

Repatriation: How Safe is it?

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Abstract

This article provides updated information on the human rights climate in Laos as it pertains to the repatriation of Hmong refugees from Thailand. The disappearance of Vue Mai and the arrests or demotions of Hmong officials in the Lao government are an indication of the problems faced by Hmong both as repatriates and residents in Laos. The recent abuses against several hundred Hmong at the Ban Phan Thao repatriation site are described in detail.

[1]

In order to understand the current problems existing at Ban Phan Thao repatriation site in Laos, one must go back to the beginnings of the repatriation program. In the late 1980s Thailand wanted to close all the refugee camps. Ban Vinai camp, which was the largest Hmong camp in Thailand, would be the biggest challenge to close.

[2]

On June 9-10, 1991, the Hmong/Highlander Development Fund sponsored "The Hmong-American Conference on the Future of Hmong Refugees" in Washington, D.C. The purpose of this conference was to convince the Hmong-American population that it was safe for their relatives in Thailand to repatriate to Laos. Vue Mai, the Hmong leader of Ban Vinai camp, was flown in to be a participant at the conference. Since he was the Hmong leader of the camp, it was important

to convince him it was safe to return. Once convinced, the Hmong refugees would follow him.

[3]

Vue Mai was given two options: one, he could join his wife and family in the United States; or two, he could lead his people back to Laos. Vue Mai knew his responsibilities as a Hmong leader meant he could not desert his people. He knew there was only one option. He must lead his people back to Laos. The U.S. State Department, the United Nations, and other non-governmental organizations, convinced him it was safe to return. Vue Mai truly believed them, so he agreed to lead his people back.

[4]

On November 10, 1992 Vue Mai repatriated to Laos. He went to live with a cousin of his in Vientiane. Although the Lao government had promised him a house of his own and some land for him and his people, he never received a thing. Upon his return, he was closely monitored by the Lao government the whole time. When Hmong-Americans would come to visit him and ask to take a picture, he refused, telling them to get a copy from the Lao Foreign Ministry. Why did he behave like this? Because he knew he was being closely watched by the Lao government, and didn't want to take the slightest chance of having any type of trouble.

[5]

Several months before his "disappearance," he applied for a passport because he wanted to visit his wife and family in the United States. The Lao government denied him one. Then, on September 11, 1993, Vue Mai was secretly arrested by the Lao government. Several months ago I sent a detailed confidential report on the arrest to the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane. It is currently under investigation. Four days after Vue Mai's arrest, Chong Moua Thao, the repatriated

Vice-Chair of Chieng Kham camp, died of "food-poisoning" during a dinner with Lao government officials. Coincidence?

[6]

During the early 1990s, when it was supposedly safe for the Hmong to repatriate to Laos, unprovoked killings of Hmong civilians living in Saysomboun Special Area continued unchecked. On January 5-7, 1990 the Lao government bombed Nam Tao and other villages in Saysomboun Special Area, killing 180 Hmong villagers.

[7]

Chong Yia Yang, Governor of Xieng Khouang province at the time, was forced to retire after the Lao government used him to convince the Hmong it was safe to come down from Phou Bia mountain area. The Hmong leaders, Chong Shoua Xiong and Xeng Xiong, along with many other leaders and villagers, were then killed by Pathet Lao soldiers.

[8]

Around 1991, Por Thao, a high ranking Hmong in the Pathet Lao Army, was forced into early retirement. During the war he fought very hard and loyally for the Pathet Lao, losing a leg in combat and even shooting down a jet-fighter on the Plain of Jars.

[9]

Around 1992, Xai Chou Yang was forced to step down from his position as prefecture president of Muang Cha Special Zone, then forced to move to Vientiane. The reason being he was not doing an effective job of killing the Hmong in Muang Cha Special Zone. Chai Yang Lor and Xia Bee Lor were also forced to step down from this prefecture committee. They were also forced to move to Vientiane.

[10]

In the early 1990's, thousands of Hmong who had feared returning to Laos, escaped from Ban Vinai camp and found their way to Wat Thamkrabok. In a short time the population there swelled to almost 30,000 Hmong refugees. But in the Thai newspapers these Hmong were often referred to as being Thai-Hmong opium addicts, who had come there for detoxification. The largest, and fastest growing, opium detox center in the history of the world!

