

UN PRAISED LAOS WHILE HMONG REFUGEES HELD HOSTAGE September 30, 2009

The United Nations has publicly praised Laos for its recent ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a major UN human rights treaty. Serge Verniau, UN Resident Coordinator in Laos, stated "This is a significant moment in the evolution of the country's commitment with the promotion and protection of human rights and the UN Country team stands ready to support the Government in the realization of these conventions."

Even the Lao state-controlled media boasts to have "taken a huge stride in the advancement of the international and national rule of law" by ratifying the treaty.

Yet, at the very same time, the Lao government continues to hold a group of 158 UNHCR-recognized Hmong refugees hostage. These refugees fled political persecution in Laos but have been held in an overcrowded jail in Nong Khai, Thailand for the past 3 years, due to pressure from the Lao government who is blackmailing Thailand to repatriate the group.

On two separate occasions the Thai government had agreed to allow these refugees resettlement in third countries but due to a huge amount of pressure from the Lao government backed off. The refugees, mainly women and children, continue to be held under horrible cramped unsanitary living conditions due to this continuing pressure from the Lao side.

Back on November 17, 2006, the Lao government had closely coordinated with Thai police in Bangkok orchestrating a police raid targeting this group of UNHCR-recognized refugees. They were later transferred to Nong Khai immigration jail where they have lived ever since.

The group targeted includes witnesses of an April 2006 jungle massacre in which Lao troops reportedly killed 26 Hmong civilians. This is a very delicate matter with the Lao government who continues to deny that such attacks take place. This is due to the fact that these jungle Hmong are remnants of the CIA's secret army who fought against the Lao communists during the Vietnam War.

On December 19, 2006, the Lao and Thai governments signed a bi-lateral agreement to deport these Hmong refugees back to Laos. Although this would be in clear violation of international refugee law this is what the Lao government continually uses to justify their return to Laos, and that no third-party interfere in the matter.

I think this line taken from one of Amnesty International's annual reports sums up the situation best:

“Intergovernmental organizations such as the UN are the sum of their member states. Decisions reflect the will of governments. With few exceptions, governments act on the basis of their perceived economic, political or security interests, often at the expense of their human rights treaty obligations. Yet governments undertake these obligations freely, and governments must be held to account for their actions in their own country and on the international stage.”

How can the UN praise Laos for signing this treaty while at the same time their government is holding 158 UN refugees hostage?

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