

For Immediate Release

Contact: Kelly O'Brien, U of M College of Liberal Arts, 612-624-4109

Barbara Frey, U of M Human Rights Program, 612-626-1879

PaChia Yang, U of M Human Rights Program, 763-607-6529

**United Nations Expert Hears Moving Testimony from Hmong Families on Grave  
Desecrations in Thailand**

*Calls accounts of exhumations "assault to culture"*

After listening to four hours of testimony describing the Hmong grave exhumations at Wat Tham Krabok in Thailand, United Nations Special Rapporteur James Anaya addressed several hundred people gathered at the hearing, stating, "What I have heard are accounts that are very serious -- accounts of assault to culture, assault to a people." Anaya is independent expert on the human rights of indigenous people. He visited Minnesota on December 10 at the invitation of the University of Minnesota's Human Rights Program to learn more about the desecration of an estimated 900 graves in Thailand. At the end of the hearing, Professor Anaya committed to raise further concerns about the diggings with the Thai Government and then "to formulate an opinion, views, and communicate those views to the government and to the Human Rights Council in a report that will be made public and available for you."

The consultation with the UN expert was the culmination of years of work by the University's Human Rights Program, Minnesota public officials, and community activists. According to the Human Rights Program's Director, Professor Barbara Frey, "Professor Anaya's visit gave us the chance to pull together all the research and fact-finding that has been done and to present it as a full case for the United Nations' consideration." The hearing featured a dozen witnesses, including family members, Hmong shaman, and community representatives who had been involved in investigating the case and advocating for a satisfactory resolution with the leadership of the monastery and the Thai Government. More than 200 Hmong community members attended the hearing, along with human rights advocates and students.

The hearing was introduced by Professor Frey and Professor David Wippman, Dean of the University of Minnesota Law School, who noted, "Our collective work will leave the law clearer and more enforceable, will add to the protection of the cultural and religious rituals of indigenous groups, and will leave our students better prepared to take on the challenges facing our global community."

Minnesota State Senator Mee Moua gave a welcome by video, as she was out of the country at the time of the hearing. Senator Moua asked the UN expert to "help us to recognize the wrong that has been perpetrated...Let this be the last time any people should ever have to witness their loved ones violated in this manner."

After a general overview of the case from Hmong activist Yee Chang and Mr. Vang Xiong X. Toyed, of the National Hmong Grave Desecration Committee, the UN Special Rapporteur heard from traditional Hmong funeral expert, Shong Ger Thao, who

testified that “the desecration of Hmong graves is the most fundamental and deeply painful violation of all violations against the Hmong...because it violates not only tradition, but history of an entire people.” Asked by the UN Expert if anything could be done to heal the spiritual damage brought about by the exhumations, Nhia Yer Yang, responded that there were no known healing ceremonies to restore the spirit of the deceased in this situation, in which the grave site is entirely demolished and the body removed.

Affected family members gave gripping testimony about the shock of witnessing the exhumations, the ongoing spiritual and psychological consequences of the exhumations and their fear of further harm.

Lee Yang spoke about his concerns for his family and children as they are constantly falling ill because of the desecration of his parents’ graves.

“Alive or dead, I will always be upset,” said Lia Thao, as she described her feelings on the digging of her husband’s grave.

Pa Ze Xiong told the U.N expert that “we’re not here to ask for a sum of money. We’re here to ask the international community to secure our right as a people to never be violated ever again.”

Chue Thao spoke to the UN expert asserting his fear that the “Thai authorities will remove or desecrate” his father’s grave that is still intact at the burial site of temple Wat Tham Krabok.

University of Minnesota law students, Katie Devlaminck and Kevin Morrison, summarized the legal arguments on behalf of the Hmong people, based on violations of their rights to non-discrimination and to practice their cultural and religious beliefs. The students asked the UN expert to “recognize these violations against the Hmong people and demand that the Government of Thailand ensure no further Hmong grave exhumations take place at Wat Tham Krabok or anywhere else in the country without the express consent of family members.”

The United Nations expert was clearly moved by the testimony which he called “disturbing” while quickly adding that it was at “the same time encouraging to see the courage and the determination by the people to have their rights respected and the violation of their rights vindicated.” Anaya pledged to the community that “I will take measures that will help restore some level of dignity and some level of trust and perhaps some level of understanding, mutual understanding, between the Hmong people and the rest of the Thai society...this is a matter of concern that you can rest assure that I will address.”

Professor Anaya was welcomed to the Twin Cities the night before the hearing at a reception at the University of Minnesota featuring elected officials, Hmong community leaders and human rights advocates. Mayor Chris Coleman welcomed the UN expert to

the community, noting that the suffering in the Hmong community, and especially for the City's newest immigrants from Wat Tham Krabok, had led him and the St. Paul City Council to take various steps to try to resolve the crisis. Other public officials speaking at the event included Minnesota State Representative Cy Thao, Northfield Commissioner of Human Rights, Judy Dirks. Singer-songwriters Tou SaiKo Lee and Logan Moua of The New Sky Development provided entertainment.

Carleton College graduate, PaChia Yang, was presented with the Sullivan Ballou Foundation's award for her work in interviewing families of the victims and writing up an extensive analysis of the human rights violations in the grave desecration case. The award was presented to PaChia Yang by the Foundation's board members, Judge Bruce Peterson and Elissa Peterson.

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