



HIDDEN BEHIND BARBED WIRE

Plight of Hmong Refugees Held in Detention Camp in Northern Thailand Ignored Amid Ongoing Deportations to Laos



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Photo: Thailand, 2007 © Greg Constantine

“I will never go back to Laos. I would rather die here than go back to where so many of my family died.” BV, a 20-year-old woman in the Huai Nam Khao camp

Introduction

Over the past four months, the Thai military has used heightened restrictions and coercive tactics to pressure some 4,700 ethnic Lao Hmong refugees, who claim to have fled violence and persecution in Laos, to renounce their claims for protection and accept a forced return to Laos. These refugees have been confined for the past two years to the Thai military-controlled Huai Nam Khao camp in northern Thailand. Many of these refugees have told international medical humanitarian organization Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), the sole independent nongovernmental organization working in the camp, of fleeing violent attacks and persecution, witnessing the murder of family members, suffering rape, surviving bullet and shrapnel wounds, and enduring malnutrition and disease in Laos.

The Thai military has engaged in coercive tactics such as the use of arbitrary imprisonment of refugee leaders to pressure the camp’s inhabitants to give up their claims to protection or asylum and temporary food distributions cuts. In mid-April 2009, the army began forcing the population to pass through a military check point before entering the MSF medical clinic, thus restricting access to health care services because many people in the camp fear to be arrested at this checkpoint. As a result, the proportion of men seeking medical consultations dropped by 50 percent.

The Thai military’s coercive measures have heightened the anxiety, psychological distress, and fear among the already traumatized camp population. Six refugees have attempted suicide in the past years. Hunger strikes, arson, and self-mutilation have all been employed by refugees out of desperation to avoid a forced return to Laos. Ultimately, the Thai and Lao governments’ refusal to accept any independent, third-party to assess the claims for protection of the refugees has destroyed what little space existed for MSF to continue to provide independent humanitarian assistance to these refugees. As a result, on May 20, 2009, MSF was compelled to end its medical assistance in Huai Nam Khao camp.

Despite more than two years of diplomatic and public communication by MSF, the United Nations, United States, France, and other regional powers have failed to take any concrete steps to ensure the protection of the traumatized and vulnerable refugee population confined to Huai Nam Khao camp. International standards state that repatriation cannot be forced or imposed on individuals fearing for their safety and any repatriation must remain linked to guarantees for safety upon return. For the Hmong refugees, none of these conditions have been met by either the governments of Thailand and Laos.

In March, the Thai government reaffirmed its intention to return all Hmong refugees to Laos before the end of the year. Since December 2008, the number of repatriations has increased to approximately 200 per month, reaching 500 in March, following over a year of heightened pressure on the camp’s inhabitants to agree to return voluntarily to Laos. At its peak, the refugee population numbered some 7,800 people. Last June, an estimated 800 refugees were forced back to Laos after the military rounded up some 5,000 refugees who had engaged in a protest march against the Thai-Lao agreement to deport them back to Laos. MSF staff and mental trauma patients were among those driven over the border and families were separated in the process.

MSF began providing humanitarian aid to this group of refugees in July 2005. During medical and psychosocial consultations, MSF found extreme fear and psychological distress among this population, which has only been exacerbated by the threat of a return to Laos. Refugees have told MSF field staff about recent abuses suffered in Laos, which are consistent with reports by human right organizations¹ and

¹ *Hiding in the Jungle: Hmong under Threat*, 23 March 2007, Amnesty International, [available at: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA260032007?open&of=ENG-LAO>]

independent journalists² who have visited the areas of Laos (Borikamxai, Xieng Khouang, Xaisomboune, and Vientiane provinces) where many of the Hmong refugees used to live. At least 181 refugees in the camp had been documented as bearing physical scars, such as bullet and shrapnel wounds, from alleged abuses in Laos. The MSF mental health program admitted 286 patients. Of those consulted, a majority of them reported witnessing the death of family members or friends, or experiencing torture and starvation in the mountainous jungles of Laos.

Out of grave concern for their safety, MSF is making a final call to the governments of Thailand and Laos to immediately stop the forced repatriation of these Lao Hmong refugees without independent monitoring and guarantees for their safety.

