

## **Hundreds Gather To Protest Grave Diggings**

Honoring the dead is a very big deal in the Hmong culture. Surviving family members put forth great effort to provide a spiritually comfortable transition to those who are passing this life and into the next.

One of the most important aspects of providing for the deceased is to find an appropriate burial site. How one is laid into the ground, what that person is wearing and the material of the coffin are all vital components to the spiritual well-being of the deceased.

So in November 2005 when thousands of Hmong graves were exhumed by the monks who run the Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand, the international Hmong community felt a major human-rights violation had taken place.

According to Xong Khang, a Hmong-American currently working at the Wat, those Hmong remaining at the former refugee camp were so traumatized by the grave diggings that many of them were unable to function normally for weeks.

While the Hmong in Thailand were virtually powerless to do anything at the time, the Hmong in America are more fortunate when it comes to political might.

Prompted by Sen. Mee Moua and other Hmong leaders, a contingency of Congressional power brokers including all four Senators from Minnesota and Wisconsin wrote and signed a compelling letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice telling her in the letter that they were “deeply troubled by a disturbing video showing the appalling treatment of exhumed bodies” and urging the Secretary “to examine this material and continue to press Thai officials to take immediate action to ensure that the graves are being handled with proper respect for Hmong funeral rites and rituals.”

It was perhaps because of the increasing international pressure that halted the grave digging before all the graves were exhumed. Speaking to reporters, however, Sen. Mee Moua was not satisfied with the response given by the Secretary of State, claiming to Minnesota Public Radio that, “This issue, I feel, was pretty largely ignored by our government. The letter we received back for the State Department was less than satisfactory.”

Though the grave digging has ceased for now, many in the Hmong community believe that the damage has already been done.

On March 2, 2006, nearly 400 concerned community members crammed into the auditorium of Lao Family Community Center in St. Paul to express their personal grievances.

Organized by the Human Rights Program at the U of Minnesota, the town hall meeting allowed Hmong family members to document the grave diggings with the intention of forwarding those stories as a joint complaint 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,” Professor Barbara Frey, director of the U of M Human Rights Program, told the crowd. “It’s the first official step to getting their attention.”

Over 40 volunteers comprising of mostly college students sat behind tables as the hundreds of Hmong family members lined up to tell their stories.

Clinging on to official looking documents and photographs, family members shared their horror stories while the recorders systematically asked the prepared questions from the form that would eventually be submitted to the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance and the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism at the United Nations in Switzerland.

Photocopying each of the relevant documents and photos, the packets were being created one after the other.

Koua Lee, 44, has had to cope with a lot of hardship since coming to America a year ago, but according to him, seeing pictures of the uprooted tombstones that marked his parent’s graves has been the hardest thing he’s had to deal with since leaving the Wat.

“I heard about the grave diggings, but I couldn’t believe it could happen to my parent’s graves until I saw these pictures,” Lee said while displaying a set of pictures that depicted two empty graves. “It hit me right in my stomach and in my heart.”

Others relayed horror stories generated by Hmong families remaining at the Wat of haunted spirits that have been awoken by the disturbance.

Though no living human beings had been physically hurt by the grave diggings, it was emphasized throughout the night that the grave diggings were a direct assault on the Hmong as a people as it touches our deepest core.

“The Chinese and Thai may have boiled our bones and scraped all the hair off our heads, but our spirits remain living and they will not forget what has been done to them,” La Thao, 33, said of his family whose graves were exhumed in December. “And most of all, I will never forget what they have done to us.”

To show your support or to file your own complaint to the UN, write to:

Asma Jahangir, Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance  
Doudou Diene Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism  
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