

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-4904

July 10, 2006

Ms. Barbara A. Frey, Director
Human Rights Program
University of Minnesota
214 Social Sciences Bldg
267 19th Ave S
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0499

Dear Ms. Frey,

Thank you for contacting me regarding the situation of the Lao/Hmong community residing in Thailand. I appreciate hearing from you.

As a member of the Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, I closely monitor the human rights situation in Thailand, Laos and other East Asian nations. I have also maintained regular contact with members of Wisconsin's Lao/Hmong community, and many have shared with me their grave concerns about human rights conditions in Thailand and the welfare of their families and friends who are living there.

On December 16, 2005, I joined my colleagues in sending a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, urging her to press the Thai government to ensure that treatment of Hmong graves was respectful of Hmong funeral rites. On January 23, 2006, I received a response from the U.S. Department of State, stating that the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok contacted Thai authorities to express the families' concern and had been informed exhumations had been conducted in accordance with local Thai customs. That letter also stated that U.S. Embassy officials would continue to urge the Thai government to practice appropriate funeral rites and rituals during exhumation.

In February 2006, I traveled to Thailand, in part, to discuss my concern about the Lao/Hmong in Thailand and urged the Thai government to develop comprehensive solutions to integrate Lao/Hmong into society and address those with legitimate refugee claims. I share your concern about the treatment of the Hmong and expressed my concern about this issue with Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Foreign Minister Kantathi Suphamongkhon, U.N. National Security Council General Winai Phattiyakul, and officials at the U.S. Embassy in Thailand during my visit.

As you may know, the grounds of Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple in Thailand, held approximately 15,000 Lao/Hmong refugees. In December 2003, the U.S. State Department announced that Hmong refugees living at the temple would have an opportunity to resettle in the United States. According to the State Department, any Lao/Hmong registered by the Thai government as of August 2003 and recognized as living at the Wat will be eligible to apply for

resettlement. Registration for this program began in February 2004. In January 2005, the State Department informed me that it temporarily suspended the program because a few of the recently arrived Lao/Hmong had active tuberculosis (TB). Today, strict screening allows the resettlement process to move slowly and approximately 100 refugees remain until their, or a family member's, TB treatment has been completed.

I have also consistently raised my concerns with the U.S. State Department about the situation of the Hmong who remain behind in Thailand. I also raised this issue with Condoleezza Rice when I met with her in the course of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's consideration of her nomination to be Secretary of State. I have asked the State Department to work with the government of Thailand and other relevant parties to create a long-term strategy for the Lao/Hmong remaining in Thailand, one that offers clarity and predictability, and respects the basic rights of the Hmong. The Lao/Hmong played an important role during the Vietnam War, and the United States remains indebted to these courageous individuals and their families.

I strongly believe the United States has a moral interest in reducing human suffering and protecting human rights and a political interest in promoting democracy around the world. I believe that it is crucial that minority populations such as the Lao/Hmong be protected, and I support efforts to improve their status and conditions. I will continue to monitor the current resettlement process and the well-being of Lao/Hmong in Laos and in Thailand.

If you have questions regarding pending or future applications for eligible family members, please contact my Milwaukee office at (414) 276-7282. Thanks again for contacting me regarding this important issue. I look forward to hearing from you again in the future.

Sincerely,



Russell D. Feingold
United States Senator