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Human Rights Program of the University of Minnesota Press Release

United Nations Expert to Hear Testimony from Hmong Families on Grave Desecrations in Thailand

Minneapolis-St. Paul, MN —United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, Professor James Anaya, will visit Minnesota on December 10, 2008, to hear testimony concerning the desecration of Hmong graves at Wat Tham Krabok in Saraburi, Thailand. Professor Anaya is visiting at the invitation of the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota. The December 10 hearing will take place from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. at Coffman Memorial Union Theater on the east bank campus of the University.

Background

In fall 2005, more than 900 Hmong graves were disinterred at Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist monastery that served for more than a decade as home to thousands of Hmong families fleeing persecution after the communist takeover of Laos in 1975. Hmong graves were exhumed by teams of workers who are shown on videotape dismembering the bodies, removing the bones and throwing the remains into open graves. The Thai Government responded to inquiries from the United Nations, as well as public officials and representatives of the Hmong-American community, that the bodies were disinterred because of water quality complaints. Representatives of the families reject the government's explanation, citing the government's failure to raise this issue previously or to provide proper notification to families about the need to reclaim the remains of their deceased.

For the Hmong people, the burial place is a sacred site; according to their animist religious beliefs, after death the body has spiritual continuity and the spirits of the dead have implications and influence over the living.

University connection

The University of Minnesota Human Rights Program took up the issue after members of the local Hmong community approached the program looking for assistance. Undergrad students in the program took statements from 159 different families, wrote letters in English on the families' behalf, and sent these statements to the United Nations. This effort formed the basis of the UN's involvement in the Hmong graves desecration case. In addition, the Human Rights Program director, Barbara Frey, drafted a complaint to the UN, on behalf of the Hmong families.

About the hearing

The December 10 hearing will feature testimony from family members, experts on Hmong culture, and students who have been working on the graves desecration issue. The Hmong community will petition the Special Rapporteur to use his authority to formulate recommendations to prevent further desecration of indigenous grave sites and to remedy the violations against the Hmong community. "We believe that an official determination by this U.N. official that the human rights of the Hmong people were violated by the Thai government is

the first step to repairing the damage that has been done,” said Barbara Frey, director of the Human Rights Program at the University of Minnesota. “We hope that no more Hmong families, or any other cultural or indigenous groups, will have to live with the anguish that results from the desecration of their sacred burial sites.”

Background on the Special Rapporteur

Professor Anaya was appointed UN Special Rapporteur in 2008 with a mandate to gather information from all relevant sources on violations of the human rights of indigenous people. The previous UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ms. Asma Jahangir, brought information about the desecration of Hmong Graves in Wat Tham Krabok to the Thai Government’s attention in June 2006. The government responded in July 2008 that the bodies were removed for environmental reasons; the relatives were notified and had the opportunity to claim the bodies; and the unclaimed bodies were cremated, but the removal was carried out with the utmost respect for the deceased and their families.

St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman met with Mr. Stavenhagen in October 2006 at the UN headquarters in New York City to express the continuing concerns of the Hmong families affected by the exhumations, many of whom now live in St. Paul. Several privately-funded delegations, including a delegation authorized by the St. Paul City Council in September 2007, have traveled to Thailand to investigate the circumstances surrounding the exhumations and to explore options for bringing peace and reconciliation to the Minnesota families affected by the desecration of the graves. The investigations confirmed that at least 480 Hmong bodies have been cremated and buried and that at least 211 more exhumed bodies are being held temporarily at Hulin cemetery in Saraburi. Family members still report personal suffering as a result of the 2005 exhumations and many continue to send money back to Thailand to conduct ceremonies to keep the spirit of their deceased loved ones at peace.