

>>>Media 12/17/08<<<

<http://www.hmongtimes.com/main.asp?SectionID=27&subsectionID=156&articleID=1535>

Hmong Times

By: Amy Doeun

UN Rapporteur Visits Minnesota

Holds a Hearing on the Issue of Hmong Grave Desecration in Thailand

On December 9 and 10 a United Nations Special Rapporteur Professor on human rights of indigenous people, James Anaya, visited the Twin Cities to attend a hearing on the issue of Hmong Grave Desecration in Thailand. This problem was first discovered in 2005. State Senator Mee Moua shared that her introduction to the issue was through a video tape depicting the burial site at the Wat Tham Krabok, "I was so disturbed by this news that I asked to see the video and could not make it through the entire video. If I was emotionally distressed by the images I saw, I could only imagine the pain and hurt, the outrage and anger the surviving family must be experiencing as they watched their loved ones violated in such a methodic and purposeful way."



Rep. Cy Thao & Barbara Frey at the meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur Professor.

At the December 9 reception for Prof. Anaya at the University of Minnesota, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman said, "It was very clear when you look on the faces of the relatives, that we have to do something about this issue." Mayor Coleman was instrumental in approaching Kofi Annan of the UN when he visited Macalester College [Annan's Alma Mater]." Mayor Coleman said, "I knew that I could not resolve the issue, but I knew I had a role to play." He went on to say, "I feel like we are finally getting some questions answered, let us hope the new year will bring closure to so many families."



The audience was very attentive during the Special Hearing.

On Wednesday, December 10, Prof Anaya attended the hearing on the issue. He was presented with a background of the case by Mr. Yee Chang. Currently 211 bodies are being held temporarily at Hulin Cemetary in Saraburi. Mr Shong Ger Thao an expert on Hmong Burial ceremonies and Mr. Nhia Yer Yang, Shaman, shared their testimonies through Cy Thao.

Mee Moua said, "As a people, the Hmong people believe that the burial sites of our loved ones are sacred temples, a place not only for their bodies but a home for their souls. A violation of this sacred ground is tantamount to the destruction of our place of worship and the displacement of our ancestors' souls."

Cy Thao said of Professor Barbara Frey, director of U of M Human Rights Program, "She has been a tireless advocate and driving force." Frey went on to say, "This is an important issue for all indigenous and minority groups. We are on the cutting edge of a very important issue ... I hope we will have a productive hearing and outcome that makes a difference."

Cy Thao was the Master of Ceremonies for the reception, he said, "This is a very personal issue for all of us. As long as the elders can remember there have been grave desecrations."

Professor Anaya became the Special Rapporteur in 2008 "with a mandate to gather information from all relevant sources on violations of the human rights of indigenous people."

In 2006 Former Special Rapporteur on human rights of indigenous people, Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Ms. Asma Jahangir, special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, brought the issue to the Thai Government. They responded that the bodies were removed for "environmental reasons." 480 bodies have been cremated and buried. Many families still report suffering. It is hoped that the work will continue to bring closure and keep spirits at peace.