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[http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2006/03/03/hmong\\_graves\\_meeting/](http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2006/03/03/hmong_graves_meeting/)

By Toni Randolph, Minnesota Public Radio

## Hmong protest grave desecration

**About 400 members of the Hmong community turned out for a town hall meeting in St. Paul Thursday night to get an update on what's happened since hundreds of Hmong graves were desecrated in Thailand last fall.**

**Many people attending the meeting also sent letters to the United Nations to protest the unearthing and dismemberment of their deceased loved ones.**

St. Paul, Minn. — Tong Wa Pha was one of the first people in line Thursday night to send off a letter documenting what happened to the body of his late wife, Ying Vang. She died in 2004 and he buried her near the Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple in Thailand, where they'd lived as refugees for years.



*Tong Wa Pha*

In April 2005, Pha moved to the United States as part of the huge resettlement effort. But last fall he saw a videotape that was circulating in the Hmong community. It showed workers digging up graves near the Wat -- including the grave of his wife. Pha spoke through a translator.

"He recognized the place where he buried his wife, the clothes he put on his wife," he said.

Pha brought pictures of his wife from her burial ceremony to the meeting to help document what happened to her grave.

"He was really angry. He was really hurt that this was happening. He said it's hard for him to see that they dug up his wife," he said.

Many of the Hmong people in attendance expressed anger about the grave desecration. The meeting was designed, in part, to give them a chance to channel that anger by lodging formal complaints with the United Nations.



*Tong's Wife*

The Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota organized a letter-writing campaign, allowing Hmong families to document what happened to their deceased loved ones.

Many people brought photos, receipts for burial plots and any other documents they thought would help state their cases to the U.N. Barbara Frey, the director of the Human Rights Program at the U, says the collective information helps make the human rights case to the United Nations.

"It makes an impact at the U.N. when they receive so many individual letters from people whose human rights have been violated," Frey said. "We hope it makes an impact, and lets them know it should be a high priority for their involvement."

The letters will be forwarded to U.N. experts on racism and religious intolerance.

Since last fall, Frey has been providing legal assistance and offering advice to Hmong leaders who were seeking help to stop the gravedigging. They've embarked on a two-pronged approach - one political and one diplomatic.



*Writing letters*

In December, members of the Minnesota and Wisconsin congressional delegations sent a letter to the U.S. State Department asking for an investigation, and for the U.S. to pressure the Thai government to handle the graves with respect. The State Department responded that it's monitoring the situation.

But that response is unsatisfactory to State Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul. Moua has been calling attention to the issue.

"This issue, I feel, was pretty largely ignored by our government. The letter we received back from the State Department was less than satisfactory," said Moua. "The community feels like it took headlines for a couple of days, but there really has not been a heavy political effort on the part of our government to speak on behalf of these families."

And Moua says many families are feeling mental as well as emotional anguish over this issue. She says they know they can't save the graves at this point, but they're seeking acknowledgment that a wrong has been committed. She says they also want -- and deserve -- an apology.



*Charles Xiong's father and brother were buried at the Wat refugee camp in Thailand in 1994 and 1995. (MPR Photo/Toni Randolph)*