 2012, at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. The fight ended with Bradley winning a split decision that sparked controversy throughout the boxing world. **HIDE CAPTION**



Child advocate wants Pacquiao's help



Government: 100,000 sex workers are kids

Philippines to join the rebels.

As Commander Liway, she led a unit of the New People's Army against the Marcos regime but the pregnant Oebanda was about to be captured.

"I can still vividly remember it, suddenly, one of my comrades shouted there are enemies coming. They said around 100 of them.

Because of that, we [were] unprepared. We don't have any plans how to escape as a group," Oebanda tells CNN.

She was eight months pregnant and surrounded in the mountains with her husband and a small band of students and revolutionaries.

Government soldiers rained bullets and grenades at her position.

Three comrades died trying to protect her.

"This is very painful, you know. And because of that, it really hit in my core that I hate myself

being alive and make this young man sacrifice for me to live."

After her capture, Oebanda was taken to a prison on another island where she spent the next four years in a squalid room for political prisoners.

In that time, she gave birth to two children, a son, Kip, and daughter, Malaya. Shortly after their release in 1986, Oebanda and her husband would part ways.



Ride-along on a human trafficking raid

Five years later, she would found a small grassroots organization to help women and children working as domestic servants.

The Visayan Forum Foundation would grow to become an internationally recognized charity and provide services to more than 70,000 victims or potential victims of human trafficking.

When Oebanda and her husband were released, after the

1986 Edsa 'People Power' Revolution ousted Marcos, she was reunited with her first son and soon after gave birth to a fourth child.

The determination which allowed her to join the rebels and saw her through prison, was now focused on creating a new organization, the Visayan Forum Foundation, which would one day become an internationally acclaimed force to stop human trafficking.



[Click here to get full infographic on human trafficking in the Philippines](#)

When we first met Oebanda, morning light was streaming through the sheer curtains at a halfway house for human trafficking victims near Manila's North Harbor port.

Oebanda and her staff were busy making phone calls and preparing the paperwork needed after a possible raid.

Cecilia Flores-Oebanda is presented with The World's Children's Prize for the Rights of the Child by Sweden's Queen Silvia on April 28, 2011. Manny Pacquiao, with Oebanda, meets girls rescued from human traffickers. The girls shared their stories with Pacquiao, who also spoke at congress in support of an anti-trafficking law. Oebanda with President Jimmy Carter at the 2008 Skoll World Forum where she received the Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship Oebanda meets with Desmond Tutu in 2008 while both were speaking at the Global Philanthropy Forum. Oebanda receives the 2005 Anti-Slavery Award at Chatham House in London on November 29, 2005. The award was presented by Lord Bill Brett, director of the International Labour Organization. Oebanda speaks before the Philippine Senate during deliberations about the Magna Carta on Domestic Workers in 2002. The legislation was designed to improve conditions for domestic workers in the country. Oebanda attends the first Southeast Asian Consultation, meeting to draft legislation on domestic workers in 2005. The meeting was organized by the Visayan Forum. Oebanda is seen in the late 1990's working in poor communities of Manila with the Child Watch Network. Oebanda's first day outside prison, with her children on February 26, 1986. She was captured while fighting for rebel forces against the dictatorship of President Ferdinand Marcos. HIDE CAPTION Manny Pacquiao is known the world over for his boxing abilities, but in the Philippines he's also a national hero beyond the ring. Click through to see moments of Pacquiao's life. Pacquiao, center, and his wife Jinkee, right,

"Every day I wake up grateful for the opportunity to live and every person that I rescued and help -- I honor them. I see the sacrifice through me. And I see myself to save others. So it's like I am paying them while serving others. In rescuing girls and giving their life back and I hope that they enjoy. I give justice to those three great men."

