

## **Report on the Hmong-American delegation visit to Ban Napho Repatriation Center Nakhon Phanom, Thailand**

The Joint Voluntary Agency U.S. Indochinese Refugee Resettlement Program

(Thailand)

May 30th - June 7th 1996

### **BACKGROUND:**

On April 1, 1996, the U. S. Department of State announced a final, time-limited resettlement opportunity for eligible Lao highlanders (Hmong) and lowlanders (Lao). Those physically present and officially registered at Ban Napho repatriation center and Sikhui camps would be given one last opportunity to be interviewed for resettlement. The majority of the refugees in Ban Napho repatriation center are Hmong.

With authorization from the Royal Thai Government, the United States will offer resettlement interviews over the coming weeks to those Lao highlanders and lowlanders who are registered with both the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Thai Ministry of Interior and have not previously been screened out or denied U.S. resettlement.

According to U.S. policy, this will be the last opportunity for Laotian refugees to resettle in the United States. The Thai Government has not offered local resettlement to refugees in first asylum camps. Thus those deciding not to participate in the U.S. program will have no other option but to return to Laos.

Statistics for the current Hmong refugee population in Ban Napho repatriation center per UNHCR as of May 31, 1996 break down as follows:

In late April 1996, a U.S. Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA) team went to the camp to survey the registration and screening process for the U.S. program. This team was permitted to interview eligible applicants and present their cases to U.S. immigration officers. On May 7, 1996, information received from the JVA team indicated a reasonable number (752 individuals comprising 147 cases) ready for INS interviews. 93 cases (516 people) had withdrawn their applications, and 25 individuals (comprising 5 cases) had disappeared from the camp. An additional 42 cases totalling 169 individuals had been screened but

were not yet ready for INS interviews. In addition, there are numbers of families who did not show up at the JVA processing center for the screening. This led to the formation of a Hmong-American delegation, organized to visit Hmong refugees at the Ban Napho repatriation center. This delegation was sponsored by the Joint Voluntary Agency in Thailand, operated by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), with the support of the U.S. Department of State, and was approved by the Royal Thai Government.

### **Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center:**

Hmong-Americans have become actively involved and interested in the Ban Napho repatriation center because of humanitarian concerns and continuing opportunity for resettlement in the U. S. First, the majority of Hmong refugees in Ban Napho repatriation center are women and children. The Hmong-American delegation believes that this population (as the last of the refugee holdouts) needed more accurate information than was available in order to make a well-thought-out decision regarding resettlement or repatriation. Secondly, the U.S. announced that unlike in previous instances, there would be no English training language or orientation to American culture and society before the final relocation of the camp population. (Those that were to accept the resettlement option were to receive only a short briefing about air travel.)

The objectives of the Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center were first: to send a message to the Hmong refugees in the camp that this will be the last and final opportunity to resettle as refugees in the United States. Refugees have two choices: resettlement to a third country or repatriation to Laos. In order to assist the refugees at the Ban Napho repatriation center in making their decision, the delegation's second objective was

to disseminate information about life in America. In doing this, myths and rumors about life in America would be dispelled so that Hmong refugees could be well informed about their life decision to resettle or repatriate. Thirdly, the delegation assessed the needs of Hmong refugees by meeting with officials who work closely with the refugees.

The Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center consisted of four Hmong-Americans, two men and two women from three different states. The delegation consisted of the following individuals:

- Paul Pao Herr, a metropolitan Washington D.C. resident and a long time community activist in Hmong communities throughout the United States.
- Mai Zong Vue, a board member of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children in New York, currently working as a Refugee Program Specialist with the state of Wisconsin, Department of Health and Social Services.
- May Kao Yang, a former Director of Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul, Minnesota and a recent graduate (M.A.) of the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. University of Minnesota.
- William Boua Yang, a former soldier from the Vietnam war and ex-mayor of Moun Soum, Luang Prabang province, Laos, who now owns a business in St. Paul, Minnesota.

