

HMONG HISTORY

Hmong

2007-02-02

Geography

The majority of the Hmong population in Laos is situated in the mountainous northern area of Laos. The provinces inhabited by the Hmong Chao Fa include: Houaphanh, Xieng Khouang, Sayaboury, and the city of Luang Prabang along the Mekong river. The total area of the territories is approximately 48,769 sq kilometers. Mountain peaks rise above 9,000 ft (2,800 m) in the general altitude of the region. Dense forests also cover the northern and eastern areas. Hmong territory is bordered on the east by Vietnam, the north by China, and the northwest by Burma.

People

Hmong or Meo peoples are indigenous in greater Asia and Southeast Asia with over 5,000 years of history where they occupied the plateau and mountainous regions in which their ancestors built and established cities, towns, and shrines. They were originally from Southern China and migrated over the centuries to Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Thailand.

History

Relations between the Hmong and the French were tenuous. The Hmong, who live in some of the country's least accessible and marginal lands, have traditionally relied on the cultivation of opium as their major economic source. Despite increasing French encroachment, group members were able to maintain a semi-autonomous status in which political rule was exercised first through leadership by the major clans and later under a canton system implemented by France.

Divisions within the Hmong emerged with the onset of World War II as

some group members chose to support the French while others favored the Japanese who occupied the region or they made contacts with the communists in Vietnam. Decolonization in Indochina and the subsequent American interventions were also played out in the context of Hmong fragmentation. The Hmongs' possession of large quantities of opium, which could be traded for arms on the black market, brought them into direct conflict with the various rebel groups participating in the general civil and liberation warfare which engulfed Southeast Asia in the 1950s.

In 1960, many Hmong in Laos were recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency as part of a plan to defend Laos against the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Communist Pathet Lao movement in that country and to otherwise assist the U.S. in its Southeast Asia war efforts. The efforts of the Hmong came to be known as the Secret War. American support led to the brief ascendancy of the Vang Pao supporters who joined with the LaoTheung tribals in 1966 to declare a short-lived independent Meoland in southern and central Laos.

When the U.S. withdrew from Vietnam in 1975, the Lao kingdom was overthrown by the communists and the Hmong people became targets of retaliation and persecution. While some Hmong people returned to their villages and attempted to resume life under the new regime, thousands more made the harrowing trek across the Mekong River into Thailand. This marked the beginning of a mass exodus of Hmong people from Laos.

Of those that did not leave, 2-3,000 were sent to re-education camps where political prisoners served terms of 3-5 years. Many people died in these camps, enduring hard, physical labor and harsh conditions. Thousands more Hmong people, mainly former soldiers and their families, escaped to remote mountain regions - in particular, Phou Bia, the highest peak in Laos. There they staged attacks against Pathet Lao and Vietnamese troops. The spiritual leader Zong Zoua Her rallied his followers in a resistance movement called Chao Fa. Initial military successes by these small bands led to military attacks from the government forces that included aerial bombing and heavy artillery, as well as defoliants and chemical weapons.

In the early 1980s, support was obtained from refugee groups in Thailand and other countries. The resistance movement became better coordinated and even had regular radio communication contacts with supporters in Thailand. However, this support was very ad hoc and only exposed the resistance groups to greater danger of discovery. When the Thai and Lao Governments started negotiations on border security in July 1994, these resistance support networks were dismantled and their members dispersed or imprisoned. With the closing of the refugee camps in Thailand, the resistance groups in Laos have been on their own since 1993.

To pacify the resistance Hmong, the Lao Government made Saisomboun District (formerly known as Muong Cha) into a Special Zone in 1994. This is the area closest to Phu Bia, the base of most of the Chao Fai groups. The idea is to make Saisomboun the centre for political and economic development to attract resistance Hmong into the folds of the authorities. The Government withdrew its lowland Lao personnel from the

area, and put Gen. Bouchane (a Khmu who successfully suppressed many Chao Fai Hmong in the late 1970s) as the local military commander, with Col. Lo Lu Yang as deputy commander and Mr Siatou Yang (formerly the Chao Muong at Mounng Hom) as the unification coordinator. The Special Zone covers the following districts: Muong Phoun, Muong Hom, Muong Cha and Long San.

Statistics

Area: 48,769 sq. km.

Population: 320,000