

The missing children of Laos

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The Lao government claims to have "found" 21 girls and young women who have been missing since December 2005 when they were deported from Thailand. But the young Hmong asylum-seekers are still separated from their families and their current whereabouts remain unknown.

Amnesty International (AI) has received news on several young Lao asylum-seekers arrested in Thailand over a year ago. Three sisters; Nhia Vue, 12, Mai Ker Vue, 14, and Xiong Vue, 16, were among 22 ethnic Hmong children and five adults forcibly returned to Laos by the Thai authorities after being arrested for entering Thailand illegally.

News has emerged that Lao authorities have found 21 girls and young women from the group. Six of the group are still unaccounted for. Lao and Thai authorities are reportedly drafting a plan to reunite the 21 with their families in Thailand, but details of the children's whereabouts during the 15 months since their deportation to Laos are still unclear.

Reports indicate that the arrested girls have been in a prison outside the town of Paksen in Bolikhamxay province. Six young men were reported to have been held in Vientiane, then transferred to Phongsaly in the far north. Conditions are said to be hard, with some deportees believed to have been ill-treated and others tortured.

Ethnic Hmong from Laos began seeking refugee status in Thailand in 2004 and there are now 7,000 living in Phetchabun province.

The parents of the three girls last saw their daughters when church leaders collected them for choir practice ahead of Hmong New Year and Christmas celebrations in 2005. The sisters had been living with their family in an informal Thai refugee camp in the village of Huay Nam Khao, where approximately 7,000 ethnic Hmong from Laos are seeking sanctuary from alleged persecution by the Lao authorities. The family of nine had escaped from the Lao jungle, where they had been hiding from Lao government troops.

"We had to flee as the Lao soldiers were killing and poisoning us," the girls' father told AI.

Little is known about what happened to the 27 people after their return to Laos. Even now the Lao authorities have not confirmed their whereabouts and deny any responsibility.

The girls' mother says they have no relatives in mainstream society in Laos and their only other family is in the jungle. This means there is nobody to visit the prison to find out if the children are there, or to supply them with food and other basic provisions.

Groups of Hmong have faced persecution in Laos because they are connected with former rebel groups. These rebel groups were formed from an armed faction that fought with the US during the Vietnam War and its spill-over fighting in Laos.

Up to a few thousand Hmong and other minorities -- including women, children and elderly people -- still live in the jungle today, hiding from armed attacks by the Lao military. They are not believed to have capacity to pose a military threat to the Lao authorities. Those living in the jungle face a daily struggle for survival amidst malnutrition, disease, bullet and shrapnel injuries, and a lack of healthcare. In 2005, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination raised concerns about reported violence against the Hmong minority, including children.

Amnesty International will release a new report - "Hiding in the jungle: Hmong under threat" tomorrow, which describes serious human rights violations against groups of ethnic Hmong people, including many children, whose life in hiding in the jungles and on the run from the Lao military perpetuates their destitution.