The Thai government proceeded in December 2007 and January 2008 with a screening process without the participation of any third party and its results have not been communicated to UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). The purpose of this operation was to separate refugees fleeing persecution in Laos from those migrating for economic reasons. Despite repeated requests, UNHCR has not been allowed to access the camp or to monitor the screening process at any point over the last three years.³ The repatriation process agreed upon by Thailand and Laos seriously threatens the legal and fundamental right of *non-refoulement*—whereby people fleeing persecution must not be sent back to countries where their lives or liberty would be threatened.⁴

The government in Laos has continually prevented nongovernmental organizations and international organizations from monitoring and assessing the safety of Lao Hmong returnees. Since December 2005, more than 1,500 Hmong have been forcibly returned to Laos. Some of these individuals have been held in arbitrary detention, and there have been credible reports of torture.⁵

Because of the credible fear among Hmong refugees in the Huai Nam Khao camp, MSF is issuing a final appeal and urgently calling upon the governments of Thailand and Laos:

- **To stop the forced repatriation of the Hmong refugees in Huai Nam Khao and allow an independent, third party to review the refugee status determinations.**
- **To allow an independent, third party to assess the areas of return and the adequacy of assistance offered, monitor all repatriations, verify the voluntary nature of returns, and continued safety of returnees.**

Furthermore, MSF requests any States that have already resettled Hmong, or could be ready to do so, to offer them an alternative in accordance with international law in terms of protection of people fleeing persecution.

² “*The Human Rights Situation in Laos with Particular Emphasis on the Situation of the Hmong People*,” Ruhi Hamid, requested by the European Parliament’s subcommittee on Human Rights, September 2005, [available at:

http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/hmong_ruhi_hamid_020905/hmong_ruhi_hamid_020905_en.pdf]; “Old US Allies, Still Hiding Deep in Laos”, Thomas Fuller, The New York Times 17 December 2007 [available at: www.nytimes.com/2007/12/17/world/asia/17laos.html?_r=1&oref=slogin]; “Laos’ ‘Lost Tribe’ in Plea for Help”, Tony Birtley, Al Jazeera 12 March 2008 [available at: <http://english.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/A015CB08-F309-4035-B85C-A22FEC01AF42.htm>]

³ “Thais Urged to Stop Hmong Refugee Deportation Plan”, Nopporn Wong-Anan, Reuters, 31 October 2007

⁴ “Thailand: Stop Forced Returns to Laos: Forced Repatriations of Hmong to Laos Should End” Human Rights Watch, 5 March 2008, available at: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2008/03/05/thaila18211.htm>

⁵ “Thailand: The New Thai Government Must Stand Up for Human Rights of Refugees”, Amnesty International, 18 April 2008, available at: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/document.php?id=ENGASA390042008>

Background

The Hmong refugees that MSF assisted in Huai Nam Khao in northern Thailand are originally from Laos. According to the Lao government, more than 450,000 Hmong live in Laos, constituting 8 percent of the population and making them the third largest ethnic group in the country after the Lao and the Khmou. Ethnic Hmong also live in Cambodia, southern China, Thailand, and Vietnam.

During the Vietnam War, certain Hmong were recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) of the United States to support the American army in Vietnam and Laos. In the first decade following the US departure in 1973, approximately 300,000 people⁶, including many Hmong, fled Laos to Thailand where they sought refugee status. The majority resettled in third countries, particularly in the US, which received some 250,000 Lao people between 1975 and 1996⁷, more than half ethnic Hmong.

Because of the involvement by some Hmong with the CIA-trained army, the Communist government in Laos has treated this group with suspicion since it came to power in 1975. Thousands of irregular Hmong soldiers retreated to inaccessible forest areas with their families out of fear for their safety. According to people living in the camp and human rights organizations, up to a few thousand Hmong, including women, children and elderly people, still live in the jungle today and continue to be subject to attacks and persecution by the Lao military. As a result, Hmong have continued to flee Laos since the end of the war

Hmong Refugees in Huai Nam Khao, Thailand

Chronology of Events

Late 2004: 4,000 to 5,000 Hmong fled Laos, crossing the Mekong River to seek refuge in the Thai province of Petchabun. Initially, many of them lived in the forest near the village of Huai Nam Khao, where local residents gave them food. Some worked in farms and others sold or bartered their few possessions to be able to eat.