Overnight, the Philippine coast guard reported three possible trafficking

display their certificates of candidacy at the election office in Alabel, Sarangani province, in the southern island of Mindanao, on October 2, 2012. Pacquiao registered to run for reelection as a congressman for the southern province of Sarangani, with Jinkee filing to stand for vice-governor. Pacquiao attends a plenary session discussing a proposed reproductive health bill at the House of Representatives at Congress in Quezon City, east of Manila, Philippines, August 6, 2012. Pacquiao gestures during a prayer rally at the Araneta Coliseum in Manila on July 28, 2012. The prayer rally was a way for Pacquiao to thank his fans and supporters for the blessings he received. Pacquiao gives a sack of rice and relief goods to a woman after floods struck in Glan, Sarangani province, southern Philippines, June 17, 2012. Pacquiao speaks to flood-affected residents at an evacuation center in Cagayan de Oro City, a southern island off Mindanao on December 23, 2011. Pacquiao is conferred the rank of lieutenant colonel by Maj. Gen. Emmanuel Bautista, left, and Brig. Gen. Alex Albano, right, in Manila, on December 5, 2011. Pacquiao sits with fellow lawmakers during the 15th Congress at the House of Representatives in Quezon City on July 25, 2011. Pacquiao shakes hands with a Special Forces Operation Course student during the 49th Special Forces Regiment anniversary at Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija, north of Manila, on June 27, 2011. During the event, Pacquiao received the Honorary Special Forces Warrior Badge, and wore the exclusive Special Forces uniform popularly known as the "Tiger suit." Pacquiao looks toward Congressman Edcel Lagman, right, at the House of Representatives on May 18, 2011. Pacquiao speaks at a news conference during the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines in May 2011. Pacquiao and U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid exchange flags in Washington on February 15, 2011. Pacquiao waves as he joins hundreds of other runners in Manila on October 10, 2010, to raise funds and environmental awareness to help revive the Pasig River, a heavily polluted major waterway that cuts through the city of 12 million. Pacquiao joins Harry Reid, a Nevada senator, on the campaign trail at the Orr Middle School in Las Vegas, Nevada, on October 29, 2010, ahead of the midterm U.S. elections. Pacquiao tries out whitewater rafting to promote tourism in his district in New La Union in Maitum, Sarangani province, on August 14, 2010. Pacquiao attends a session of the Lower House as congressman representing his home district of Sarangani during the State of The Nation address of President Benigno "NoyNoy" Aquino on July 26, 2010. Pacquiao listens during the turnover ceremony for the new commanding general of the Philippine army at Fort Bonifacio on July 23, 2010. Pacquiao takes his oath of office as congressman at the provincial capitol in Alabel, Sarangani province, on June 28, 2010. Pacquiao holds his daughter Queen Elizabeth as he talks to members of the media during his victory party for winning a seat in parliament -- held jointly with her birthday celebration -- at a convention center on the southern island of Mindanao on May 15, 2010. Pacquiao celebrates with local officials during his proclamation as congressman of Sarangani province in May 2010. Pacquiao plays billiards at his recreational center in General Santos, Mindanao, in May 2010. Pacquiao places his ballot into a vote-counting machine in Kiamba, Sarangani province, on May 10, 2010. Pacquiao greets supporters during a campaign rally in Kiamba in April 2010. Pacquiao, center, greets supporters with presidential candidate Manny Villar, right, and vice-presidential candidate Loren Legarda, left, as he starts his campaign for Congress in March 2010. Pacquiao poses with his certificate of candidacy next to his wife, Jinkee, after filing in the town of Alabel, Sarangani province, on December 1, 2009. *HIDE CAPTION* In these rarely seen photos, taken by Manny Pacquiao's personal photographer James Dayap, we take a glimpse at the boxer's training regimen for the Timothy Bradley fight in June 2012, which would become one of the most controversial bouts of his career. Pacquiao was awarded the title "Fighter of the Decade" for the 2000s by the World Boxing Organization (WBO), World Boxing Council (WBC) and the Boxing Writers Association of America (BWAA). At the age of 14, Pacquiao moved to Manila, the Philippines, and started boxing. For a time, he lived on the streets. Pacquiao trained in Los Angeles for the welterweight title match against Bradley. The WBO welterweight title fight was held on June 9, 2012, at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas. The fight ended with Bradley winning a split decision that sparked controversy throughout the boxing world. *HIDE CAPTION*

victims on board a passenger ferry heading to Manila.

Visayan investigators position themselves on the dock and wait for a signal from the officers on board to start their raid.

A hand signal sets the operation into motion.

When the team arrives in a dining area, they find three groups of adults and children surrounded by armed officers. The Visayan Forum staff immediately starts work.

"Our people are trained to ask questions, we are trained how to spot. We try to share if the information given to one group is the same, is consistent to the information given to other people."

After a few moments, the task force is confident that two groups are just families traveling together on vacation.

But the third group, made up of a man and a woman traveling with four teenage girls, bears the hallmarks of human trafficking.

"The group actually shows a lot of red flags for possible trafficking victims. The lady in the middle is actually giving them instructions, what kind of jobs they have, what are they going to do, where are they going," says Oebanda.

The four girls will be escorted to the halfway house for physical



Oebanda visits site where she was jailed



Oebanda: Deadly ambush changed my life

The suspects are heading to jail.

"Some of the kids that we rescue

may be alive outside but they are actually nothing inside. They are dying inside."

To see how those children are reborn, we visited the Visayan Forum's Center of Hope. About two dozen girls and young women live at the center permanently.

Read how trafficked girls endure degrading acts

We spoke to several, including three girls whose stories are heartbreaking.

When they were nine-years-old, a neighbor lured them into a room with a computer and an internet connection.

He made the girls take off their clothes and dance for a man at the other end of a chat room.

