

DID HMONG CRISIS SPUR VANG PAO "PLOT"?

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News that General Vang Pao may have been plotting to overthrow the Lao government will come as little surprise to people in Laos, or groups and individuals within the region who have been following the plight of the "jungle Hmong", which is particularly bad at present.

Remnants of Hmong groups that have survived since the war in remote areas of mainly northern Laos are in their death throes, given several years of a reportedly brutal crackdown by Lao and Vietnamese troops in the Saysomboon restricted zone, a series of large surrenders by the main jungle groups and a mass exodus across the Mekong to Phetchabun province.

The recent bilateral agreement by a Thai-Lao border committee last month - to forcibly return any new arrivals to Laos "no matter how many bullet wounds they have", as one sarcastic observer noted - was probably the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.

Vang Pao would have been acutely aware of how dire the situation has become in recent weeks, which have seen a series of alerts of looming forced deportations from detention centres in the North and far Northeast, where Hmong from Laos have been detained.

Websites in the US such as factfinding.org carry regular updates on the predicament of Hmong refugees here, which is now an issue of international attention thanks to activists such as Joe Davy, Laura Xiong, Ed Szendrey and Rebecca Sommer.

Sommer, a German, recently showed her documentary on the plight of the jungle Hmong - "Hunted Like Animals" - in New York. She had initially planned to screen the film in the UN building itself, "but Vietnamese officials stopped that",

she said.

Early last month, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) sent a senior official to Bangkok and Vientiane to stop the forced repatriation of 155 Hmong at Nong Khai Immigration Detention Centre, all of whom are listed as "people of concern" and believed to be at genuine risk of persecution or even death, if returned. That group remains, in a pathetic state of limbo, but the two governments have virtually thumbed their noses at the UN by sending back many similar groups.

Indeed, Reuters reported recently that Thai officials have ordered UNHCR staff in Bangkok to stop processing refugee applications because of the large number of Hmong and North Korean seeking refuge here. Hundreds of people with serious claims to refugee status have crossed into Thailand this year but none have been listed since late last year.

At least two large groups of Hmong with serious claims to refugee status (strong links to groups that have survived in the Lao jungles) have been forcibly deported in recent weeks. And a third group of 45 people is now crammed in Lom Sak police station awaiting the same dismal fate. This group allegedly includes survivors and relatives of 26 people killed in a notorious massacre near Vang Vieng on April 6 last year. (Photos have been posted at rogerarnold.net by the US photographer taken to the site several months later.)

Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the whole crazy Vang Pao "plot" is that the US government actually opted to prevent this latest alleged scheme going ahead.

Why? Because many in Laos and Thailand suspect Washington has either turned a blind eye to such activities in the 30 years since the Vietnam War - or has actually encouraged efforts to destabilise the tiny Asian regime and its socialist leaders, many of whom are ex-military and seen as bitter ideological foes.

French journalist Cyril Payen is one of about eight Western journalists and photographers who have sneaked into the military zones in Laos in recent years. He has just published a book, "Laos, the Forgotten War", which details one of several raids into Laos in the 1980s or 1990s by foreign mercenaries allegedly backed by Hmong exiles abroad, and even the Thai military.

Payen said his interest in Laos grew after he met two French mercenaries on the Thai-Burma border after the fall of Manerplaw in 1995.

"They told me about the Hmong. They said they undertook a security mission in 1989 allegedly organised by [a high-ranking Thai military official], to prove there were some resistance groups still existing. They went with a group of overseas Hmong, crossed the Mekong, and made a six-month trip to Phu Bia, a huge mountain where rebels were based. They lost about 200 men - mostly Hmong from America, who were killed by the Vietnamese. But they found 4,000 to 5,000 people - Hmong. The group included kids who were victims of chemical weapons.

"They [the mercenaries] said they later made a film and wrote a book about this, but nobody cared. They had gone later to join the Karen [fighting the Burmese] but were crying when they told me about the Hmong they met years before."

However, not many realise current Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont, a former Army chief, but one regarded as having a far greater grasp of moral issues than the military official Payen spoke of, is fast gaining a bad reputation because of his regime's treatment of the Hmong. Some have argued that the Surayud government has agreed to summarily deport all Hmong because it needs help from Vientiane, as the Council for National Security fears the "former power" or Thai Rak Thai heavyweights may seek to use Laos to funnel weapons or mercenaries, or simply large bundles of Thai baht to buy the next election.

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