June 2005: Thai authorities force the Hmong refugees to leave the forests surrounding Huai Nam Khao and pressure residents to stop helping them.

July 2005: MSF learns of the situation from several articles in the *Bangkok Post*. The medical and logistics team sent to evaluate the situation reports that 5,000 to 6,000 refugees have settled along the main road, on a strip of land less than 10 meters wide, living in makeshift shelters with minimal access to food, drinking water and health care. The MSF team immediately sets up a clinic, provides water and sanitation and distributes basic supplies.

December 2005: 27 adolescents are arrested outside the camp and deported to Laos. This deportation creates a diplomatic incident among Thailand, Laos, and the international community. MSF seeks more space for the Hmong and improved sanitary conditions.

March 2006: Military checkpoint is set up in the village of Huai Nam Khao and the Thai government announces its intention to deport all the refugees to Laos. Every new arrival is systematically arrested. In May 2006, MSF builds an outpatient center and a logistical warehouse.

⁶ *The State of the World's Refugees*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2000, p. 98; <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/3ebf9bad0.pdf>

⁷ United States Department of State, Laos Country Brief, 2006; <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2770.htm>

June 2006: Refugees begin to run out of food and malnutrition in the camp increases. MSF seeks partners and/or funding for food aid. Under pressure from MSF, the United Nations evaluates the situation in the camp but UNHCR does not receive government's permission to access the refugees.

Between June and December 2006: 2,000 new refugees arrive in the camp. In November, 147 refugees are imprisoned in Nong Khai prison. The Thai decide to move the population of the camp to a new site.

January 2007: MSF undertakes an exploratory mission into Laos to try to reach the area where many of the refugees claim to have fled from violence and persecution. Preparations for the new camp are underway and arrests resumed. The assessment mission failed. The MSF team was prevented from accessing the area by authorities

In May 2007: Eight of the adolescents arrested in November 2006 and deported to Laos return to the camp and speak to MSF teams about the violence they had experienced in Laos. The Thai and Laotian governments sign a joint repatriation agreement covering all Hmong refugees in the camp.

Mid-2007: New arrivals swell the population at the Huai Nam Khao makeshift camp, bringing the total number of individuals there to 7,800.

June 2007: The refugees are transferred to a new site, approximately three kilometers from the center of the village. The new camp, on a 20-hectare site, was set up on a hillside, is surrounded by barbed wire. The Thai army controls the only entry point. While living conditions improve, the refugees are confined to the small area and children have no access to education. According to MSF statistics, in April 2008, 1,451 families (approximately 7,850 people) live in the camp.

September 2007: The Thai and Laotian governments agree to repatriate the Hmong to Laos. Given the fears expressed by people in the camp about their security in Laos and the complete lack of transparent, independent screening, MSF issues a public report⁸ and press release in October.

Between December 2007 and January 2008: The Thai government conducts a review of requests without the participation of a third party. The results are not transmitted to UNHCR. The operation is intended to separate refugees fleeing persecution in Laos from economic migrants. Despite its repeated requests, UNHCR does not receive authorization to enter the camp or monitor the review of requests at any time during the prior three years.⁹

February 2008: MSF witnesses the forced repatriation of a group of 11 refugees, allegedly part of a list of voluntary returnees. MSF interviews four families registered as voluntary returnees. None of them express the desire to return to Laos. Indeed, they fear for their safety if they return. A 27-year-old man registered on the list tells MSF, "I never said I wanted to go back to Laos—no one has told me why I'm on this voluntary list. I don't want to go back to Laos—I'm afraid of what will happen to me if I go back there." A 50-year-old man who is the head of a family of 9 said, "I don't know why I'm on this list, but I do not want to go back to Laos. If I return to Laos they're going to kill me." It immediately notifies the media and representatives of the international community in Bangkok.