[11]

In 1992, Yang Va returned to Laos to negotiate with the Lao government about the repatriation of Hmong refugees living at Wat Thamkrabok. Upon his return, he was immediately arrested and imprisoned by the Lao government. Currently he is still being held in prison.

[12]

On November 30, 1993, Xao Xiong, and four other refugee leaders from Phou Bia, came down to Muang Cha to meet with Bounchanh, the newly appointed prefecture president, who had replaced the former Hmong prefecture president (mentioned above). They were to negotiate, but instead the Lao government tortured the refugee leaders, killing two of them. Xao Xiong, and the two other leaders who survived, Xeng Vang and Nao Yia Vue, are currently being held in a Vientiane prison.

[13]

On April 28, 1994, Kou Yang and over 1,100 Hmong refugees were repatriated to Laos. They were sent to Ban Phan Thao, Vang Vieng, Vientiane province. Before they returned to Laos the United Nations had paid 48,000,000 kip to the Lao government for the land at Ban Phan Thao. The U.N. gave Kou Yang, the leader of the group, a map of the designated land

while he was still in Napho Camp, Thailand. When the refugees saw that they were going to get the land, and that the U.N. would guarantee their safety, they agreed to return to Laos.

[14]

When the Hmong returned everything was ready for them. But later on, when the irrigation dam was completed, the Lao government came in, and using guns, forced the refugees to give up their land. When this happened Kou Yang strongly objected, telling John Junk and others at the U.S. Embassy and the U.N. about what the Lao government had done. When the Lao government found out that Kou Yang was complaining about this they accused him of being "disobedient" to the government. Threats were made on his life. It got to the point that John Junk and the U.N. finally decided to get him out of the country, and after negotiating with the Lao government, got him official permission to leave. In September 1996 Kou Yang came to the United States, leaving his wife and family behind. Presently he's seeking political asylum.

[15]

The problems continued for the Hmong refugees at Ban Phan Thao. Meanwhile, in July 1995, Boua Chong Lee was severely beaten (his jaw broken and all his teeth knocked out) and taken to prison, along with his son. Boua Chong Lee was the highest ranking Hmong Pathet Lao Army officer in Luang Prabang province, and had been forced into early retirement during the late 1980s. Currently he is still being held in prison.

[16]

After Kou Yang left the problems for the Hmong at Ban Phan Thao continued, gradually getting worse. On January 21, 1998 the Lao government used three soldiers (named Kham Ouane,

Khongpheng, and Sayphone) from Ban Pho Xay, a nearby village to take over the rice fields of the Hmong refugees from Ban Phan Thao. These soldiers yelled to the refugees saying something like "Why you refugees taking over Lao people's land?" and, "If you want to take over the Lao land you better come to the fields, because now we are going to destroy your farm and break down the dikes in the paddy fields. Come on over and we'll kill you!" The Hmong working in the fields were terrified, so they all ran home.

[17]

The next day, January 22, 1998, Chue Vue (son of Nao Yeng Vue) went to the rice fields. Those same three soldiers came back again and at gunpoint told him to return to his village. He was ordered to tell the Hmong people from Ban Phan Thao to come to the rice fields, so that the soldiers could kill them. When Chue Vue returned to Ban Phan Thao he told the village chief, Ka Ge Moua, what had happened. Ka Ge then told all the villagers not to go because he did not want them to be killed.

[18]

On January 23, 1998 the village chief allowed four Hmong men to go to the fields to see what had happened the day before. These men were Chia Xeng Lor, Neng Lo Lor, Pao Vue, and Chong Neng Vang. They saw that the U.N. post markers and the fences had been torn down, their field houses were burnt to the ground, and the dikes in the paddy fields were all broken up. After having inspected the damaged rice fields they were approached by three soldiers, who said "Do you want to die? You took over our land!" They then fired three shots at these Hmong men. In fear of being killed they ran and hid themselves in some rocky mountain area until it got dark, then snuck back to their village that night.

