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By: Sao Sue Jurewitsch

Senator Mee Moua Hosts Second Meeting On Hmong Graves

Community Members Bring Concern to Senator and State Representative Cy Thao

For the second time in two weeks a group of concerned community members met with State Senator Mee Moua and State Representative Cy Thao to discuss the desecration of Hmong grave sites in Thailand. The meeting, which was requested by the community, was held in a conference room at the state capitol on December 20th. It was a follow-up to a first meeting on December 10th, at the Hmong American Partnership office.



After a round of short introductions, Senator Mee Moua started the meeting by reporting what she and Rep. Cy Thao had done so far to try to end to the desecration of Hmong burial sites near the Wat Tham Krabok. They already contacted members of Minnesota's congressional delegation and ask them to contact the U.S. State Department for assistance. A letter directed to Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice and signed by, among others, Rep. Betty McCollum, Rep. Martin Sabo, Senators, Russ Feingold, Mark Dayton, and Norm Coleman, was circulated during the meeting.

In the letter, which is dated December 16th, the members of congress inform the Secretary of State of the concerns that the exhumations have caused in the Hmong community. They also express their concern about the video footage of disrespectful treatment of exhumed bodies. "However, we are deeply troubled by a disturbing video showing appalling treatment of exhumed bodies. The images belie reports by the Thai government that the dead are being treated with respect." The letter then urges the Secretary of State to "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."

Senator Mee Moua also explained that her office would be available as a contact to collect information about the grave sites and the families who have loved ones buried there. Answering a question from the audience, she reported that the Center for Human Rights at the University of Minnesota was working on legal research in the matter. She also said that what was needed now, was more concrete information about how many graves were affected and what the legal basis for the exhumations were. She said that this is not only important for a possible legal case, but also needed to keep the news media informed.

At least one member of the community had brought a copy of a signed contract that showed that his family had paid for a burial plot. Others had just gotten news that their family members were among those whose bodies had been dug up. John Yang Her and his wife had learned from their niece, who arrived in mid-November from Wat Krabok, that John's aunt, uncle, and grandmother were among those who had been exhumed. The niece also reported that her husband's, her mother's, and her sister-in-law's graves were among those destroyed.

After Senator Mee Moua's introduction, the meeting discussed what else could be done. One of the proposals was to form a committee that could further collect evidence and do some additional legal research. Some of the attendees also wanted to send a delegation to Thailand to talk directly with the Thai authorities. Senator Mee Moua thought that the group could form a committee, but she declined to

be part of it, because she felt that it was better if the initiative came from the community, rather than a political office. She also encouraged members of the community to write to their representatives in congress and to keep pressure on them to do something about the situation in Thailand.

In the end, the meeting adjourned with the understanding that the community would collect more information on the number and location of graves at the Wat Tham Krabok. Senator Mee Moua's office will remain one of the central collection points for this data. Senator Mee Moua's office at the State Capitol can be reached at 651-296-5285. Lee Tou Yang, who is one of the community organizers, is also collecting data. He can be reached at 612-272-1439.

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