April 2008: Another 67 Hmong are again allegedly voluntarily returned to Laos. However, their protection claims are never reviewed by any third party.

May 2008: Refugees protest the arrest of one of their leaders. A fire breaks out and burns 60 percent of the shelters and the water-and-sanitation infrastructure (including latrines and water distribution points). During the four weeks following the fire, several thousand refugees refuse to return to the camp and settle outside, intentionally blocking the camp's access road to protest their situation and, specifically, to

⁸ The Situation of Hmong Refugees in Petchabun, Thailand – October 2007 – MSF

⁹ "Thais Urged to Stop Hmong Refugee Deportation Plan", Nopporn Wong-Anan, Reuters, 31 October 2007

demand that they be interviewed by UNHCR. Hundreds of demonstrators go on a hunger strike and MSF has to treat dozens of others on an emergency basis. MSF issues a public report, again denouncing the situation.¹⁰

June 20, 2008: Approximately 5,000 refugees decide to march to Bangkok in an effort to attract more attention from the international community regarding their situation. Military forces stop the demonstrators several kilometers away from the camp and more than 800 refugees were subject to forced repatriation to Laos. MSF issues a new press release at that time, criticizing the forced repatriation and restates its call for more transparency on the part of the Thai and Laotian governments.

Between June and December 2008: The situation appears to have calmed. However, repatriations to Laos continue on a “voluntary” basis, according to Thai authorities. Nonetheless, the line between voluntary and forced departure is increasingly difficult to define because most refugees agree to return out of resignation and under pressure and threats from Thai soldiers.

The Current Situation

The restrictions and coercive tactics imposed by the Thai military authorities over the past years has exacerbated fears among the refugee population of an imminent and forced return to Laos. This environment has caused refugees to resort to hunger strikes, suicide attempts, and even self-mutilation out of desperation to halt their return to Laos.

UNHCR has still not been allowed to enter the camp despite numerous official requests by the agency to assess the conditions of the refugees, review their claims for protection, or take part in the screening process. The Lao government has made the firm demand that no third party should be included in the repatriation process. This was made a condition of any negotiation with Thailand on the issue of Hmong returns.

Thus the forced repatriation process may continue without any monitoring of the humanitarian conditions or respect for individuals’ rights—a prospect that has increased the level of fear and anxiety among the population and caused families to regularly flee the camp since August 2007.

In addition, over the past six months, Thai military’s willingness to allow MSF’s medical and relief activities to continue without obstruction has gradually deteriorated. Military authorities in the camp have refused to discuss with MSF any issues related to the situation in the camp. The Thai army has on numerous occasions attempted to involve MSF in its strategies to pressure the Hmong to return to Laos. At several points, the military have asked MSF to not distribute food to the population in order to punish the people. But MSF has always refused, arguing that humanitarian assistance should not be used as a coercive instrument.

The military has consistently stated that it defines the rules and requests MSF to follow them without condition. The rules imposed do not respect MSF’s most basic operating principles. These principles include that no pressure be applied on MSF staff and there is free access for the population to MSF health structures. For the past six months, many times MSF has had to argue with the army to try to preserve those two principles but each time MSF was constrained to compromise:

- Regularly, MSF staff members are questioned by the army about their work and their salary.
- Since March 2009 the military oblige MSF’s Lao Hmong staff to pass through military control to get to the MSF clinic and logistical warehouse.
- In the beginning of March, the army obliged MSF to stop hiring or using Lao Hmong as volunteer workers by the end of the month.

¹⁰ The Situation of Hmong Refugees in Petchabun, Laos : Fears of Forced Return – May 2008 - MSF

Concerning the free access to the population, several times the army has tried to control the gates to access the MSF clinic.

- At the end of last year, the army decided that patients would not be allowed to get direct access to MSF clinic at night and forced them to pass through a military checkpoint.
- By mid-February 2009, the army attempted to put a soldier around the clock at the gate to the MSF clinic to control the movement of patients.
- In the beginning of March the army stopped MSF from distributing food to the population. MSF finally resumed this activity after three days of stand off.
- Finally on April 16 the army locked MSF's clinic and warehouse gates (without any warning). Thus, people did not have free access to MSF medical and logistical facilities.