### **Visit to Ban Napho repatriation center:**

On May 29, 1996, the Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center met with staff from Refugees International and the International Rescue Committee in Washington, DC. for a briefing regarding the Hmong refugee situation in Napho. The Hmong-American delegation departed on May 30, 1996 from Washington, D.C. to Bangkok.

For the past 20 years, the U.S. government has assisted the Hmong refugees in resettlement activities. Today, for the first time in Hmong refugee resettlement history, a group of Hmong-Americans assisted the U.S. and Thai governments in an official capacity in assessing the needs of Hmong refugees. Preparations for the visit included the gathering of visual aids and development of presentations, videos consisting of Hmong life in the U.S.; Hmong newspapers and Hmong magazines were compiled to enhance the delegation's discussions with Hmong refugees in the Ban Napho repatriation center. Once in Bangkok, the Hmong-American Delegation met with JVA representatives to review the logistical plans of the trip to Ban Napho repatriation center. Mr. John Crowley of the U.S. Embassy in Thailand and Ms. Dianne Dawkins, the JVA Representative in Bangkok accompanied the delegation to Napho repatriation center.

After arriving in Nakhon Phanom on June 3, 1996, the delegates paid a courtesy visit to His Excellency Supong Manasphaiboon, Vice Governor of Nakhon Phanom and the Honorable Charoen Wimutthikosol, Chief of Staff. The delegation was well received and had the opportunity to discuss Hmong refugee issues and concerns before departing to the Ban Napho repatriation center. At the Napho repatriation center, the delegation was well received by Mr. Naravuth Chanthong, the Camp Commander. Mr. Chanthong explained

about the logistical process in the camp to the delegates. After meeting with the Camp Commander, the Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center met with approximately 1200 refugees. Refugees were packed in the Wat (within the camp perimeter) waiting for the delegation to deliver its messages. Whether sitting on the floor, standing in the back, or crowding outside the Wat, children, parents and elders gathered wherever there was room to listen to the delegation's presentations.

The format of the two-day visit included two three-hour general sessions and four simultaneous two-hour breakout sessions. The first general session included the camp commander's welcoming remarks, introductions of the Hmong-American delegates, video presentations of lifestyles in the United States including the success stories, Hmong media and publications, and various news clips illustrating the Hmong adaptation outcomes, and question and answer sessions. On the second day, the delegates reconvened with refugees in a general session in the morning and then broke into four sessions in the afternoon. The Hmong refugees who had withdrawn their application or who had not shown up at the JVA processing center were specifically invited to the afternoon sessions in an effort to gain understanding of why some Hmong were not participating.

Each delegate led one of the second day afternoon break-out sessions. Refugees seemed comfortable in asking questions and adding comments. In general, older Hmong men and those who had withdrawn their applications felt more comfortable talking to William Yang, especially those that had withdrawn their applications for specific reasons such as Hmong politics. Paul Herr dealt mostly with the BSC (screened-out) and allegation cases. Mai Zong Vue and May Kao Yang handled general sessions including screened-out cases, questions regarding the educational system in the U.S., and other issues such as employment opportunities, nursing homes, youth issues, refugee assistance, and general lifestyle topics. In an effort to document the concerns of refugees in Ban Napho repatriation center, the delegation returned with both video and photographic records of their visit to the center.

### **Factors that influence refugees from declining their interviews or withdrawing applications:**

- The Hmong in Ban Napho repatriation center are concerned that once they reach the United States, there will be no way for them to survive

economically. Many ex-military individuals expressed that they were middle-aged and unable to learn a new and different language or adapt to a country that they had never seen.

