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UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Congresswoman Betty McCollum (MN-04)
Statement for the Record
Concerning Desecration of Hmong Grave in Thailand
June 14, 2006

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Betty McCollum" with the date "June 14, 2006" written below it.

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to urge the Royal Thai government to immediately cease any further destruction of Hmong burial sites and stop the exhumation of Hmong graves located inside and surrounding Wat Thamkrabok monastery. Furthermore, I would ask that the Royal Thai government address the serious plight of Hmong-American families that I represent who no longer know where their loved ones' remains are located.

Mr. Speaker, between 1995 and 2003 many Hmong families living in Thailand as refugees from Laos had buried their deceased loved ones in the Wat Thamkrabok sanctuary. In December 2003, the U.S. Department of State announced the last resettlement of 15,000 Hmong refugees residing in the Wat Thamkrabok monastery, which concluded last year by bringing nearly 5,000 new arrivals to Minnesota, a significant number of whom have settled in St. Paul and surrounding communities which I represent.

It has been reported that between November 4 and December 30, 2005, approximately 900 Hmong graves were exhumed with the human remains taken to unknown destinations. Hmong-American families were shocked and profoundly disturbed to see the horrific video images of human remains, possibly of their own loved ones, being treated in a disrespectful and unspeakably offensive manner. To this day, Hmong-Americans remain unable to receive reliable information regarding the whereabouts of their loved ones' remains.

As a Member of Congress representing more than 35,000 Hmong-American constituents, I join them in expressing shock at this disturbing episode. The dignity of their deceased ancestors deserves respect. There can be no doubt that this entire situation has caused considerable anguish and emotional distress to relatives now living in the United States and elsewhere.

The Royal Thai government is a friend and ally of the United States. Our bilateral relationship is vital and it would be my desire to see a strengthening of all aspects of this relationship. Yet, in Minnesota today, it is very difficult for me to champion this relationship with the pain and distress felt by so many of my constituents as a result of the desecration of their ancestors' graves. Once again, I would urge the Royal Thai government to work to prevent any further Hmong grave exhumations, while fully investigating the circumstances surrounding this action in order to help facilitate long-lasting healing for those families affected by this terrible situation.