Fearing an Unsafe Return to Laos

The alleged abuses perpetrated against Lao Hmong refugees who have been forcibly returned to Laos have intensified the stress and anxiety among an already traumatized population. In December 2005, 27 Lao Hmong children (5 boys and 22 girls) from Huai Nam Khao were arrested by the Thai police and sent back by force to Laos. Twelve of the girls managed to come back to Thailand and join their parents in the camp in May 2007. They told MSF staff of enduring repeated beatings, rapes, and other abuses during their detention in Laos. Ten girls and five boys are still in Laos, their whereabouts and fates unknown.

Such incidents have only heightened anxieties among the population living in the camp. Following a mental health assessment in the camp to obtain some indicators of the prevalence of psychological disorders among the Hmong refugees, MSF began providing mental health counseling in November 2007 to the most traumatized refugees.

The adults interviewed presented various psychological disorders as well as a high level of psychological distress: pathological mourning due to death or disappearance of multiple family members, psycho-traumatic disorders due to exposure to numerous highly traumatic situations (being forced to hide, flee under dangerous conditions, live under constant threat of attack and sexual violence), anxiety disorders due to the uncertainty of their future, and the inability to control their present living conditions.

In clinical interviews, patients presented several symptoms related to post-traumatic stress disorder as well as anxiety-related depressive disorders. Their main symptoms are persistent sadness, anxious mood, crying easily, sleeping disorders, recurrent nightmares of traumatic events, feelings of hopelessness, difficulty concentrating, and somatic complaints such as headaches and other chronic pains.

Conclusion

For nearly four years, MSF has been providing medical care to the refugees living in Petchabun, a population completely dependent on outside aid. The main need voiced by the Hmong refugee population is protection from forced repatriation to Laos. MSF patients say they are extremely afraid about the prospect of a forced return to Laos. For many of them, this situation produces intense stress and psychological suffering.

As a final appeal, MSF is urging the governments of Thailand and Laos to immediately halt all deportations of Lao Hmong refugees living in Huai Nam Khao and to allow an independent third party to monitor and assess the fears of the population, ensure that guarantees for their safety are in place, and any repatriation to Laos is voluntary and secure. International standards state that repatriation cannot be forced or imposed on individuals fearing for their safety and any repatriation must remain linked to guarantees for safety upon return. For the Lao Hmong refugees, none of these conditions have been met by either the governments of Thailand and Laos.

Additionally, MSF urges the ASEAN member states, key regional stakeholders, and the French and US governments to take concrete steps to protect these refugees and to ensure that Thailand stops abusing and persecuting the Lao Hmong refugees and deporting them back to Laos without any respect for international standards for the protection of refugees.

Appendix I

Mental Health Status – Hmong Refugees

The stress of life in the camp for refugees who report a long personal history of traumatic events in Laos continues to intensify in the face of ongoing uncertainty about their future and lack of any economic opportunity. So far, 286 patients have been seen for psychological consultation. MSF staff living in the camp report there are many more whom suffer symptoms of stress but are not yet referred. Nearly every day, new faces come to the consultation room door and ask to be seen. Of those seen, a majority reported a lifetime of loss, torture, running, hiding, and starving in the mountainous jungles of Laos. Patients present extensive documents showing photos of the dead and relatives in military uniforms, papers showing the family's connection to the CIA, and maps of hiding places and routes of escape from attacks. While many details differ, the elements are quite consistent.

Of the 286 patients seen for consultation many of them threaten suicide if they are forced to return to Laos. They make statements that vary in intensity, from: "I would rather die in this camp than return to Laos" to: "If I am forced to go back to Laos I will kill my family with a knife and then hang myself." Or, "I will force the soldier to shoot me." One patient who tried to kill himself by drinking wood staining liquid reported that he was tortured by thoughts of the past suffering in Laos, humiliated by his present circumstances of being poor and unable to provide for his family, and hopeless about the future, convinced he will be killed anyway if he is sent back. "At least I can choose my time to die and join my father (who recently was reported killed in Laos)". Another male patient expressed suicidal thoughts and a plan to kill his family if forced to return: Since I was a small child, my life has been running from the war, hiding and starving in the jungle, and seeing my family killed. Now I am afraid of being sent back to the same suffering, and I have to beg for protection. I thought I would find a better life."

