

August 2, 2006

Senator Russell D. Feingold
506 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Feingold,

Thank you for your letter dated July 10, 2006, concerning the situation of the Hmong in Thailand. We greatly appreciate your concern and attention to the issue of Hmong grave desecration at Wat Tham Krabok in Suraburi Thailand, and your communication with the Department of State on this issue.

We did feel the need to respond, however, to some of the issues you raised in your letter. We are most concerned about your apparent willingness to accept the accounts of the exhumations given by the Thai Government and passed on by the U.S. Embassy.

First, as to the assertion of the Thai Government/U.S. Embassy that the “exhumations had been conducted in accordance with local Thai customs,” we wish to point out that it is the customs of the Hmong people and not the Thai people that must be respected in this case. The religious beliefs and the funeral customs of the Hmong people have been completely disregarded by the Thai government at Wat Tham Krabok. The majority of Hmong practice animism and ancestral worship. In Hmong culture and religion, the three most important events in life are birth, marriage and death, each accompanied by an elaborate ceremony and much celebration. The Hmong consider the body to be sacred and according to tradition it must remain intact in life and death. Thus the Hmong do not believe in cremation. When a person dies the funeral lasts three days, the body is dressed in the finest and most intricate traditional funeral outfit. Many animals are sacrificed to help guide the spirit back to their ancestral home. After the burial, immediate and close family members frequently return to the grave to perform special ceremonies to honor the dead and to feed and tend to the well being of the spirits. The Hmong believe that the physical condition of the graves of their deceased can have a profound impact on the living. Any inattention, disturbance or other willful acts of desecration of Hmong graves will cause illness, strife and even death in the family of the deceased. For the Hmong a grave is a sacred site. Any unauthorized exhumation is therefore a grave violation of religious freedom and cultural rights.

Second, and of most concern, is the information you have passed on to us that “U.S. Embassy officials would continue to urge the Thai government to practice appropriate funeral rites and rituals during exhumation” (emphasis added). This statement appears to

indicate that the Embassy has accepted the authority of the Thai Government to continue to exhume bodies at Wat Tham Krabok, or other sites. We absolutely protest this position by the Embassy. Any exhumation of Hmong or other graves in Thailand without express consent of family members or their authorized representatives should be considered a direct violation of the human rights of the surviving family members.

The monks at Wat Tham Krabok and the Government of Thailand continue to state that the Hmong relatives were notified of the plans to exhume the graves and given a chance to claim the bodies, but the relatives insist they were not notified and those who have tried to make other arrangements have been told that they have no right to do so.

I urge you to give your full attention to resolving this issue as soon as possible. Based on your letter, we are deeply concerned at the prospect of further desecrations of Hmong graves. We would appreciate a response offering assurances that no further exhumations are taking place and joining with us in an effort to identify the remains of the graves that have already been exhumed.

Sincerely,

Barbara A. Frey
Director

CC: U.S. Embassy, Bangkok
U.S. Department of State