

Statement of students from the Human Rights Program,
University of Minnesota
Wednesday April 20th, 2006
Hear Our Grief: Say NO to Hmong Grave Desecration

My name is Amie Shindelar and I represent a group of 20 students affiliated with the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota.

In fall 2005, Minnesota's Hmong families began to receive reports that the graves of their deceased loved ones were being dug up at *Wat Tham Krabok*, a Buddhist monastery in Saraburi, Thailand. For many of these refugee families, *Wat Tham Krabok* had been home for more than a decade. In 2004-05, thirteen thousand Hmong refugees left *Wat Tham Krabok* for the United States. Over 4,000 of those refugees resettled here in Minnesota. Many of our new Hmong neighbors have been directly affected by the desecration of more than 900 graves in their former refugee camp.

Our student group learned about the violations at *Wat Tham Krabok* about three months ago from our human rights Professor, Barbara Frey, and from members of the Hmong community. We believe that permitting the desecration of these graves is a serious human rights violation by the Thai Government. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 18, proclaims that all people have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to manifest their beliefs. The manner in which people choose to bury their dead is a fundamental manifestation of one's belief system. In Hmong culture and religion, the graves of ancestors become a holy place where families can pay their respects. Since the disinterment of the graves profoundly disturbs the Hmong people's ability to honor their loved ones according to tradition, it violates their human right to manifest their beliefs and religion.

As students who live, work, and learn in the Twin Cities we feel it is important to show our solidarity with the affected families and to inform the Minnesota public about this horrific human rights violation.

We thank Mayor Coleman and members of the Saint Paul City Council for their leadership on this issue and their compassion for our Hmong neighbors. Students affiliated with the Human Rights Program will continue to work with the Hmong community on this issue. We believe that our work will be done when:

(1) The Thai government takes steps to halt further exhumations, (2) investigates the whereabouts of the remains that have been disinterred, (3) returns those remains to family members and (4)apologizes for the harm they have caused.

Our work is clearly far from finished but we are glad to have Mayor Coleman and the Saint Paul City Council's encouragement and support.