Every day, these people face Thai soldiers with weapons who have decided to send them back to Laos even by force. According to the MSF psychologist, these conditions for the traumatized refugees—facing weapons and the imminent threat of deportation to Laos—serve as a constant reminder of the violence and persecution they endured in Laos. This situation and the lack of real protection creates high levels of anxiety and has produced somatic disorders and depressive symptoms in the patients admitted to MSF's mental health program. This lack of protection also prevents the patients from recovering from their psychological wounds.

The fact that they are traumatized leads them to believe that they are destined to experience additional catastrophic events. According to the MSF psychologist, traumatized individuals who feel powerless and helpless may resort to killing themselves as they feel it is their only power to avoid the repetition of the trauma they have experienced in the past. For all of these reasons, the threat of suicide voiced by patients during psychotherapy poses a major concern for MSF.

Appendix II

Living in Constant Fear

A pervasive fear stalks the Lao Hmong refugees in Huai Nam Khao camp because of the prospect of a forced return to Laos. In testimonies provided to MSF staff, many of these refugees tell of facing a daily struggle to survive targeted attacks, witnessing the murder of family members, suffering rape, and surviving bullet and shrapnel wounds, as well as malnutrition and disease. They endured these hardships and acute stress for prolonged periods with little or no access to any health-care services or medicine beyond herbal remedies harvested from the jungle. During these interviews, many of the refugees repeatedly stated to MSF staff members that they feared death, torture, and imprisonment if returned to Laos. Further attesting to the intense and overwhelming stress felt among the refugees, some of the interviewees expressed suicidal thoughts when asked about being sent back to Laos.

Hiding in the Forest

YH, 22 years old, used to live in the forests of Xieng Khouang province in Laos. She fled to Thailand in May 2005 after five cousins and two sisters had been killed during attacks on her family. She lives with her husband and their three-year-old daughter in Huai Nam Khao.

“I lived all my life in the forest in Laos. We were chased by the Lao and Vietnamese soldiers all the time. All my family members were killed by soldiers. Sometime the planes attacking us would drop bombs that produced a poisonous, yellow-colored gas. We would have to run and hide among the trees. I saw a lot of people die. Sometimes the soldiers would accidentally kill one another, and some of the adults would see their bodies and the uniforms that they were wearing. During one attack, one of my younger sisters breathed in poisonous gas and she passed out. My mother had to carry her. Eventually, all her teeth fell out.

My husband decided we could no longer stay in the forest. He thought we should try to come to Thailand. We were still constantly being chased by the Lao and Vietnamese soldiers. When we finally made it to the Mekong River my husband paid a fisherman to take across the river. Then we paid some more silver to a driver and my husband told him to take us where the Hmong were living. He dropped us in Huai Nam Khao. All we had when we arrived was my husband’s Hmong knife that he used to dig for roots. Some of the Thai Hmong in the village let us live with them. Then we were forced to live with the other Lao Hmong along the roadside. We started to receive food from MSF. Ever since we fled Laos our life has gotten better because we have had food to eat and we don’t have to hide from attacks. But I am so afraid that we will be sent back to Laos. If I think about it too much I faint. I don’t want to be sent back to Laos to be killed. Everyone is saying we are going to be sent back.”

Surviving Detention and Rape

KL lived most of her life in the forest in Laos’ Xieng Khouang province. Her father fought alongside other Hmong who were allegedly trained by the Central Intelligence Agency of the U.S. government. She and her family were later captured by Lao soldiers and sent to a camp. She was repeatedly raped by the soldiers and later escaped to Thailand.

“In 2002, the Lao military surrounded the area where my family and I had settled in the forest. The soldiers arrested me and my husband. Our four children were also brought to the camp. The soldiers took us to a village and we stayed there for about one month. Then, the military took my husband and another man into the jungle with them to try to find other Hmong groups. I never saw my husband again. About five months later, the soldiers asked me where my husband had gone. I told them I did not know and they beat me. Two days every week the soldiers would march me to the local commander’s compound for

questioning. They would rape me. When the soldiers realized I was pregnant from the rape they put me in jail. My children stayed back in the camp.