- Some Hmong wanted to know who would help support them in case they were unable to support themselves. Some thought that they would be required to go to work directly with no time for transition.
- Older and elderly Hmong ex-military were concerned that they would not receive proper burial in the United States according to Hmong culture and tradition. For example, a Hmong man expressed fear that when he dies, his body will just be thrown into the river. Others said that they did not want an autopsy performed after death.
- Those Hmong who refused resettlement and had withdrawn applications still believed that they would have another opportunity to come to the United States.
- Hmong parents feared crime and gangs in the United States. They did not want their children to grow up and become criminals.
- Hmong families did not understand why the United States was selectively denying entrance to some members and not to other members of an extended family. Thus, none of the family, nuclear or extended, wanted to resettle even after approval.
- The majority of Hmong men don't want to resettle in the United States because they have been told that their wives will abandon them and their children will not respect them.
- Hmong in Ban Napho repatriation center have received conflicting information from Hmong in the United States about Hmong life in America. They also have received misinformation from the resistance and Hmong/Lao human rights organizations based in the United States about their rights. This has resulted in confusion, fear, and anger from Hmong in Thailand.

According to the delegation's observations, the following factors caused some Hmong refugees in Ban Napho repatriation center to withdraw their applications for resettlement and others to not show up for JVA processing.

- A few of those who withdrew were holding out hoping that one day the resistance and the Hmong/Lao human rights organizations based in the United States will win back Laos.
- Those who had a physical handicap from the war were advised by relatives and friends in the U.S. that they would not be able to survive in the United States after welfare reform because of their handicaps (even if they could get JVA approval for resettlement).
- Hmong families with one or more members who have illegally left the Ban Napho repatriation center will not make a decision to resettle or repatriate for fear of leaving those members behind forever. In some cases, they are holding out to see if the family member will return before they make a decision.

### **Concerns and Issues Raised by Ban Napho repatriation center residents:**

- Many Hmong wanted to know why only some Hmong were allowed into the United States and others were not.
- Hmong with BSC cases (those who came after the cut-off date) wanted to know if they would become eligible to resettle in the United States. They were confused as to why they were not accorded refugee status since they were involved directly in the war but only fled later from the remote areas.
- Hmong who had tested positive for drug use during the last INS interviews wanted to know if they would be called to be re-tested. Many of these ex-military Hmong men that are now free of drugs want to be re-tested for eligibility for resettlement in the United States.
- Many of these allegations have been proven false and the Hmong are worried that these claims will put them in danger upon return to Laos.
- Some Hmong families who had family members that left Ban Napho repatriation center worried that they will not be able to reunite with their families if they take resettlement/repatriation options. (This concern led many families to ignore activities at the JVA processing center or to

withdraw their application for resettlement after JVA had processed it.)

- Those who had been denied resettlement for any reason were unclear about what would happen to them.
- Some Hmong were frustrated with the JVA process and confused as to why they had not been called for interviews or did not receive proper notification about the status of their cases.

## **Return to Bangkok:**

Upon returning from Ban Napho repatriation center to Bangkok, the delegates paid a courtesy visit to the Honorable Khun Wannita Boonpraong, Office of Operations Center for Displaced persons in Thailand, Ministry of Interior and his Excellency Ralph Boyce, Deputy Chief of Mission, U.S. Embassy in Thailand. The delegation was well received by both ministries and had the opportunity to report their findings and discuss Hmong refugee issues and concerns.

## **Proposed Delegation Recommendations:**

There are many issues that were brought to the delegation's attention during the two day discussion. Not all issues raised were relevant to the delegation's objectives. This summary of recommendations relates to refugee resettlement from Ban Napho repatriation center. To meet the needs of refugee resettlement programs in the United States and the Hmong refugees in Ban Napho repatriation center, the delegation proposes the following recommendations:

- The Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center recommends that there should be at least one Hmong-American to provide cultural orientation (however brief) to refugees before leaving for the United States. There is an inordinate amount of anxiety related to departure and arrival. Furthermore, a Hmong-American staff on-site at the Ban Napho repatriation center will debunk the refugees' negative stereotypes of life in the United States and provide accurate information regarding resettlement.
- Depending on the rate of resettlement and repatriation decisions made by

refugees at Ban Napho repatriation center and at the recommendation of May Kao Yang (the remaining delegation representative on site in Thailand), there should be a follow-up visit by the delegation within the next eight weeks. The delegation believes that a follow-up visit would continue to build the trust of the Hmong refugees in Thailand and facilitate a quicker decision making process, in addition to preserving resources for future programs.

