

PUBLIC

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Fear for safety/ torture/ ill-treatment/ arbitrary detention

**LAO PEOPLE'S
DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC**

53 asylum seekers

A group of 53 ethnic Hmong Laotian asylum seekers, including women and children, were forcibly returned from Thailand to Laos on 15 November, and their whereabouts are unclear. Amnesty International believes the group could be in danger of serious human rights violations, including torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary detention inside Laos.

Another group of 27 ethnic Hmong asylum seekers were forcibly returned to Laos on 5 December 2005. They have been detained incommunicado since then, reportedly in deplorable conditions. Most of them are children. According to Lao officials the Lao government has been unable to locate these arbitrarily detained children, and maintain that the deportation, which appears not to have followed formal procedures, failed to involve Lao authorities. The Lao government position therefore, as communicated to Amnesty International, is that responsibility rests with the Thai authorities only.

Both these groups were staying at an informal refugee camp in the northern Thai province of Phetchabun and were first arrested near the village of Huay Nam Khao, where the camp is located. Lao official media reported on 16 November that the group of 53, including a newborn infant, would undergo "re-education" before being resettled in their areas of origin, although details of what such a "re-education" entails are unknown.

The group was handed over from Thai to Lao authorities, under the leadership of the Vientiane Border Security Cooperation Committee, at a Nong Khai district checkpoint in north-eastern Thailand. Eyewitnesses reported that the group was escorted in direction of the Lao capital, Vientiane. There are conflicting reports as to their whereabouts, including that they may be held in a detention facility around 60 kilometres north of the city.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

An estimated 7,000 ethnic Hmong Laotian refugees are living in the makeshift refugee camp at Huay Nam Khao. They started arriving there in large numbers in 2004, seeking refugee status. The majority of them claim to have been persecuted because of their connection with ethnic Hmong rebel groups, who fought alongside the United States during the Viet Nam war and its spill-over fighting in Laos. Up to one-third of the Hmong minority in Laos, estimated to be around 300,000 in 1970, are believed to have fled abroad between 1975 and 1990, the vast majority resettling as refugees in the USA.

Most Hmong are integrated into mainstream Lao society, but an unknown number of groups have been hiding from the Lao authorities, particularly the military, in isolated pockets in the jungle for decades. Such groups are living in extreme poverty, hardship and disease, and violent onslaughts by the Lao military against them are regularly reported from the provinces of Bolikhamxai, Luang Prabang, Vientiane and Xieng Khouang.

The Lao government has denied the existence of these groups and has made no known efforts to seek a long-term humanitarian solution addressing the ongoing problems.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, French or your own language:

- expressing concern that the group of 53 asylum seekers may be at risk of torture, ill-treatment or arbitrary detention, and seeking confirmation of the whereabouts of the group;
- reminding authorities of the 27 who remain "missing" after being forcibly returned to Laos on 5 December 2005, and calling on the authorities to continue their efforts to locate the group;
- calling for the authorities to allow access by independent monitors to the group of 53 so that their needs and wellbeing can be independently assessed;
- calling for the authorities to ensure the group's safety and well-being;
- urging the authorities to immediately seek assistance from the international community to ensure that a humanitarian, peaceful solution is worked out so that Hmong groups can emerge safely from the jungle to a secure environment.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

Bouasone Bouphavanh

Office of the Prime Minister

Lane Xang Avenue

Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic

Fax: + 856 21 213560 or + 856 21 414009 (c/o Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

Deputy Prime Minister/ Minister of National Defence

Major General Douangchay Phichit

Ministry of National Defence

Phone Kheng Road

Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic

Fax: + 856 21 414009 (c/o Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Salutation: Dear Minister

Deputy Prime Minister; Standing Government Member

Somsavat Lengsavad

Office of the Prime Minister

Lane Xang Avenue

Vientiane, Lao People's Democratic Republic

Fax: + 856 21 414009 (c/o Ministry of Foreign Affairs)

Email: sphimmas@laonet.net OR cabinet@mofa.gov.la

Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO: diplomatic representatives of the Lao People's Democratic Republic accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 8 January 2006.