After that, it was whatever disgusting acts the cyber customer asked for. Oebanda helped coax details of their abuse.

The first girl said: "Sometimes we had to urinate."

The second added: "The urine is mixed with juice as a drink."

Oebanda asked: "Who drinks it? You?"

The first girl replied: "Yes, we drink it."

"That's appalling. What a beast!" Oebanda replied.

The first girl continued: "That's what the American client wants. He demands that anyone who feels like urinating should do so, but that he wants that we show it in front of the camera."

Oebanda told CNN: "The first time they do that they were already warned not to tell anybody. He said that you are already committing a crime and if you refuse to do it again, I will come and hurt you.

"Sometimes we just don't understand why one of the kids suddenly gets sick, and she always vomits. Our psychologist said it's because she remembers what these guys on the Internet asked her to do and she was forced to do it. Every time she was forced to do it, she vomits.

"Even though they are in America, we can still track them down and bring them to justice. I know this is really a hard fight for all of us, but we need help also from America. We also need help from the people there to stop this trade. We need to stop this demand. This is really too much."

Read what happened on a night undercover in Manila's red light district

For six years, the Visayan Forum did get help from America in the form of grant aid from the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID.

On the U.S. government's website it lists Visayan Forum Foundation (VFF) as a recipient of \$2.1 million.

The money was earmarked to expand Visayan's trafficking task force -- the PORT project -- and supporting halfway houses across the Philippines.

And Oebanda was certainly a darling of U.S. administrations. She received the U.S. Department of Labor's first-ever "Iqbal Masih" award for the elimination of child labor. In 2008, Oebanda was named by the U.S. Department of State as one of its "Heroes Acting to End Modern-Day Slavery."

But on August 31, 2012, the life and work Oebanda knew came crashing down.

Agents with the National Bureau of Investigation executed a search warrant, raiding Visayan Forum's office. They removed more than 30 boxes of documents and laptops, evidence which they said would prove that Visayan Forum employees had willfully attempted to divert funds and cover it up.

Among the allegations listed in a report prepared by the Philippine NBI :

- Visayan Forum reported 664 beneficiaries in the halfway house in Matnog, Sorsogon from April 2005 to March 2006, when there were none.
- Social workers were instructed to receive more than double the amount needed to run their program, then return the money to the Visayan Forum's bank account.
- Thirty names on the Visayan Forum payroll registry do not have any data filed in its employment records.
- Questionable cash advances to the tune of more than \$51,405.71.
- Oebanda had instructed her employees to falsify documents.

During the ongoing investigation, more than 80 percent of the employees have resigned or been let go. Visayan Forum's work rescuing trafficking children has come to a standstill.

Renoir Baldovino, of NBI'S Anti-Graft Division, said: "The former bookkeeper of the Visayan Forum gave us information that disbursements -- 70% of disbursements -- by Visayan Forum were supported by fake official receipts and manufactured receipts, contracts -- fake contracts -- to enable them to liquidate cash advances."

Baldovino said: "I don't believe it was a matter of not keeping the books accurately. There was an intention really to siphon off the money for personal purposes."

The information provided to CNN appears damning. The 15-page report contains more than 85 points of evidence, most of it provided in sworn affidavits from a number of former employees.

The NBI says it interviewed more than 20 former and present Visayan Forum employees.

Oebanda denies any wrongdoing, but acknowledges administrative shortcomings in her organization. She is now desperately trying to provide explanations for these allegations. She insists the allegations stem from poor bookkeeping and operating in an environment where asking for a receipt is sometimes impossible -- while at the same time having to meet U.S. accounting standards.

She says: "It's a big lie. Let's look at facts. If you look at their own audit findings, most all of their concerns are procedural which they disallowed. ... We admit that these procedures internally could have been done better, but to say that the amount was stolen are unfounded. We are offended that there was lack of due process and the rush to judgment."

Oebanda added the publicity around the allegations had already harmed her work. She said it was vital Visayan be allowed to explain its side of the story.

USAID would not comment on the case. Gloria Steele, USAID's mission director in the Philippines, said the agency would continue to support the fight against human trafficking and that USAID is in touch with other anti-trafficking groups.

"We all think we are indispensable. But no one is. Truly," Steele said. "I think always when there is a vacuum, it will always be filled. I think that's the law of nature and a lot of groups are coming and providing the assistance that's needed."

To date no charges have been filed and Oebanda also refuses to rule-out that it could have been a set-up by forces who wanted to see the Visayan Forum go away.

Oebanda is now fighting to keep her organization afloat in an ocean of paperwork. "Look at this. We are drowning with all these receipts," she said.

"There are children and women the Visayan Forum is supposed to help. Every day that we are upset in the field, every day that we are not in the port, we are losing children. We are losing women to the traffickers and we don't know what happened to them and that makes me really so, so mad."