I knew if I stayed in the jail that I would be killed. I had no choice but to runaway from the jail and leave my children behind. When I fled into the jungle I came across the rotten body of the other man who had been taken into the forest with my husband. His throat had been cut. I assumed they had done the same to my husband, but I couldn't find anything to indicate if he was alive or dead. I fled to Vientiane. Some people told me that the army was looking for me. I asked them what I should do and they told me to take a boat across the Mekong River and travel to Petchabun province in Thailand where other Hmong were living. When I got to the Mekong River I went into labor and delivered my daughter. I just wrapped her up in cloth. Even though she was born out of rape, she is part of my blood and I really love her. The military keep on scaring us that they will send us back to Laos. I don't want to go back to Laos. I cannot sleep at night. I am always scared. And as long as we have food to eat we will stay here. When we lived in the forest we didn't have much to eat. I had never tasted rice before coming here. We were just eating the insides of trees. Everyday, I prayed to heaven but nobody could hear me. Now that I have told my story I hope someone can help me."

Fleeing Violence

CY is 18. She is originally from Bolikhamxai province in Laos. She arrived at Huai Nan Khao refugee camp on October 4, 2006, accompanied by her three-year-old brother.

"Laotian soldiers attack us regularly, at least four or five times a year, particularly during the dry season. Laotian helicopters fly over the jungle to find groups of Hmong. Failing that, they drop troops down close by and the soldiers search for us, surveying the area for several days. To find us in the jungle, the military look out for signs of us, particularly marks made by machetes on the vegetation - so we try to leave as few traces as possible. When there is an attack, we separate, and we normally get together again a few days later, in a predetermined place. Generally, the soldiers systematically kill the men and capture the women. To defend ourselves, some of our group were armed [one weapon to 3 or 4 men], some groups possess a few machine guns (M16s); in my group we only had a few old rifles, but it is very difficult to obtain ammunition. 'Since my childhood, several of my cousins in my group have been killed. In 2002, one of my elder brothers was killed by soldiers when he was out collecting fruit with my cousins. One day in 2004, at around 8 in the morning, Laotian soldiers found our camp. That day, my mother and two men from our group were killed, the soldiers set fire to our camp, but my father, my two younger brothers and I managed to escape.

We later found the rest of the group; we use a sort whistle made of leaves to find each other after we have dispersed. 'In March 2006, soldiers attacked us again and my father and I had to separate, each taking one of my younger brothers. We had arranged to meet at a place. I waited for my father for two days but he never arrived; I was terrified, alone with my brother. Then I decided to walk and, after a day and a night of walking, I came upon a Hmong village on the edge of the jungle. The village chief introduced me to some cousins [among the Hmong, the same surname means you are from the same clan, i.e. cousins; two people with the same surname cannot marry each other].

I stayed there for eight months, working, but the village chief then asked me to leave as he considered it too dangerous for him and for the village if the Laotian authorities discovered me there. He told me there was a Laotian Hmong camp in Thailand, where I would be safe."

Dangers of Being Sent Back

In December 2005, 27 Lao Hmong children (5 boys and 22 girls) from Huai Nam Khao were arrested by the Thai police on their way to celebrate Christmas and sent back by force to Laos. Since then, in May 2007, 12 of the girls managed to come back to Thailand and join their parents in the camp. Their testimonies collected directly by the MSF team attest to the harsh treatment those children had endured during their detention in Laos. PHY is one of the girls who returned to Huai Nam Khao. Her statement was taken in the presence of two other girls, PKY, 16, and MY, 16, who were also among the group sent to Laos. During the interview, they occasionally added details and information regarding their own experience. Ultimately, all three girls endured the same situation. PHY describes their experience after being deported to Laos.

“Six policemen arrived and started asking us questions, beating us at the same time. They questioned each girl privately (one girl after another in different rooms). They asked, ‘Where do you come from and what are you doing?’

