SUICIDE OF HMONG WOMAN HIGHLIGHTS WELFARE WORRIES OF IMMIGRANT WAR VETERANS

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Body

Chia Yang lay in the dark and waited for her husband to fall asleep. Then she got up and changed her clothes.

She slipped past the bedrooms of her son Yia, 21, and daughter Janie, 14, sleeping in their American beds, steeped in American culture.

Yang had endured ***war*** in Southeast Asia, walked miles through rotting corpses and lived four years in suffocating refugee camps. A ***Hmong*** tribeswoman from the mountains of Laos, she was 36 before she first saw a water faucet.

But at 54, after bearing seven children and more heartache than most, she looped a cord around her throat, tied it to an overhead beam, and jumped off the trunk of her husband's Toyota.

She ended her life because she believed the United States betrayed her by cutting her family's ***welfare*** benefits.

About 40,000 ***Hmong***, including Yang's husband and her two brothers, were enlisted by the CIA from 1961 to 1974 as guerrillas in the Vietnam ***War***. In return, they were given rice and an average salary of $3 a month.

The ***Hmong*** say the U.S. government also promised to take care of them, like any other ***war veteran***, then reneged.

In September, the U.S. Department of Agriculture cut food stamps to some 800,000 legal ***immigrants*** - including an estimated 20,000 Laotians - as part of ***welfare*** reform.

A month later, Yang was dead. Illiterate, she left ***suicide*** cassettes blaming the government

"She lost her country because we fought on the American side. Then she loses her benefits because she wasn't a U.S. citizen," said Yang's 30-year-old son, Toby Vue, sitting in his Sacramento home.

Panic and despair have prompted two other ***suicides***, community leaders say - one in Fresno, Calif., home to the largest U.S. ***Hmong*** population, another in Wisconsin.

"The whole community is at the point of desperation. They say 'We fought for your country, we died for your country.' Assistance from the government is what they were promised," said Victor Hwang of the Asian Law Caucus of San Francisco.

Since the Vietnam ***War*** ended in 1975, about 180,000 mostly ***Hmong*** Laotians have immigrated to America. More than half landed on federal assistance. An estimated 35 percent to 45 percent remain there, nearly all of them older people. Unlike their children, they couldn't assimilate into U.S. culture.

President Clinton, in his January State of the Union address, asked Congress to reinstate food stamps to legal ***immigrants*** by December. That is too far off, ***Hmong*** advocates say.

"Some people are talking about wiping out their whole families because they feel so bad, and betrayed, and not worth anything anymore," said Yi Xiong of the California Statewide Lao ***Hmong*** Coalition.

Philip Smith directs the 11,000-member Lao ***Veterans*** of America in Washington, D.C. He is pushing a bill making it easier for Laotians to become citizens.

"This is really not the way this country should be treating people who gave their lives during the Vietnam ***War***," he said.

CIA spokesman Mark Mansfield declined comment.

Jim Parker is one of the few surviving CIA advisers who served in Laos. He made no promises to the ***Hmong***, he says. He does not consider them ***veterans***.

"When they talk about fighting and dying for the Americans, it was a common enemy we were fighting," said Parker, who now writes books and lives in North Carolina. "They were already fighting the communists when we went there. I don't feel like we abandoned them."

The United States is not the best home for them, he said. "They're a Stone Age people.

The ***Hmong*** were recruited - some say drafted - by Gen. Vang Pao, the highest-ranking ***Hmong*** in the Lao military. Pao also worked for the CIA.

Laos, sandwiched between Thailand and Vietnam, was pivotal to Pentagon strategists fending off communism. But under a 1962 treaty, Laos also was off-limits to U.S. military personnel.

So the CIA waged covert ***war*** there, using the ***Hmong*** to gather intelligence, rescue downed U.S. pilots and guard radar and surveillance installations.

The ***Hmong*** suffered heavy casualties. An estimated 30,000 soldiers and civilians died before the last Americans pulled out in 1974.

Chia Yang and her husband Sua Chai Vue gathered their children, a few pounds of rice and started walking to Thailand, where refugee camps had opened at the border.

At the camps, the family waited four years before entering the United States. They were woefully unprepared.

Vue's father rarely found work. The family lived on federal assistance from the day they arrived.

The 1996 ***Welfare*** Reform Act took effect in September. And so began the last year of Chia Yang's life.

The first government letter warned that her disability payments of $640 would cease. That would leave only her husband's $400 ***welfare*** check and $180 in food stamps for the couple and their two youngest children to live on each month.

Yang panicked, then slid into depression. She already suffered from high blood pressure and kidney problems.

She tried to become a U.S. citizen, but twice failed because of her poor English.

"I'm worthless," she told her son. "Maybe they're right. I'm just like a dummy." For the first and only time, she spoke of killing herself.

"Don't talk like that," her son said.

Vue visited Oct. 15, the day before his mother chose to die. Her eldest son sat next to her. "I just need to rest a little bit," she said. "I'll be OK tomorrow."

She watched TV with her husband. They went to bed about midnight.

At 3:30 a.m. her husband of 33 years woke alone. He checked the bathroom, the kitchen, the backyard. Then he opened the garage door.

Her family found two cassette tapes. On tape she spoke of her Supplemental Security Income and her Aid to Families with Dependent Children. "What if I lose my SSI?" She asked. "What if my husband and children lose their AFDC grant? If they stop my grant I'm going to die anyway."

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