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Hmong Grave Delegation Returns with Some Answers and Some Questions

Families Have a Chance to Give Input on Future of Exhumed Bodies

In late 2005, when the first videos of Hmong grave desecrations surfaced in Minnesota, there was outrage, and many questions about why and how this could happen. To answer these questions, and find out what can be done for the families, a group led by Senator Mee Moua traveled to Thailand and met with Thai officials and the two groups. On Wednesday, October 11, more than a hundred Hmong community members attended a meeting at the Hmong American Partnership office to learn about the delegation's findings.

The evening began with Saint Paul mayor Chris Coleman, who coordinated the group's visit to Thailand, thanking the group of State Sen. Mee Moua, State Sen. Larry Pogemiller, Yee Chang and Va-Megn Thoj, who had traveled to Thailand. He then explained how he became involved in the grave desecration problem. While he and others were able to bring the problem to the attention of the Thai government and the UN, he continued to hear from Hmong in Saint Paul who had the graves of their loved ones desecrated. This was when he decided to put together a mission to find out the facts.



After the mayor had ended his remarks, Sen. Mee Moua gave the audience a report on the delegation's findings. She explained that United States ambassador to Thailand briefed the delegation on the first day of the visit. The embassy was very helpful in arranging meetings with Thai officials. Mee Moua reported that the delegation was able to meet with Thai officials from the Vice-president's office, the abbot of the Wat Tam Krabok and the two foundations that were responsible for the digging up of the Hmong graves.

The abbot of the Wat told the delegation that the graves had been removed because they posed an environmental hazard. According to Senator Mee Moua, he also made it clear that he considered the Hmong graves "unclaimed and illegal" graves on the temple's property. While he assured the delegation that there were no immediate plans to dig up any of the remaining graves, he also said that this could change if they would pose an environmental risk.

The delegation then was given the opportunity to visit the former site of the refugee camp at the Wat Tan Krabok. They found the site overgrown and deserted, with only a few refugees waiting to leave the camp for the U.S. and other countries. The delegation was able to visit the former Hmong gravesites and found remains of the graves, such as burial clothes and artifacts that had been buried with the loved ones.

The delegation was also able to meet with the two Buddhist foundations that had dug up the graves. The first meeting took place at the Bothavana foundation's headquarter in Bangkok. The foundation told the delegation that they were invited by Wat Tam Krabok to dig up and properly bury "unclaimed" bodies at the temple's lands. They explained that this was part of their foundation's religious mission and that they believed it was charitable work that showed respect for the deceased. They also expressed that they felt a great sense of regret when they learned that these were not unclaimed graves, but the burial grounds of the Hmong families of the Wat Tam Krabok.

Senator Mee Moua explained to the foundation how much the actions of the group had hurt the Hmong community, even if it was well intended. The foundation invited the delegation to visit the cemetery where the ashes of the Hmong had been buried after being cremated, according to Buddhist customs. They also invited any family members to come and visit the site.

In a meeting with Buddha Dharma 31, the second foundation involved in the grave digging, the delegation learned that the group stopped its activities as soon as it learned that the gravesites were not "unclaimed" or the graves of unknown bodies. The foundation also did not cremate the 211 bodies it had already dug up, but rather stored them in a Chinese cemetery in hopes they could be identified and claimed by their loved ones. The delegation was able to see the cemetery, but could not verify the identity of the bodies. Representatives of a second delegation and of the U.S. Embassy were later shown some of the bodies. The foundation also agreed to extend a deadline to allow the families more time to decide what to do with the bodies.

After Senator Mee Moua ended her remarks, the delegation showed some videos and photographs of the meetings and visits in Thailand. After that, the families who were present had an opportunity to express what they wanted to do. Many expressed their desire to make sure that such grave desecrations would not happen again, some also wanted to take practical steps to ensure that the 211 bodies still intact could be claimed by their families. Ilean Her suggested that DNA test should be done on the remains so that the families could claim the bodies of their loved ones. Others, like John Thao, from Saint Paul, was more concerned with preventing any more Hmong grave desecrations. He wanted the foundations involved penalized, so they would not do this again. However, he admitted that he did not know how that could be done.

While the mayor's delegation was involved in discussing the next steps with the families, a second delegation, led by Michael Yang and Sia Lo, was announcing that it had reached an agreement with the Wat Tam Krabok that would allow the families to rebury their loved ones on the temple's lands. Asked about that, Sen. Mee Moua was very skeptical: "In our talks, the abbot made it very clear that he considered all Hmong graves on the property illegal and unclaimed graves." Va-Megn Thoj, who was part of the delegation for the mayor's office, also questioned the merits of this idea. "We think it should be up to the families to decide whether they want to re-bury their loved ones in Thailand, or bring them here. After all, it was on the temple's lands where the graves were dug up in the first place," he told the HMONG TIMES.

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