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Item 461

HMONG INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH
www.hmongihrw.org



May 10, 2004

Dear Mr. Chair, Distinguished Members, Brothers and Sisters of the Indigenous Population:

As Hmong Representative from Hmong International Human Rights Watch, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to speak about the ongoing problems of my people.

There are two topics that I would like to address today, the Hmong refugee situation in Thailand and the unmonitored "surrendering" of hundreds of Hmong refugees trapped inside isolated jungle areas of northern Laos.

Over the past six months, our organization has made several fact finding trips to Thailand in which we have talked to thousands of Hmong refugees living at Wat Thamkrabok and other areas of Thailand. The majority of these refugees were issued official UNHCR refugee status at one time, but according to UNHCR policy, they automatically forfeited this status the minute they fled the "security" of the UNHCR refugee camps. The UNHCR fails to acknowledge the fact that many of these Hmong had a legitimate fear of persecution and could not safely return to Laos. The UNHCR sponsored repatriation program did in fact involve forced or coerced forms of repatriation. We have firsthand reports of this.

This is the reason why many Hmong chose to "voluntarily" leave the "protection" of UNHCR refugee camps in the early 1990s. They fled to Wat Thamkrabok or areas of northern Thailand, where they continue to lead a precarious lifestyle. They cannot work legally, they do not have access to schooling, nor do they have freedom of movement. Most rely on financial contributions from their relatives in the United States.

For the past 6-7 years, our organization has requested the United Nations and the U.S. State Department to put pressure on the Lao PDR government to open up the secluded and isolated areas of the country, such as Saysomboun Special Zone, where the most of alleged Human Rights Violations take place.

To this day, we continue to receive firsthand reports from Hmong people fleeing these isolated areas, reporting human rights atrocities that almost seem incomprehensible. Today, we hear reports from the U.S. State Department that the Lao government is currently offering an unofficial amnesty program for those Hmong living in the jungle. They claim it seems to be a "peaceful process" from the reports they receive. Why then does the Lao government continue to deny U.S. Embassy staff, UN personnel, international human rights groups, and other outside observers any kind of access to these areas? We have talked directly with Hmong who have recently fled these areas. They have told us that the Lao military attacked them and that many people were being killed.

In closing, I would like to plead with all of you here today to hear our cries for justice. We are not asking much. We just want the United Nations, the U.S. government, and other international bodies to get access to these areas so that the safety of these Hmong can be properly monitored. We also would like to request that the UNHCR reissue refugee status to the Hmong refugees living outside of Wat Thamkrabok, so that they may be eligible to apply for resettlement in third countries. Furthermore, we would like to request that the Royal Thai Government continues with the hospitality and to accepting the Homeless Hmong to Thailand and to grant citizenship to the ones that chose to remain in Thailand.

Thank You,

Laura Xiong, Executive Director

South East Asia

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