

>>>Media 12/11/08<<<

<http://www.startribune.com/local/east/35939574.html?elr=KArksUUUU>

By Jean Hopfensperger, Star Tribune

Grief renewed for Hmong

Soua Dao Thao has never met a special investigator from the United Nations. But on Wednesday, the soft-spoken St. Paul man wept as he asked one to help the Hmong people who are haunted today because their family members were exhumed from graves.

"I ask that the United Nations seek the truth about what has happened to my mother's petrified body in Thailand," said Thao, at an unusual hearing at the University of Minnesota.

"I took a small piece of cloth that fell off her body as they carried her away ... and a sample of her hair," he explained. "Today those two items are the only things I have to mark what she went through."

Thao was among hundreds of Hmong from the Twin Cities, and some from around the country, who attended a hearing with James Anaya, the U.N.'s rapporteur on indigenous people's issues. Anaya was here to gather information on one of the most emotional issues in the Hmong community worldwide -- the desecration of more than 900 Hmong graves in 2005 at a Buddhist monastery where thousands of Hmong refugees had been living.

The incident prompted two St. Paul delegations to travel to Thailand last year and investigate the matter, and the University of Minnesota's Human Rights Program to draft a complaint to the U.N. on behalf of Hmong families.

On the surface, a three-year-old case about graves being dug up in Thailand may not seem like a classic international human rights case. But legal experts testified it was a serious violation of the cultural and religious rights of the Hmong people, and part of a broader pattern of discrimination against Hmong in Asia.

More important, the grave desecrations go to the core of the Hmong people's spiritual beliefs, they said. Disrupting a grave, and pulling the bones out of bodies, is "worse than committing a murder," said one Hmong witness.

Hmong tradition holds that people have several spirits, one of which guards the place they are buried, two shamans explained to Anaya, who is a University of Arizona law professor. When that place is upset, the disturbed spirit can cause illness -- and even death -- among the living.

Several people told Anaya that their loved ones had returned to them in dreams and nightmares. Others attributed family illnesses, and even a death, to disturbed spirits.

"My children tell me all the time that they see my parents' ghosts around the house," testified Lee Yang, of St. Paul. "My children are constantly in fear of my parents' haunting."

The case is different from others that Anaya is reviewing. He said he just returned from Brazil, where he investigated charges that indigenous people were being pushed off their land to make way for dams. He also recently visited Nepal, where indigenous leaders asked him to investigate their lack of opportunities for political participation in all levels of government.

The Hmong allegations, though very different, were "disturbing," he said.

"What I've heard today are accounts that are very serious -- assaults to a culture, assaults to a people," he told the crowd filling the auditorium at Coffman Memorial Union, many listening on headphones that translated the discussion from English to Hmong.

Anaya said he would investigate the matter in the months ahead, as well as make recommendations, in a report to the U.N. Human Rights Council later next year.

Fixing the problem will not be simple, Hmong leaders said. There is no traditional ceremony to rebury someone in Hmong culture, so a spiritual solution remains elusive.

On the political side, witnesses called for an official apology from the Thai government and information on the whereabouts of all the missing bodies. Some Hmong even asked for DNA testing on the bodies already recovered to make sure they are properly identified, and the return of those bodies to family members.

"I want you to know that even when we die, this won't be over," said Lia Thao, of St. Paul "Because our children will carry on [the fight]."

Barb Frey, director of the human rights program at the University of Minnesota, said continued U.N. pressure on the government of Thailand is important to make sure such incidents don't occur in the future.

"It's a great honor, and unusual, to get a representative from the United Nations to come and listen to the case," she said.

Jean Hopfensperger • 651-298-1553