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By Wameng Moua | Hmong Today

CONTROVERSY FOLLOWS ST. PAUL GRAVE DELEGATION TO THAILAND

The world was sickened when video footage showing hundreds of Hmong graves being dug-up at the Wat Thamkrabok refugee camp in Thailand became available to the public.

With ancestor worship as the main element of the Hmong traditional religion, there is no bigger act of defamation than to dig the bones of a dead relative.

According to Chung Xue Moua, a shaman and a cultural expert, such action against a relative's grave is believed to bring a life-long curse upon the family.

"After we die, much depends on the position of our bones," explained Moua about the Hmong religion. "As our spirit journeys towards our ancestors, everything from the material of the casket to the clothes that we depart with becomes a factor on this journey. There is nothing worse to a Hmong family than to have the bones of your relatives completely removed."

What was even more disturbing to Moua and other religious observers was how the grave diggers, a Chinese religious sect hired by the Thai landowners, treated the bones: As though they were on a recreational outing, the gravediggers casually boiled the bones and scraped the flesh clean.

When the video was shown to audiences, there were no dry eyes in the room.

For one occasion, it had seemed like all the political infighting among the Hmong had halted as everybody united against the horrid acts perpetrated on the Hmong people.

For the next two years, a number of initiatives were set into motion including a massive campaign that was launched by the University of Minnesota Human Rights program to address the acts at the United Nations. In addition to that, community leaders teamed up with their local politicians to create a united front against the continuing assault.

Mayor Coleman of St. Paul helped to pass an official city proclamation against the grave desecrations and the State of Minnesota followed suit with Sen. Mee Moua and Rep. Cy Thao leading the way.

During a brief encounter with then U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Anan, Mayor Coleman urged the world leader to specifically look into the grave desecrations. Whether that meeting had anything to do with what proceeded, the results have been impressive in terms of how the Thai government has reacted: They opened their door for negotiations—something that rarely ever happens when it concerns the Hmong.

Jump two years since the videos surfaced and the mayor is still in the picture. In April 2007, the Mayor formed the Grave Desecration Reconciliation Working Group to recommend an appropriate response after he received word from U.S. Ambassador to Thailand Ralph L. Boyce offering assistance on this issue. Ambassador Boyce also recommended that the City of Saint Paul send a delegation to Thailand to work with the Thai government on the community's behalf.

The Mayor's Delegation will travel to Thailand from September 21-29, 2007.

"The delegation presents an opportunity for the City of St. Paul to address the tragedy of the grave desecration," said Mayor Coleman. "With the assistance of the U.S. Embassy in Thailand, we hope to find answers for the families who are suffering as a result of this tragedy."

Confirmed representatives of the Mayor's delegation are State Senator Mee Moua, international human rights lawyer Maya Diokno, community activist Yee Chang, and Mayor's Policy Associate Va-Megn Thoj. The trip will be privately funded.

"There is no better person to lead this Delegation than Senator Mee Moua," said Mayor Coleman. "She's been a strong advocate on this issue from the beginning and is crucial to the success of the mission."

Despite what would seem an obvious choice, however, some community leaders don't think the mayor's delegation is the correct group to send to Thailand.

On September 19 during a scheduled St. Paul City Council meeting in which the Council was to vote on officially sanctioning the delegation, a group of protestors tried to block this vote.

Michael Yang, head of the National Association of Hmong Justice, along with attorney Sia Lo led a group into the Council meeting to speak against the delegation.

With signs that asked the mayor to "Back Off" and other signs reading, "Hmong are best to make decisions for Hmong", the group, which included small children, spoke to the Council during the session allowed for citizens to speak.

"This is about our culture," Michael Yang announced. "And the people in the best position to do that are our Hmong cultural elders who know that tradition. This is a Hmong issue."

Sia Lo made it clear that the community had gotten together over many meetings throughout the last two years and selected their group to represent the community in Thailand and not the mayor's group.

"You have the mayor's group, who he appointed, and you have our group who the people have chosen and entrusted to go to Thailand to deal with this sensitive cultural issue," Lo remarked to the media. "We have asked the Mayor to join our delegation and not send his own."

According to Va-Megn Thoj from the Mayor's office, however, the family members who were directly affected by the grave desecration have given their full support to the Mayor and his group.

"They recognize the work and effort that the Mayor has given to this project," Thoj reported from having spoken to dozens of families. "And they also see the reasoning behind sending Sen. Mee Moua, the highest ranking elected official in America of Hmong ethnicity, to go speak to Thai government representatives."

Asked why he thought this group was trying to block the Mayor's delegation, Thoj paused a second and noted, "Some people just want to be leaders, I guess."

Thoj also made it clear that the project was being paid for by private donations, most of which came from Native American tribes.

"Grave desecration is a big concern for Native Americans, so when they heard about what was happening to the Hmong, they got together and pitched in. This issue goes beyond just a Hmong issue. It's a human rights issue."

Despite the protest, the City Council unanimously passed the sanctioning of the delegation who went to Thailand as scheduled. Apparently the other group went as well. The delegation will hold an open forum after they return to let the public know of their findings.