

## PRESS RELEASE – March 26, 2010 By Joe Davy

Lao General cautions Hmong returnees what to tell media

Yesterday, Lao Brigadier General Bouasieng Champaphanh paid a special visit to a group of some 3000 Hmong returnees recently resettled in Phonkham village, Borikhamsai province. He informed them all that the Lao government had invited the foreign media to visit their village the next day and cautioned the returnees to make sure to use correct speech when answering any questions the journalists may ask.

The General told them to say good things about the Lao government and how well they were being treated. In particular, those Hmong who had previously received UNHCR-refugee status should firmly state that they wanted to live in Laos and not be resettled in third countries as they had been offered. The General then reiterated his point stating there would be consequences for those who did not fully cooperate in this matter.

The embedded foreign journalists will be airlifted in by Lao military helicopter. There are also expected to be at least 100-200 plainclothes soldiers and policemen present scattered amongst the villagers to make sure no one steps out of line or says the wrong thing. Of course, the foreign media will more than likely not be aware of any military presence due to their plain-clothing, but the Hmong returnees will certainly be aware and intimidated by them due to the fact that these soldiers live in their settlement. The soldiers dressing down in civilian clothing seems to be a ploy set by the central government to create a very conducive and pleasant atmosphere for the embedded journalists to capture.

The soldiers living at the Hmong settlement are mainly ethnic Khmu (Lao Theung) and have told the Hmong returnees of their ugly past history dealing with the jungle Hmong insurgents, who less than 10 years ago occupied territory just 5-10 miles north of their village. The Khmu soldiers have talked quite openly about this with some of the returnees saying how upset they are that many of their soldiers and close family members died in these attacks. Hmong people who lived in that jungle area some 7-10 years ago also confirm this story to be accurate.

Hmong returnees have been told quite bluntly by these Khmu soldiers that they are not very happy, to say the least, that the central government has chosen to resettle all 3000 of them in their village. The Khmu feel that this is their land and are very upset with the central government's decision to resettle so many Hmong here, especially when they feel there's not enough resources available. They have openly told the new Hmong villagers that the land is not very suitable for growing crops and that they've had a very hard time surviving during their past 10-20 years living here.

Just three months in their new village, some Hmong returnees have already claimed to have disputes over land with the Khmu soldiers and their families. As the Hmong returnees supported the US during the Vietnam War they are seen as outsiders or "troublemakers"; so feel afraid to bring up legitimate grievances with their neighbors who are soldiers carrying a grudge.

Earlier this month, about 60 Hmong families had their farmland burned by some unknown perpetrators. Now the land is not suitable for use to get in this year's crops. This has had a damaging impact on many of the Hmong returnees feeling they are not really welcome here.

It is quite obvious that the central Lao government is well aware of this past ugly history between the Hmong jungle groups and their new Khmu soldier neighbors, as these soldiers were used to attack them in the nearby jungles. Brigadier General Bouasieng Champaphanh should know better than anyone, as he has been the military man in charge of dealing with the Hmong jungle groups. On his many visits to the Hmong settlement over the past several months he always brings up this issue of how the jungle Hmong caused so much trouble over the past years. Maybe this is why the Lao government picked such a secure location for these Hmong returnees.

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