

November 16, 2004 – Sacramento, California

Prepared for “**Joint Informational Hearing on Hmong Refugee Resettlement in California**”
Statement by Doua Thor, Deputy Director, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC)

The Resettlement of the Hmong Refugees from Wat Thamkrabok — A National Perspective

Introduction

As a former refugee and now an American citizen, speaking to you all today regarding resettlement of Hmong refugees from Thailand represents a full circle filled with emotion and excitement. I was born in Laos, escaped to Thailand, lived in Ban Vinai refugee camp, and came to the United States with my own family fleeing persecution because my father was a Hmong soldier fighting for the United States. Never did I think that someday, I would have the opportunity to stand in front of you to tell the story of and prepare for a new wave of Hmong refugees.

My name is Doua Thor and I currently serve as the Deputy Director of the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center also known as SEARAC. Based in Washington, DC, SEARAC is a national nonprofit refugee organization managed primarily by and for Americans with heritage in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. SEARAC advances the interest of the Southeast Asian community through leadership development, capacity building, public policy advocacy, and community empowerment.

For this opportunity, I would like to thank the Commission on Asian and Pacific Islander American Affairs, the Senate Health and Human Services Committee, and the Asian Pacific Islander Legislative Caucus. This forum is the first of its kind in any of the States and shows your commitment to the successful integration of the Hmong refugees from Wat Thamkrabok. In addition, I'd like to thank all of the local community based organizations, allies of, and the local Hmong community for your continuing support and investment in this new community

History

People from the Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam constitute the largest group of refugees ever to build new lives in the United States. Nearly all Hmong entered the U.S. as refugees or as relatives of refugees at various times after the end of the Vietnam War.

The Hmong have a unique history with the United States and began to relocate to this country in 1975, after fighting alongside the United States, rescuing downed American pilots, and gathering intelligence for America's military forces during the Vietnam War. At the end of what is now known as the “Secret War of Laos” the American-supported South Vietnamese government succumbed to the military pressures of their Communist neighbors to the north. The Hmong were then targeted for persecution and had to leave their home country for fear of losing their lives. “Many fell victim to the genocide that ensued after the takeover. Desperate families fled by the thousands, on foot, by boat, or, if they were lucky, on the few U.S. planes that returned for them.”¹

Following the War, hundreds of thousands of Hmong fled Laos for refugee camps in Thailand. The majority were resettled in countries throughout the world such as the United States, Australia, French Guyana, Canada, and France. In 1992, the United Nations High Council for Refugees closed Ban Vinai, the largest of the refugee camps. For fear of repatriation, thousands of these remaining refugees later found relative sanctuary in Wat Thamkrabok, a Buddhist temple in central Thailand. Approximately 15,000 Hmong refugees now live at the temple grounds. Others have

¹ *Visiting the Hmong, America's Forgotten Refugees* By Pha Lo, Pacific News Service

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since left the temple and now live on the margins of Thai society, without access to Thai citizenship or the possibility of integration into that country. Many inside the temple grounds, as well as outside of them, still possess the documentation of refugee status they obtained in refugee camps.

The U.S. Decision

After years of uncertainty, on December 18, 2003, the U.S. Government announced that it would offer the option of resettlement in the United States as a durable solution for those living at Wat Thamkrabok. In addition, while this population is being processed as refugees, the Wat Thamkrabok temple area is not designated an official UNHCR recognized refugee camp, and therefore does not receive traditional aid resources such as food and water.

Before the announcement and even now, these refugees continue to exist in impoverished and vulnerable circumstances. Without access to Thai citizenship, they lack full rights in that country, are often victims of exploitation, and remain there only under the temporary permission of the Thai Government. Since the end of the Vietnam War in Laos in 1975, these remaining Hmong refugees have been trapped in a country that has repeatedly restated its unwillingness to fully integrate them.

Life at the Wat

Currently, the entire area at Wat Thamkrabok has been fenced off by barbed wire, guarded by Thai military who allow minimal access to the temple grounds. The area is divided into four sections with section leaders who disseminate information and report to the Thai military. Of the 15, 000 in the camps, 74% of the population are under the age of 25.² Water, food, education (above a junior high equivalency), and medical care must be purchased. Malnutrition and inadequate health care are prevalent. For a population with limited mobility and access to wages, these basic resources are difficult to sustain.

Education and Employment

The majority of the population grew up in the Thai refugee camps and have had some exposure to Thai, English, and Hmong literacy, however lack fluency in any of the languages due to the lack of resources and isolation. After the Wat Thamkrabok area was surrounded by Thai military, opportunities for the residents to work greatly decreased. Since the resettlement began, only a limited number of residents have been allowed to work outside of the Wat mostly as migrant farmers or contractors. None of these workers are permitted to go beyond the limits of the Sayaburi Province (more than thirty to one hour drive outside the Wat.) Beyond that point, they can be arrested. As a result work opportunities are limited and fewer people are allowed to work.

Perseverance

Despite these obstacles, the Hmong have continued to be industrious and resourceful. As migrant farmers, they show up at around 2-3 am daily to get onto pick-up trucks to go to farms to pick vegetables and earn wages. Residents make anywhere between 80 to 150 baht per day (\$2-\$3.75) Families have made these small wages support as many as 10 people. Even for those who cannot leave the Wat, both men and women make paj ntaub (traditional Hmong tapestry and needlework.) It is said by observers that they often sew until every minute of daylight has gone and then next to an open fire of small lamps. These pieces of paj ntaub are then sold for money.

² American Paj Ntaub, Wat Tham Krabok Assessment Team Report, Ramsey County, Minnesota

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While lacking an opportunity to experience education fully, the young do have minimal exposure to American society through the internet and interactions with relatives in the United States. When interviewed, a young girl, 14-years-old named Pa Houa from the Wat said “she doesn’t want to get married because she wants to go to school in the United States and be independent.” Many of the young are eager to attend school and learn.

In addition, there are 6 Hmong Americans who have been hired to assist with cultural orientation and the resettlement process in Thailand. For the first time, the presence of Hmong Americans as the lead cultural orientation team to prepare these refugees for resettlement has begun a process of integration taught through the lens of former refugees themselves.

The Hmong in America

The resettlement of the Hmong refugees from Wat Thamkrabok has ignited a fire of energy and support from community members throughout the United States. The resettlement of these refugees has proven the desire of refugee communities to actively engage in all aspects of democracy, advocacy, philanthropy, coalition building, and activism.

As of October 2004, more than 6,000 people have departed to the United States with another 9,000 anticipated next year. These new refugees will have an opportunity to join a community who continue to contribute tremendously to this country. California is home to Dr. Tony Vang, Professor at CSU, Fresno, and a member of the Fresno School Board; Paul Lo, Board President of the Merced City School Board; and Lee Yang and Bao Moua, who defied cultural boundaries to become the first Hmong principal in California and the first Hmong woman vice principal in Sacramento. The state of Minnesota has elected to the state legislature Senator Mee Moua and Representative Cy Thao. In addition, both Wisconsin and Minnesota Hmong communities have established Hmong Chamber of Commerce organizations representing Hmong-owned businesses offering community programs and providing expertise for up and coming entrepreneurs. It is a testament of the strength of the refugee resettlement program that these leaders—educated, civically engaged, and proactive—have succeeded. And it is with that potential and more that these New Americans come from Thailand with.