

# Urgent Action In Focus

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## Laos: The plight of the Hmong continues...

In January 2004, UA in Focus told the story of two journalists and their four colleagues who had been arrested after researching a story on rebel fighters and their families from the Hmong ethnic group. We can now provide new information on the fate of Char Yang and the other Lao nationals who remained in detention.

In May 2003, three Lao nationals accompanied two European journalists and an ethnic Hmong interpreter with US nationality into the impenetrable Lao jungle in Xieng Khouang province.

The journalists, Thierry Falise and Vincent Reynaud, were covertly investigating the plight of Hmong rebels in Laos after a *Time Asia* magazine article had broken the long-hidden story of on-going internal armed conflict in Laos between the authorities and predominantly ethnic Hmong rebels.

Media attention including shocking and heartrending photographs showing the plight of the Hmong rebels in Laos has clearly deeply embarrassed the Lao authorities who had consistently denied the presence of a conflict with Hmong rebels in the country.

Having successfully reached the rebel group, the journalists and their Lao guides Char Yang (also known as Va Char Yang), Thao Moua and Pa Fue Khang were arrested on 4 June 2003, on their way out of the jungle. The Lao nationals, known locally as "blackbirds", are part of

a disparate group of ethnic Hmong sympathisers and supporters of the jungle-based rebel groups.



Thao Moua, who is still in detention © Private

They have played an essential role in providing very limited material assistance such as food and clothing from the outside world – as much as they can carry on occasional visits – to groups in the jungle who have been playing a cat-and-mouse game with the authorities since the end of the Lao civil war in 1975.

Char Yang and the other two guides were taken to a police station in Phonsavanh, Xieng Khouang province after their arrest. Char Yang has now revealed that he was beaten with rattan sticks and bicycle

chains by police. His face was also pistol-whipped. He told a *Time* journalist, Andrew Perrin, that "they beat me like a dog...like I wasn't even human." During the following two days he claims to have been repeatedly knocked unconscious only to be revived so he could be beaten again. Eventually, perhaps thinking he was dead, police threw him into an outdoor washroom loosely shackled. He came too, bleeding heavily from a wound to his head. At this point he made the decision to try and flee. "I knew if I didn't try to escape I would die," he told the journalist

Char Yang went on the run. His network of fellow blackbirds was clearly no longer safe – many of his relatives, and friends, homes were raided by the authorities leading to several dozen people fleeing the country.

On 30 June 2003, the two journalists and their interpreter were sentenced to 15 years imprisonment by a court in Phonsavan in a staged trial with a predetermined outcome. They were fortunate enough to be released and were swiftly deported largely due to pressure put on the Lao authorities by the European and US governments and pressure from AI membership including the UA Network who wrote numerous appeals (UA 165/03, ASA 26/004/2003, 11 June 2003 and follow- ups).

Pa Fue Khang and Thao Moua were not so lucky. The two men were sentenced at the same trial to 15 and 12 years' imprisonment respectively. Char Yang was sentenced in absentia to 15 years in prison. Unlike the foreigners, the Lao nationals reportedly had no legal representation at their collective trial which lasted just over two hours. All five defendants were initially held in Phontong prison in the capital Vientiane. The two Lao prisoners were later transferred to Samkhe prison, also in the Lao capital, where conditions are notoriously harsh.

The Lao authorities, meanwhile, publicized Char Yang's escape from detention and put a bounty on his head. The \$15,000 reward is a fortune in a poor country like Laos – an indication of the authorities' desire to apprehend him. All that anybody knew about him was that he was in hiding – there was no certainty that he was even still alive. It transpired that, after weeks evading capture, Char Yang eventually made it back, in July 2003, to the same jungle rebel camp that he had visited with the journalists.



Char Yang and family © Private

Miraculously, over one year after the trial, Char Yang emerged in Thailand and revealed his story. He had spent the previous months together with the rebel groups in the jungle and had managed to flee the country with considerable video footage of their plight, including of the aftermath of a government ambush of unarmed civilians in May 2004 which left five children dead, the four girls among them having been sexually assaulted and mutilated.

Amnesty International described such atrocities against Hmong children as war crimes. The footage was made public and led to international outrage. In Thailand, Char Yang was reunited with his wife and three young children who had escaped the country many months before. The family are now in the United States.

Thao Moua and Pa Fue Khang, meanwhile, remain in Samkhe prison of Vientiane. It is understood that their families are allowed to visit them. However, reports indicate that they, along with other prisoners in Samkhe, are given arduous tasks, impossible to complete, resulting in harsh punishment. Both men are reported to have been detained in solitary confinement in dark rooms for considerable periods of time. Amnesty International continues to campaign on their behalf as they are in desperate need of the help that AI's membership can provide.