

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Laos/Thailand: Hmong refugees dragged from cells amid tear gas**

The Thai government must permanently call off the deportation to Laos of 153 refugees from the Hmong minority, said Amnesty International today. Immigration officials dragged women and girls crying and screaming out of their cell in the Nong Khai immigration centre and used tear gas against the men and boys, who have been barricading themselves in the men's cell for hours.

"These men, women and children have been recognised as refugees by the UN and would be at risk of serious human rights abuses if they were returned to Laos," said Brittis Edman, South East Asia researcher at Amnesty International. "The Thai government must call off their deportation and allow them to be resettled in a third country."

The women and girls were loaded onto buses earlier today and driven to the border. Two of the women are eight months pregnant and one has a baby who had been born weeks earlier in the detention centre. Two men were also put into the buses, having been taken from their hospital beds where they had been receiving care for a serious liver condition and a bullet wound to the face.

For unknown reasons, the women and girls were later taken back to the immigration centre at Nong Khai in north-east Thailand.

Immigration officials have called on the police to force the men and boys out of their barricaded cell. The police have used tear gas and tried to saw through the bars but were unable to gain access. Witnesses reported that police used tear gas three times, despite the fact that 20 children, all boys, were in the cell.

"It is particularly concerning to hear of the violence used against these refugees, some of whom are teenage boys and girls," said Brittis Edman. "These are people who have fled persecution and abuse in their own country -- the Thai authorities have a duty to protect them, not add to their suffering."

#### **Notes to Editors**

The Hmong people are an ethnic minority, some of whom fought alongside US forces in the Vietnam war and have since been persecuted by the Laos authorities.

All 153 Hmong people in the Nong Khai immigration detention centre have been recognised as refugees by the UN refugee agency.

Under international law, no government may forcibly return people to a country where they risk serious human rights abuses.

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