

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: ASA 26/002/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 113
4 May 2006

Laos: Massacre of unarmed Hmong women and children

Amnesty International strongly condemns the massacre of ethnic Hmong people by Lao government troops in northern Vientiane province last month. The deadly attack, which took place some 20 kilometres northeast of the tourist town of Vang Vieng on 6 April 2006, claimed the lives of at least 26 people, mostly women and children. Another four people were wounded.

Scattered groups of people from the ethnic Hmong minority make up the largely forgotten remnants of an armed rebel group involved in a decades-old internal armed conflict with the national armed forces. The victims of the recent massacre came from one such group.

The government troops launched their assault in the morning hours while the victims, reportedly unarmed, were searching for food outside of their hiding places in the jungle.

The massacre took place amidst growing concerns about 27 ethnic Hmong Laotians, most of them children, who have been held in incommunicado detention in Laos since 5 December 2005. Contravening international law, the group was forcibly returned to Laos from Thailand, where they lived with their families in an informal makeshift refugee camp, housing some 6,000 Lao Hmong who claim to have fled persecution in Laos for their links to rebels. The whereabouts of the 27 returned Hmong have not been confirmed by Lao authorities, but credible accounts indicate that the girls are held in a prison facility outside the town of Paksen, east of the capital, while the boys have been transferred from a prison in Vientiane to one in an isolated region in the far north.

The recent massacre as well as reports of other deadly attacks by government forces and the arbitrary detention of children deepen Amnesty International's concerns for the safety of Hmong groups living in hiding, some of whom are reportedly surrounded by Lao army units, struggling to find food and with no access to medical care.

The Lao government has so far failed to work out an overall peaceful resolution to end the conflict with these Hmong groups, to protect those who have laid down their arms and respect human rights. Instead, violence and persecution continue against individuals and groups of ethnic Hmong perceived by the armed forces as having links to the rebels. In 2005 the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination raised concerns about reported violence against the Hmong minority, including acts of violence carried out by soldiers against children.

Laos ratified Additional Protocol II to the four Geneva Conventions in 1980. The Protocol applies to non-international armed conflicts and provides for the protection of those not involved in fighting and those who choose to lay down their arms, and forbids attacks on the civilian population as well as individual civilians.

Amnesty International calls on the Lao authorities to open a prompt and impartial inquiry into the 6 April massacre to ensure that those responsible be brought to justice. The organisation also urges the authorities to release the arbitrarily detained children and ensure they are reunited with their families in Thailand.

Amnesty International reiterates its calls to the Lao government to address the wider issue of this conflict in cooperation with the international community, which has expressed a readiness to provide humanitarian assistance in support of groups who emerge from the forest seeking to reintegrate into Lao society.

Background

A number of ethnic minority groups, especially the Hmong, were allied to the US during the Viet Nam war and its spill-over fighting in Laos and Cambodia. In the aftermath of the creation of the Lao People's Democratic Republic in 1975, up to a third of the Hmong ethnic minority, estimated to some 300,000 in 1970, are believed to have fled the country, mostly to be resettled in the USA.

An unknown number of Hmong and other minorities have remained in the jungle to this day, hiding from the Lao military. Some groups have continued armed resistance to the Lao government, but many are not involved in fighting. In recent years a variety of sources have revealed to the outside world the dismal situation and increasingly desperate struggle for survival of such groups, including women, children and elderly people.

As a state party to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) the Lao authorities have legal obligations not to sponsor, defend or support any form of racial discrimination.

Laos has signed but not yet ratified the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESC).