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Group: Hmong Bodies To Be Returned To Thailand

St. Paul (AP) — Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul, said that in the faith of her people disturbing the dead can leave souls to wander and affect the health and livelihoods of those still alive.

A national delegation of Hmong representatives has negotiated a deal with Thai officials for the reburial of 211 Hmong bodies that were exhumed from the grounds of a Buddhist monastery in Thailand two years ago.

Michael Yang, a member of a national Hmong delegation that returned from Thailand this week, announced Wednesday that the verbal agreement had been reached.

"This is a big deal, not only in Minnesota but across the country," said Yang, a St. Paul leader in the Hmong Grave Desecration National Delegation. "It's about who we are as people."

Yang said his group was arranging an all-clan national meeting in Wisconsin in two weeks to figure out where the bodies should be reburied and how to pay for the project.

Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul, said that in the faith of her people disturbing the dead can leave souls to wander and affect the health and livelihoods of those still alive.

The issue became a priority for Hmong in the United States in 2005 when immigrants began receiving reports that the graves of their relatives at Wat Tham Krabok, a monastery that had sheltered the refugees in Thailand, were being desecrated.

The public outcry increased when video footage taken by Hmong still at the refugee camp showed bodies being removed from their graves and the flesh being removed.

A "Grave Desecration Project" was launched at the University of Minnesota Human Rights Program. The cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul adopted resolutions of support. A formal communique was sent to the United Nations.

Also Wednesday, a delegation organized by St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman hosted a community meeting to present the results of discussions it had with Thai officials during its trip to Thailand there last month.

"We will hopefully bring closure on this issue in the very near future," Coleman told the group.

About 80 people attended. Among them was Sou Dao Thao, a 59-year-old refugee. He said that on Oct. 26, 2005, he had watched for eight hours as the body of his mother was dug up at the temple.

"I was crying, very emotional, but powerless to stop it," Thao said through a translator.

Moua, who was on the Coleman trip, said there were officially 691 graves at the temple, of those 480 had been exhumed and cremated. The question is what will happen to the 211 bodies that were exhumed but not yet cremated.

The temple's abbot has cited various reasons for exhuming the bodies, including a desire to build health and community centers and to plant herbs. Most recently, he cited concerns about water contamination.

Moua said there has been no substantiation of water contamination. She said the mayor's delegation is trying to get test data, if it exists.

Moua did not know the details of the other delegation's announcement Wednesday and would not comment on it.

Thousands of Hmong served in a CIA-backed guerrilla army that fought against Lao communists in the 1960s and 1970s. The refugees claim that as a result they face persecution in communist Laos.

More than 300,000 Laotians, mostly Hmong, are known to have fled to Thailand since the communist takeover in 1975. Most were either repatriated to Laos or resettled in other countries, most in the United States, particularly Minnesota and Wisconsin.

In 2005, the U.S. allowed 15,000 Lao Hmong to immigrate from Thailand, but officials have said no more will be accepted.