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Laos: Military atrocities against Hmong children are war crimes

Amnesty International is horrified by recent reports, including video evidence and witness testimony, of an attack by Lao soldiers against a group of five children, four of them girls, in the Xaisomboune military zone on 19 May 2004.

The children, aged between 13 and 16 years old and part of an ethnic Hmong rebel group, were brutally mutilated -- the girls apparently raped before being killed -- by a group of approximately 30-40 soldiers. The victims -- four girls, Mao Lee, 14; her sister Chao Lee, 16; Chi Her, 14; Pang Lor, 14; and Tou Lor, Pang Lor's 15 year old brother -- were killed whilst foraging for food close to their camp. They were unarmed.

The attacks violate the most fundamental principles of international human rights and humanitarian law. These rapes and killings constitute war crimes. The Lao authorities must bring to justice those responsible for this atrocity and cease attacks on unarmed civilians.

A witness, who has subsequently fled the country and been recognized as a refugee by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, reported hearing one of the soldiers saying: "*Meo (Hmong). Your kael ni (mouth) allows you to speak. Your hin (vagina) allows you to breed*".

He then heard moans and a gunshot.

Mao Lee was shot in each breast and the other bodies were mutilated by what appears to be high-powered rifle shots fired at close range. One of the girls was disembowelled.

Several other members of the group were seriously injured with gun shot wounds but managed to return to their encampment. The rebels have little if any medicine and rely on traditional treatments using plants found in the forest.

The Lao authorities must, as a matter of utmost urgency, permit UN agencies and independent monitors unfettered access to those rebels who are recently reported to have 'surrendered'. They must also permit humanitarian agencies to provide medical and food assistance to those injured as a result of this and other military actions against the rebels.

Background

The Hmong ethnic minority group in Laos was allied to the US during the Viet Nam war and its spill-over fighting in both Laos and Cambodia. The Hmong people have a long history of resistance and aspirations of independence from Lao government control. Following the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975 and the fall of the former regime, as many as a third of the Hmong ethnic minority are

believed to have fled the country. Most of these refugees resettled in the USA, but a large number spent many years in refugee camps in Thailand.

Sporadic military resistance to the government has continued among some ethnic groups, predominantly Hmong. There are also continuing allegations of serious human rights abuses against those Hmong perceived as still being opposed to the Lao government.

There have been increasing concerns over the last two years at an apparent increase in Lao government military activity against rebel groups, who along with armed adult men also comprise a large number of women, children, elderly and sick. The upsurge in military activity followed increasing international concern at the situation, which was triggered by a number of journalists visiting rebel groups and reporting their plight.

Credible sources have reported the deaths of scores of civilians, mainly children, from starvation and injuries sustained during the conflict. It is known that several of approximately 20 rebel groups with their families are surrounded by Lao military and prevented from foraging for food that they traditionally rely on to survive. Amnesty International has protested to the Lao authorities at what it believes is the use of starvation as a weapon of war against civilians.

Several hundred ethnic Hmong rebels are reported to have 'surrendered' to the Lao authorities in recent months. UN agencies, diplomats and journalists have not been given access to these people and Amnesty International has received conflicting reports as to their reception and treatment by the authorities.

Amnesty International has also repeatedly condemned indiscriminate attacks by armed opposition groups that have reportedly killed and injured civilians in Laos. Amnesty International unequivocally condemns these acts and has and will continue to call upon the perpetrators to cease all activities that are in violation of human rights and international humanitarian law.