

>>>Media 12/02/05<<<<

http://news.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/2005/12/02_randolpht_hmonggraves/

By Toni Randolph, Minnesota Public Radio

Hmong outraged at grave digging

There have been claims that hundreds of bodies have been exhumed.

St. Paul, Minn. — Human rights advocates have called the reports about digging at the burial grounds "repulsive." Barbara Frey is the director of the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota.

She says those responsible for having hundreds of graves removed from the hillside near the temple where the Hmong refugees lived for decades need to know that the families of the departed feel their rights have been violated. She's providing legal assistance and offering advice to Hmong leaders who want the international community to help stop what some are calling "grave desecration."

"There are mechanisms in the UN for urgent actions such as the special repertoire on tolerance of religion or belief. We think we can send a communication in to that mechanism. We also can send it directly to the Thai government," he said.

Frey says she's hoping the mix of diplomatic and public pressure will put a halt to the digging -- at least temporarily -- so that the families can be consulted.

Suddenly, now that the majority of them are no longer there to protect their loved ones...it's become a rationale for the digging. - Sen. Mee Moua	And so does Chue Thao. Thao moved to St. Paul last year with his wife and five children as part of the latest wave of Hmong refugees resettling in the United States. But he was living at the temple, which is called Wat Tham Krabok, in Thailand when his father died in 2000. He paid \$300 for a plot of land to bury his father on the hillside near the temple. He got word on Wednesday that his father's grave is still in tact -- for now. But he's worried that if the digging continues, his father's remains will be removed. Through an interpreter, Thao says he's not sure what HE can do, but he knows that there is action that can be taken.
---	---

"He says he knows there are people who are responsible," the translator says. "And that the US gov't can have a dialogue with the Thai officials there and government to see what they can do to stop this process because he knows that his father's grave can be spared, can be saved, and there are others can be saved also, the remaining ones also," he said.

U-S State Department officials say the monks at the temple hired a company to remove about 500 bodies from the hillside near the site. They say the refugees who remain at the camp were notified of the plans several months ago. The U-S officials were told that the bodies were being exhumed because they're buried near a water source and the local Thai government is concerned about possible contamination.

State Senator Mee Moua represents thousands of Hmong who live on St. Paul's east side. She questions why the state of the water supply has only recently become a concern, when Hmong people had been living at the temple for more than 30 years.

"That doesn't add up for me. These individuals have been there for a long time and for the last 15-some years that these people have been burying their family members there it was not an issue. But suddenly, now, that the majority of them are no longer there to protect their loved ones, suddenly it's become a rationale for the digging," she said.

Moua says several of her Hmong constituents have contacted her office expressing outrage and frustration about the digging. She says they feel betrayed by the temple that they once felt was a safe haven. Moua says she's been in touch with several members of Minnesota's congressional delegation in hopes that they will collectively approach the U-S State Department to try to put a stop to the digging -- at least temporarily -- until the Hmong families here can find an alternative for their loved ones.



Chue Thao's father is buried on a hillside near the Buddhist temple in Thailand where thousands of Hmong refugees lived for decades. Thao worries that his father's grave will be dug up. Hundreds of graves already have been dug up. (MPR Photo/Toni Randolph)