[19]

The four men reported the incident to Ka Ge, the village chief. So in the morning (January 24, 1998) Mr. Ka Ge sent some people to investigate again. When they arrived they saw that all the rice fields were destroyed and all the dikes broken down. They were able to find the three shell casings from the three rounds that were fired the previous day. They brought them back and reported to Mr. Ka Ge. That same day Mr. Ka Ge went to report the incident to the Vang Vieng prefecture, to Mr. Khamsy, the Social Welfare chief of Vang Vieng, and also to the Governor of Vientiane. He asked them to take immediate action but nothing was done. From January 24-29, 1998, the government did nothing. During this time the soldiers were still guarding the fields, so the Hmong could not go there.

[20]

Since the Lao government did not do anything after five days passed, the four men who had been shot at, had no other choice. So on January 30, 1998, Chia Xeng Lor, Neng Lo Lor, Pao Vue, and Chong Neng Vang went to Vientiane to report the incident to the United Nations, the U.S. Embassy (John Junk), and to "Martin" (head of Consortium, which operates programs for repatriates).

[21]

They waited two days but nothing was done. When the Lao government found out that the Hmong reported this incident to the U.N. and the U.S. Embassy they were furious. So on February 1, 1998, they sent soldiers from Ban Pho Xay to take over the land of sixty-two families. Kou Yang (in the U.S.) received a call from these refugees on February 12, 1998. They asked him what they should do. He told them to wait a while until he could figure something out.

[22]

Finally, on February 16, 1998, the 367 refugees (sixty-two

families) had become very afraid of what would happen to them. They decided to take a chance and go to the U.S. Embassy to request political asylum. Upon arriving at the embassy they talked with John Junk about their problem. The U.N. was called. Then, after talking for a while, these refugees were handed over to the Lao government.

[23]

The Lao government took all these Hmong to a military warehouse at KM 25, and accused them of betraying the government. Everyone was told to "shut up and listen" or they'd be put in prison. If anyone talked they would be killed. Later, the government had three buses take the refugees away, heading northbound. Eight Hmong leaders (Chia Xeng Lor, Neng Lo Lor, Ger Yang, Lue Yang, Pao Vue, Neng Vang, Pa Toua Xiong, and Fai Chia Moua) talked with the U.N. (Prachuab Yang) saying that this was a serious problem which must be solved before they can safely return. The Lao officials responded, "This is our government. This is our land. You have nothing to say about it! Whoever doesn't want to go to prison or be killed better get on the buses. If you want to have trouble just keep talking." These eight Hmong leaders escaped while people were being loaded onto the buses.

[24]

At the present moment these eight Hmong men are still hiding out in the jungle, fearing for their lives. The fate of the other 359 Hmong remains uncertain, since the Lao government has not allowed the U.S. Embassy nor the U.N. to visit the repatriation site since the February 16, 1998 incident. The U.S. Ambassador to Laos (Wendy Chamberlin) said the problem was "solved" on February 18, 1998. This is strange since on February 22 Kou Yang received a phone call from one of the eight escapees, saying that the eight were still hiding out and fearing for their lives.

[25]

Again, on March 14, 1998, Kou Yang received a call from one of the eight saying that they recently called Elizabeth Kirton (one of the U.N. monitors), telling her of their present predicament. They were told not to wander off too far. What was going to be done to help or assist them was not made clear to them. She acknowledged that she had heard about them through the letter I had recently sent to the U.S. Embassy and U.N. in Vientiane.

[26]

These eight Hmong wanted to take a chance and report to the U.S. Embassy in Thailand, thinking that maybe they wouldn't turn down their political asylum request -- as the U.S. Embassy in Laos had done. Kou Yang told them not to do this, because if the Thai police caught them they'd be handed over to the Lao government.

[27]

As of today, March 29, 1998, the fate of these eight Hmong refugee leaders remains uncertain. I just got off the phone several minutes ago talking with Kou Yang. He told me he has not received any news since the March 14, 1998 phone call. The last words from these refugees were that if the U.S. Embassy and the United Nations refused to guarantee their safety, by granting them political asylum, they would continue to live in the jungle.

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Hmong Studies Journal v2n2 Spring 1998