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By Wameng Moua & Kathy Moua | Hmong Today

BOTH GRAVE DELEGATIONS RETURN WITH MORE QUESTIONS

Describing their visit to the gravesite at the Wat Thamkrabok in Thailand, Michael Yang's eyes open wide.

"All day long, it had been a sunny day with no cloud in sight," Yang recalls while excitedly raising his arms above his head. "Suddenly, after visiting the site where the graves had been dug up, the sky opened up and we were hit with typhoon like rain. In my mind, and consulting with the elders, that was a clear sign that the spirits were with us on our journey."

Along with 13 others from throughout the United States, Yang was part of the Hmong Grave Desecration National Delegation whose mission to Thailand was to investigate and seek answers on finding a "respectable solution" to the mass grave desecrations that occurred after more than 15,000 inhabitants left Wat Thamkrabok to immigrate to the United States in 2005.

The Delegation spent over a week meeting with the American Ambassador in Thailand, government officials from the Saraburi Province, leaders from the Wat Thamkrabok and members from both Chinese foundations that were involved in the physical excavation of the bodies.

Displaying a set of photographs newly taken from their trip, Delegation spokesperson Sia Lo, a St. Paul based attorney, pointed to the images of tattered Hmong burial clothing sprawled over bones.



(Photo Courtesy of Mayor's Delegation)

"We were able to locate the remaining 211 bodies that had been stored by one of the Chinese religious foundations that had originally dug them up," Lo detailed from their meeting with those in Thailand who was involved in the grave exhumations. "Furthermore, we were able to negotiate a number of different alternatives on where to properly re-bury these bodies."

With the information the Delegation was able to attain, organizers hope to quickly convene a meeting between all the national 18-clan leaders where a decision would be made on what to do with the 211 bodies.

Among some of the alternatives discussed by Delegation members are to purchase land in Thailand where the bodies could be transferred, which according to Delegation members, would be the most ideal situation because the families would be assured of their relative's remains.

There is also the option to keep the bodies buried where they currently are. This option, however, would not give any assurances to families on the future care of the graves.

The Delegation members did report that their hopes to return the bodies back to the original graves at the Wat Thamkrabok was rejected by leadership at the Buddhist temple.

"In fact, the Abbott even suggested that we move all the remaining graves from the Wat because he couldn't guarantee that they were finished with the grave excavations," Sia Lo continued. "So we do know the Wat is not an option."

When asked if any of these organizations would pay for damages and future restoration of the graves, Delegation members were quick to answer that all funds would need to be raised by family members, community leaders and organizations concerned with the future of these remains.

"That is something that will need to be addressed at the upcoming meeting with national leaders," Yang included.

Traveling to Thailand at the same time to deal with the same issues was a delegation sent by St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman. Included in this group were Sen. Mee Moua, Sen. Larry Pogemiller, Mayor Coleman's Policy Aide Va-Megn Thoj and community activists Yee Chang.

The major difference between these two delegations, Va-Megn Thoj explains, is that the Mayor's Delegation was going on official government business.

"We went to find out the facts so that we could come back with options for the families. It's not our place to make the decisions for them," explained Thoj when asked about the delegation's mission. "We didn't go there seeking to make policy changes."

Although controversy surfaced between the two groups during a recent St. Paul City Council meeting, both sides insist they are in agreement of the same goals and thus have a working relationship.

"People are so quick to make this situation negative," Michael Yang explains. "But it's just two groups that have the same goals in mind. The difference is that we are the national committee and they are a state and city committee."

While conducting separate investigations, the two delegations came up with similar conclusions.

In 2005, the abbot of Wat Tham Krabok, Luangpaw Charoen, summoned the Phothi Phaowana Songkhroa Foundation and the Buddha Dhamma 31 Nakhon Ratchasima Foundation to dig up hundreds of Hmong graves for what he explains as environmental reasons.

"If there is anyone to blame – it would be the Wat Tham Krabok people because clearly they knew that the graves belonged to Hmong refugees. There is a history of discrimination against the refugees – this is just a part of the pattern," said Thoj.

Over 50 community members, 20 of which were family members affected by the desecration of the graves, and elected officials attended an informational meeting held by the delegation on October 10, 2007 in Saint Paul.

Senator Moua started her report by passing a message from Ambassador Boyce to the Hmong families in Minnesota assuring his commitment to find a resolution to the issue.

After conversations with the foundations that performed the digging, the delegation reported that the foundations did not have any malicious intent, further explaining that, according to their religion, the actions were done with respect for the deceased.

The Phothi Phaowana Songkhroa Foundation is a non-profit organization that seeks 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. They were told by the Abbot that the 480 Hmong bodies they cremated were unclaimed.



(Photo courtesy of Hmong Grave Desecration National Delegations)

The Buddha Dhamma 31 Nakhon Ratchasima Foundation has a similar purpose, but due to time restrictions, they were only able to exhume an estimated 211 bodies and have not yet cremated them. Prior to this trip, the Foundation had set a December deadline for families to reclaim bodies. As a result of the delegation, the Foundation has agreed not to take any actions with the bodies until further notice.

Senator Moua gave a determined explanation of her conversation with the foundations, making a point that, "We explained to the Foundations that we understand they were performing rituals according to their beliefs, but we needed them to understand that according to Hmong beliefs and traditions, the exhumation of graves is a severe violation that not only disrupts the soul of the deceased, but of the living relatives as well."

Perhaps due to the timing, the Mayor's group was denied the opportunity to open the coffins for viewing of the bodies. The National group, however, was able to view and photograph the remains of what they believe are Hmong bodies.

After the report and viewing of video footage from the trip, family members were allowed time to voice their concerns and suggestions for possible resolutions.

First and foremost, they demanded a commitment from the Thai that this will not happen again and that the bodies that remain buried be protected.

In regards to the cremated bodies, the families are asking for a formal apology, access to the site to be able to honor and pay respect to the deceased and there was some mention of the possibility of erecting a monument.

There was an overwhelming consensus on the need for positive identification of the 211 bodies before any further actions should be taken. Furthermore, the Thai would have to incur all the costs of reclaiming the deceased.

"This is a human right issue and a justice issue. The desecration is really reflective of the oppression that Hmong people experience in Thailand. The Hmong American people were able to send a delegation over there with a clear message that Hmong people are not to be treated poorly. These graves were not unclaimed – these graves belonged to Hmong people," said Thoj.



Hmong Grave Desecration National Delegation



Mayor Coleman's Grave Desecration Delegation