

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: ASA 26/004/2007 (Public)
News Service No: 050
23 March 2007

Embargo Date: 23 March 2007 00:01 GMT

Laos: Destitute jungle-dwellers living on run from military

Thousands of men, women and children from the Hmong ethnic minority are living on the run from the military in Laos' mountainous jungle, according to a new report from Amnesty International. The Lao army continues to mount violent attacks on them, even though the jungle-dwellers' military capacity is all but depleted decades after some Hmong fought in the CIA-funded "Secret Army" in Laos during the Viet Nam war.

The groups frequently move camp to evade the Lao military, who have attacked them with AK-47s and grenades both inside their camps and outside when they search for food. Large numbers of Hmong, including children, have scars and wounds from bullets and shrapnel.

Fighting starvation, the groups spend 12-18 hours a day foraging for roots and husks. Children display the distended bellies and bleached hair of malnutrition. They have no access to healthcare, leaving the people open to diseases and infection from untreated wounds.

"The Hmong groups living in the jungle are destitute -- the Lao authorities have a responsibility to protect them, not least because of the children involved. Instead, their regular attacks mean the groups live in perpetual danger of their lives," said Natalie Hill, Deputy Asia Pacific Director at Amnesty International.

"The Lao authorities must end all attacks against the Hmong people living in the jungle and allow access to international organisations who can provide humanitarian aid and monitor human rights abuses."

Despite numerous reports of killings and attacks by Lao security forces, Amnesty International is aware of only two cases that have been 'investigated' by the authorities -- and in both instances the authorities concluded the information about the attacks was fabricated and issued blanket denials. In one of the incidents, in April 2006, 17 children were among the 26 people who had been killed while foraging for food. Survivors said around 15-20 soldiers from the Lao People's Army had ambushed them with rocket-propelled grenades.

One young woman named "Pakou" described how her family was captured in the jungle when she was 18. She was taken alone to a police post where she was locked in a room for a year with two other Hmong women. They were repeatedly gang-raped by the police and made to do housework. After a year, "Pakou" managed to escape, traumatised, across the border to Thailand.

Many others who flee to Thailand face unlawful deportation by the Thai authorities, before they have been

assessed by the UN refugee agency. Even those who have been recognised as refugees are at risk of deportation to the violence and abuse they fled in Laos. Around 350 Lao Hmong men, women and children are currently in Thai detention, at imminent risk of forcible return.

The Lao authorities refuse to allow human rights organisations unfettered access to areas of concern and only limited information is available about the fate of those Hmong who are deported back from Thailand or who choose to come down from the jungles to try to integrate into Lao society.

In December 2006, 420 people emerged from the jungle in the north-eastern province of Xieng Khouang, apparently seeking to join mainstream society. Some 370 people had similarly left the jungle near the northern tourist town of Vang Vieng two months earlier. Nothing has been heard from either group since and Amnesty International is concerned for their safety.

"The Lao authorities must help any Hmong who want to move out of the jungle to reintegrate with mainstream society -- and they must allow UN bodies to monitor this process," said Natalie Hill.

Background

The predominantly Hmong groups in the Lao jungles are the remnants and descendents of the "Secret Army", a CIA-funded faction who fought the Communist Lao forces alongside the USA in the early 1960s when the Viet Nam war spilled across the border. When the Communist forces won in 1975, small numbers of soldiers from the losing side launched armed resistance against the government, based in the jungle.

Relatives of these insurgents remain in the jungle to this day. Hungry and destitute, they no longer appear able to pose a military threat against the Lao government.

Amnesty International interviewed Hmong asylum-seekers and refugees in Thailand in March 2006 and early 2007.

Names have been changed to protect the identity of individuals.

The report, *Laos: Hiding in the jungle - Hmong under threat*, will be available from 23 March 00:01 GMT at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa260032007>

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566
Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

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