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By: Sao Sue Jurewitsch

Hmong Leaders Meet About Digging-Up Of Hmong Graves in Thailand

Many Express Outrage and Sadness at Desecration of Loved Ones' Burial Sites

Hmong Leaders in Saint Paul met twice over the weekend to discuss what the community can do to prevent the destruction of more Hmong grave sites near the former refugee camp at Wat Tham Krabok. On Saturday, State Senator Mee Moua and State Representative Cy Thao met with concerned citizens to share information and discuss a possible community action. At a second meeting on Sunday, members of the Hmong 18 Clan Council met with members of the community to work on a plan of action. In both meetings, participants expressed outrage and sadness over reports about up to nine hundred Hmong graves around Wat Tham Krabok.



Since the beginning of the month, relatives of recent Hmong arrivals in the Twin Cities and in California have reported that the bodies of former residents of the Wat Tham Krabok refugee camp being exhumed and cremated. A graphic video, showing the exhumation and preparation for cremation of bodies, has been circulating in the Twin Cities Hmong-American community. It has contributed to the outrage felt by many of those with loved ones buried near Wat Tham Krabok.

According to Phra Vijit, a monk at the Wat Tham Krabok monastery, this is being done for health reasons. In an interview with the Associated Press, he contended that the burial sites were set up without permission and that they contaminate near-by water sources. He also denied that the excavations showed disrespect for the dead. "We're not disrespecting their ancestors," he said, adding, "Even rich people cannot have ceremonies like the one we do for them." He also urged those who wanted to claim their relative's remains to contact the temple.

Another Buddhist foundation, Buddha Dhamma, is also removing bodies from Hmong graves and reburies them in the near-by Keang Toi district in the Saraburi Province, where Wat Tham Krabok is located. According to Surasak Bitkuntod, a volunteer with the foundation, relatives can claim the bodies before they will be cremated in the middle of next year.

For many Hmong refugees at this weekend's meetings, this does little to quell their anger and sadness. Some, like Kou Yang, a recent arrival who attended the Sunday meeting, said that they had permission from the monks to bury their relatives on the monastery's land. He also contends that families paid up to three hundred dollars for burial sites that are now being emptied.

Senator Mee Moua and Chao Lee from Congresswoman Betty McCollum's office assured the participants at the Saturday meeting that they will do whatever they can to put pressure on the Thai government and local officials to stop the exhumations. Senator Mee Moua contacted the Twin Cities congressional delegation and asked them to take up the issue with the U.S. State Department. A spokesperson for Betty McCollum's office told Hmong Times that "the issue is a serious concern to the congresswoman," and that she is working with her colleagues from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California to push the State Department into action.

In a phone conversation with HMONG TIMES, Senator Mee Moua expressed her hope that the international attention that the issue was getting would slow down further exhumations and would allow the Hmong community to work out a better solution. She was also waiting for the results of legal research that is being conducted by Barbara Frey and the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota.

At the meeting on Saturday, the Senator's office also handed out questionnaires designed to collect more information about the number and location of graves in the area surrounding Wat Tham Krabok.

At the second meeting, held at the Ban Vinai Office Park in Saint Paul, members of the Hmong 18 Clan Council and Dr. Yang Dao called upon the community to collect more information about the legal situation before reacting to the disturbing news. Dr. Yang Dao argued for a diplomatic approach to the problem, saying that monks at Wat Tham Krabok have always helped the Hmong people. He argued for first talking to the monks and local officials before publicly condemning their actions. While some at the meeting argued for a quick response, it was agreed to collect more information about the issue before taking any further action.

Those with relatives in grave sites around the camp can share their information by calling the following phone numbers: Hmong 18 Clan Council President Shong Leng Thao at 651-734-3930, or Lee Tou Yang, who organized Sunday's meeting, at 612-272-1439. Senator Mee Moua's office at the State Capitol is also collecting information and can be reached at 651-296-5285.

Contact Andreas Jurewitsch at ajjsin2000@yahoo.com.