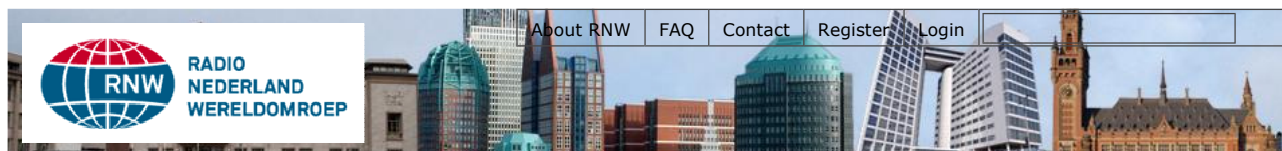


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Thai army deports 4,000 ethnic Hmong to communist Laos

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The Thai army has begun forcibly returning some 4,000 ethnic Hmong back to communist Laos despite international concerns for their safety. The Hmong say they will face persecution by the Lao regime for fighting alongside US forces during the Vietnam war.

Some 5,000 soldiers, officials and civilian volunteers are reportedly closing the camp for Hmong refugees in Huay Khao village in the province of Phetchabun. The operation is expected to take one day.

The UN had urged the Thai government to call off the deportation. Washington said on Sunday it deeply regretted the Thai government's decision and urged it to halt what it described as a "serious violation" of human rights.

Vietnam War

The Hmong, a large hill tribe, live in mountainous areas of Southeast Asia. Thailand describes the Hmong as illegal economic migrants and refuses to grant them refugee status. Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva is facing international condemnation for refusing to let the UN refugee agency assess whether there are political refugees among the Hmong.

Thousands of Hmong were recruited by the US during the Vietnam War. They formed a CIA-funded secret army when the conflict spread to Laos. When the Communists seized power in Laos in 1975, about 15,000 Hmong fighters fled abroad. Most of them stayed in the US. Thousands fled to neighbouring Thailand, a US ally during the war. Some remaining Hmong fighters continued waging a low-level rebellion from the Lao jungle. Little remains of this resistance today.

Recently, many Hmong have moved from their impoverished country to Thailand for economic reasons.

Amnesty

According to the BBC, more than 1,500 Hmong already been forced back over the border. Their fate is still uncertain, as the Lao government refuses to allow international agencies to monitor the returnees.

The Thai government reportedly promised the Lao authorities it would send the Hmong back by the end of 2009. It has insisted that the deportation will be carried out humanely. Rights groups fear the Hmong will resist the deportation, which could provoke a violent reaction from the Thai army. Journalists and other outside groups are not allowed into the camp.

Diplomats say several hundreds of Hmong justifiably fear persecution upon their return and should therefore not be forced to go back to Laos. Thailand has reportedly been assured by the Lao regime that those people will be pardoned on their return to their home country.

Legal vacuum

Communist Laos, one of the world's poorest nations, is backed by China and Vietnam. Its human rights record has been widely criticized, and there have been accusations of abuses by the military against the Hmong. In December 2005, 20 women and girls were sent back to Laos. They were detained for 18 months and some were tortured. An unknown number of returnees have vanished.

"I doubt whether the returnees who fought with the US during the Vietnam war will indeed be pardoned," said Amnesty spokesperson Nicole Sprokel in an interview with Radio Netherlands Worldwide. "In September, Laos signed the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, so they are more or less forced to make such a promise. But Laos is a communist country where capital punishment still exists, with bad prison conditions, and without freedom of expression or press freedom. The Hmong have been in a legal vacuum for decades. Those two factors combined do not make the situation very promising."

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No international aid

It is unclear why Thailand is taking such severe measures against the Hmong refugees. Over the years, millions of displaced people from conflicts in neighbouring countries have fled to Thailand. Some have been allowed to stay. Others have been kept in camps, where access to international agencies is severely restricted. The military may regard some groups as a security threat, or as an obstacle in their ties with neighbouring armies. Occasionally, groups have been forcibly repatriated to Laos.

"The tragic thing is that many of these Hmong have been granted a political refugee status outside Thailand's borders, mainly in the US." Sprokel says. "But because they did not have the same status in Thailand, they haven't been allowed to travel. This is definitely an issue Amnesty wants to discuss with the Thai government in the very near future. It is high time for a decent refugee policy in Thailand."

The only international organisation allowed to aid the almost 5,000 Hmong in Northern Thailand has been Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). MSF has decided to leave, citing unacceptable pressure from the Thai military on the Hmong to return to their home country.

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