

CAMBODIANS URGED TO FIGHT DEPORTATION BILL

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LOWELL -- Chaydy Pel's brother, Mora, is in prison for attempted murder, and could be deported to Cambodia for his crime, but he says it won't come to that.

"If they send him back to Cambodia, he says he's going to hang himself," Chaydy Pel said. "He'd rather die here than in Cambodia."

Mora Pell is not a U.S. citizen and has been in prison for five years. Under a new agreement between the United States and Cambodia, he could be returned to his native country.

His brother and about 150 other Cambodian immigrants packed the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association offices last night to gather information and ask questions about the new policy, which will target about 1,200 Cambodian immigrants with "aggravated felony" convictions on their record who are not American citizens.

Aggravated felonies run the gamut from murder to possession of drugs. Many in the Cambodian community fear they or a family member may be sent back to the country from which they escaped, even those who have turned their lives around and are now contributing to American society.

Community leaders last night encouraged local Cambodians to be united and vocal in their opposition to the new agreement. They want to focus on a bill in Congress filed by U.S. Rep. Barney Frank, a Newton Democrat, that would change the aggravated felony laws.

"We need unification. Long Beach, Chicago and Lowell are the only cities taking this seriously," said Sara Khun, an aide to U.S. Rep. Martin Meehan, citing the communities in the U.S. with the largest Cambodian immigrant populations. "I know everybody is scared to show their face and show their case, but the stronger we are, the better this bill will be."

In 1996, a new federal law expanded the categories of aggravated felonies that would cause deportation, but the Cambodian government never accepted the deportees. The new deal with Cambodia was struck last month.

Officials are unsure exactly who would be sent back to Cambodia, or when. In many cases, immigrants are expected to check in regularly with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. At future meetings, they could be told they must return to Cambodia.

Khun said according to the Cambodian Royal Embassy, deportees would be given a place to live in Cambodia, but she said she doesn't believe that would be the case. Jennifer Smith, a public defense lawyer, said Cambodia may find itself dealing with a situation where they cannot know with certainty whether a deportee is actually Cambodian.

"Cambodia has no way of determining if any of these people are Cambodian citizens," Smith said. "You don't have birth certificates or visas or passports, and neither does Cambodia."

The prospect of going back to Cambodia is a scary one for those who may be on the deportation list. Smith and other officials are encouraging potential deportees to attend INS meetings and not run and hide, but Cambodians here know their homeland is not where they want to be.

"We ran away. We came here and we ran away from war and torture, and to be sent back is to go back to that. Life in Cambodia is unspeakable," said Hai Cheng, a board member at CMAA. "I wish, I pray, I beg our representatives to reconsider this."

Smith said that those with aggravated felonies on their record have little chance of avoiding deportation if they are on the list. She said there is no timetable as to when deportees would be returned, but she expected many would be sent together on flights back to Southeast Asia.

Chaydy Pel, now 32, left Cambodia when she was 10 years old. Her legs are permanently disabled after she spent her childhood carrying rocks up and down a mountain. She doesn't want her brother going back to that place he left when he was an infant.

"I was in Cambodia when I was 10 years old. I know what it is like," she said. "I don't know what to do. I have no more tears."