- The information the delegation received from BSC cases indicated that many of these people had previously been associated with U.S. during the war. The delegation recommends that the refugees who have been screened out because of the cut off date be re-considered as refugees and be permitted a chance for resettlement.
- The delegation recommends that Hmong refugees who were denied for U.S. resettlement due to positive drug tests should be allowed to be retested because: 1) the individual may have received treatment, and 2) those individuals who are former soldiers probably cannot be safely returned to Laos. Also, it is critical that testing procedures and test results be explained to the refugees, as they are confused as to how many tests they must take. If possible, the individual should be given the option to be treated in Thailand and re-tested. In these cases, flexibility should be given to the rest of the family to proceed to resettlement with some assurance that the individual will be able to join them later.
- Hmong refugees who have had allegations against them of working for the current Lao regime before escaping to Thailand should have the opportunity to appeal their cases, especially when the accuser has already admitted to fabricating false statements and false information to the authorities.
- Some Hmong families whose family members left the Ban Napho repatriation center should be allowed to reunite with them whether they choose resettlement or repatriation options. This will increase the number of families showing up at the JVA processing center, decrease the number of withdrawn applications, and may prevent additional escapes from the camp.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Throughout the visit to the Ban Napho Repatriation center, the delegation was aware that time is critical for the Hmong refugees in Thailand. However, the refugees in Thailand and Hmong-Americans can accomplish much in a short time if they come to the same table and work together to find a solution to the refugee problem. So long as Hmong continue to fabricate false statements and accuse each other of wrong doing, they will not be able to help themselves. It's now time to move on and provide closure to the refugees' problems.

The delegation believes that time is limited for the Hmong refugees in Thailand. At some point, people have to make decisions in order to get things started. The Royal Thai Government and the population of Thailand already have given twenty-one years of protection to the Hmong. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will not protect Hmong refugees forever. And the U.S. Government will not continue to financially support the Hmong forever. It's time for Hmong to reunite and aid those who resettle to third countries as well as those who choose to return to Laos.

It's time to close this chapter of Hmong history and move on. Hmong leaders should stop circulating conflicting information to the Hmong communities in the U.S., in Thailand and in Laos. In fact, Hmong in Thailand and Laos would very much like to have the same opportunity to interact with other ethnic groups just as we have in the United States.

The delegation believes that now with help from the United States and the Royal Thai Governments, it's time for Hmong themselves to take an active role in determining their future and solving their own problems.

The delegation is pleased to offer these achievements of the visit to the Ban Napho repatriation center, and looks forward to continuing to assist the efforts of the U.S. Department of State and the Royal Thai Government in resolving the concerns of the Hmong refugees in Thailand. The delegates hope to continue to apply their skills and experience in resolving this painful chapter in Hmong history and promoting a successful resolution for all Hmong refugees.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

The success of this trip for the Hmong-American Delegation to Ban Napho repatriation center rests upon the endless hours of many hard working people whose hearts are with the refugees, especially the women and children. The delegation thanks the following individuals and agencies for making this visit possible.

The Royal Thai Government

U.S. Department of State

International Rescue Committee

Joint Voluntary Agency

Refugees International

Refugee and Migration Affairs, U.S. Embassy in Bangkok

Southeast Asia Resource Action Center

Hmong National Development, Inc.

Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

His Excellency Supong Manasphaiboon, Vice Governor, Nakhon Phanom

Hon. Charoen Wimutthikosol, Chief of Staff, Nakhon Phanom

Hon. Khun Wannida Boonpracong, Ministry of the Interior

Mr. Narabuth Chanthong, Napho Camp Commander

Mr. Pongsawat Sutthisarakorn, Ministry of the Interior

Mr. John Crowley, RMA, U.S. Embassy in Bangkok

Ms. Dianne Dawkins, Joint Voluntary Agency Representative

Ms. Lorna Stevens, International Rescue Committee

Ms. Ka Ying Yang, Women's Association for Hmong and Lao

*Note:* This report reflects only the views of the delegates based on their observations and discussions on this visit to the Ban Napho repatriation center.

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