We answered that we were from Huai Nam Khao in Thailand and that we were telling the truth, but the police wouldn’t believe us and they beat us even more. They asked us our religion and we told them that we believed in Jesus. They asked who the priest at Huai Nam Khao was and if he was an American priest. They asked if we had been sent by the Americans or the Thais to talk to other Hmong about Jesus. The police also tried to force us to say that we were being paid by Thailand or the Americans to go to Xieng Khouang province to find other Hmong. They also asked who the leader of our group was, but we told them that we didn’t have any leaders. They accused us of trying to meet the Hmong who live in the jungle to start a war in this country. They accused us of being spies and things like that.

The more we said no, the more they beat us. They hit us in the stomach, grabbed our hair and beat our heads on the floor. They tore our clothes and touched our private parts, saying they wanted to make sure that we weren’t hiding anything. One of the policemen held my legs while others raped and beat me. They did that for an entire day, one man after another. There were six rooms in the prison. Every day, we would experience the same treatment. They would beat us until we were nearly unconscious, let us recover, sometimes for a day, and start over again. They also terrorized us with a revolver. The policemen told us that the boys had already confessed and so it would be a good idea for us to tell the truth.

They made us listen to a recording. You could hear each boy being beaten, crying and answering, “Yes, yes,” to the questions the police were asking. They asked, “Were you going to Xieng Kouang? Were you going to the market to take the money the Americans gave you to support the war in the jungle? Are you from Xieng Kouang?” The boy was just crying, and saying, “Yes, yes, yes.”

Appendix III

MSF Assistance to Hmong Refugees in Huai Nam Khao

Since November 2005, MSF has been the only international humanitarian agency providing medical and relief assistance to the Lao Hmong refugee population in Huai Nam Khao. Besides providing medical care, MSF also runs the water supply system and sanitation services, distributes relief items (blankets, plastic sheeting, cooking sets, charcoal, and soap), runs an immunization program, and provides reproductive health services (antenatal care, family planning, and safe birthing services).

In mid-2006, in order to prevent the deterioration of the nutritional situation, MSF began providing targeted food distributions to children under five and pregnant and lactating women. This was later expanded to a general food distribution of a full ration, which served at its peak up to 1,451 families in the camp. Patients requiring emergency medical services or specialized tests or examinations are referred to local health facilities. These comprehensive services and activities have helped to maintain the health of the refugee population and prevent the outbreak of epidemics.

In June 2007, the Thai government relocated the refugees to a new site approximately three kilometers north of the village. The camp, roughly 20 hectares (49 acres) in size, lies on a hillside with only one access point that is controlled by the Thai military. The camp is enclosed with barbed-wire fencing. MSF was allowed to build an outpatient clinic and logistical warehouse inside the camp in order to continue providing assistance to the refugees as well as designing and implementing the water supply and sanitation system at the new site. Living conditions in the new camp were much improved. There is more space, better access to proper drinking water, better sanitation, and better shelter. Health services have also been improved, notably by MSF's provision of 24-hour maternal health services.

Every day, the MSF medical team provides around 120 consultations, including nearly 10 antenatal consultations. The maternal health team manages about 25 births per month. The main pathologies are upper respiratory tract infections (30 percent), diarrhea (17 percent), skin and eye infections (10 percent), and dental problems (7 percent). Since MSF started to provide tuberculosis treatment (mid-2006), 28 patients have successfully completed their treatment and one died due to complications. On average, MSF refers 115 patients per month to the district or provincial Thai hospitals for consultation or admission.

MSF maintains the EPI (Expanded Program on Immunization) program in Huai Nam Khao camp. MSF provides a full monthly food ration of 2,200 calories per person per day; this ration is composed of rice, soybeans, dried fish, salt, sugar, oil, and chili peppers. Since MSF initiated the monthly food-ration distribution, the level of malnutrition has dropped significantly. As of March 2009, there are no more case of malnutrition in the camp. MSF also provides non-food items such as charcoal, soap, plastic sheeting, blankets, cooking pots, and stoves. And the MSF logistical team manages appropriate water supply and sanitation services (latrines, drainages, elimination of domestic waste and vector control activities). The cost of running this relief program during 2008 was €1,900,000.