

>>>Media 10/23/07<<<

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211 Exhumed Bodies Remain: What's next?

Oct. 10, 2007- In a recent public press conference, the Hmong Grave Desecration National Delegation announced an agreement has been reached for reburial of Hmong graves desecrated in Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand.

Member of the delegation Michael Yang, who went to Thailand in September, said they had constructive conversations with all representatives involved, including the Phothi Phaowana Songkhroa Foundation and the Buddha Dhamma 31 Nakhon Ratchasima Foundation that were responsible for the exhumations of some 900 graves.

Yang said, "The Thais are in the same direction of 'spirit of cooperation' with us and we are very positive about our meeting with the Foundations that has possession of the 211 bodies."

The delegation, supported by Sen. Norm Coleman's office, spent two weeks in Thailand to negotiate with Thai and U.S. Embassy officials, the Abbot of the Wat Tham Krabok Temple, and chairmen from the two Chinese foundations who excavated and cremated the Hmong graves. During this trip, the 14-member delegation from throughout the U.S. was taken to a site of closed coffins, and they were told that the remaining bodies were in those coffins.

Yang said, "We saw the remaining of the 211 bones with our very own eyes."

After dialogues with the foundations that performed the digging, the delegation said that the foundations expressed they did not have any malicious intent. In addition, they explained that the actions were done with respect for the deceased as related to their religion.

Right now the delegation wants the cooperation of the Hmong-American leaders, cultural experts and families to come up with solutions for the remaining bodies. With deadline so close, a resolution must be sought immediately and the delegation has drafted several possible ways for protecting the bodies that remain.

After the report, a video from the trip was showed. Then, family members and attendees were given time to ask questions and suggest solutions.

All those who attended the press conference showed agreement that the delegation demand a commitment from the Thai that this won't reoccur and that remaining 211 bodies be buried and be protected. Also, families are demanding a formal apology regarding the cremated bodies. The families are asking for permission to the sites where the ashes are buried. In addition, there was an agreement to identify the remaining 211 bodies before further actions.

The delegation also said that the Thai Highland Foundation offered land for the delegation to purchase and rebury the remaining bodies there. However, the families would like to see the Thai rebury the bodies at their own expense.

The committee also reported on the 480 cremated Hmong bodies that were taken from monastery and were reburied at the Hulin Cemetery, a Chinese gravesite. The bodies were identified as 113 kids, 161 women and 206 men.

Yang remembers asking, "How would we know that these 480 bodies are in here?"

Yang pointed to a photo with the Chinese character for Hmong engraved onto the tombstone. Yang said,

"Here," while pointing to the character. "They told us that this character is Hmong. But we are still unsure. We will get a Chinese expert to translate this character if it's Hmong or not," Yang said.

An elder lady, Zoua Yang, was among the 250 people who attended the meeting. She viewed some of the 500 photos of the Hmong graves taken by the delegation; she stood in silent tears.

"I can't locate my husband anymore," said Zoua Yang as she sobbed and scanned each photo for signs of her deceased husband who was among the bodies exhumed. "He's gone."

Zoua Yang then covered her mouth, sickened by the disturbing images of the corpses. Her 4 ft. 8 in. body shuddered and she murmured: "Where is he? Where is he?" She continued to wipe her own watery eyes.

Another girl who stood next to her shook her head in disbelief. "This is just sad," she said.

In 2005, the Phothi Phaowana Songkhroa Foundation and the Buddha Dhamma 31 Nakhon Ratchasima Foundation began digging the graves. An approximate total of 900 graves have been removed and the bodies exhumed since then.

Seng, a former resident of the Wat Tham Krabok, recalls that the Hmong community was informed in 2001 that the graves would be removed. "That was the last time we ever heard of anything," he said. "The Thai said they will follow the rule of law in their land to leave the dead untouched." However, in 2005, the foundations began digging the graves without announcing any news to us, Seng said.

Wat Tham Krabok became a refugee camp for the Hmong who fled from Laos after the Vietnam War in 1975. In 2004, about 5,000 of the Hmong refugees immigrated to Minnesota. In 2005, after nearly all the Hmong refugees have left, the abbot of Wat Tham Krabok called for the removal of hundreds of Hmong graves for what he has claimed as environmental reasons.

Both foundations are organizations that seek unclaimed graves for the purpose of exhuming, cleansing and cremating the bones in a ceremonial ritual they believe frees the souls allowing passage into heaven. The Phothi Phaowana Songkhroa Foundation said they were told by the abbot that the 480 Hmong bodies they cremated were unclaimed. The Buddha Dhamma 31 Nakhon Ratchasima Foundation was only able to exhume an estimated 211 bodies and have not yet cremated them.

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