

Local Hmong seek answers to Thai grave excavations; Images from refugee camp stun immigrants; U.S. reports bodies removed for sanitation

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Body

Copies of the chilling video have been passed from one St. Paul living room to the next. On Thursday, it surfaced in Nancy Meyer's English-language class, where more than a dozen adult students — all transplants from a **Hmong refugee camp** in Thailand — watched, sickened, as workers mutilated the hillside **graves** of their former shantytown.

The **images** fit the accounts **reported** by relatives left behind in the **camp** outside the Wat Tham Krabok temple: Crews have dug up the **graves**, dismembered the **bodies** and used knives to trim off the decomposing flesh. The bones presumably were cleaned and burned to ash.

U.S. State Department officials said a nearby Buddhist monastery, which owns the land, hired two Buddhist organizations to **remove** at least a portion of the **bodies** out of concern that the burials were tainting the surrounding area's water supply.

Since the digging began in November, outrage has been steadily building in St. Paul's **Hmong**-American community. Former **camp** residents will voice their concerns today at a town hall meeting organized by state Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul.

The exhumed gravesite is home to kin related to more than 4,000 **Hmong refugees** who have resettled in Minnesota since last year. Buried are the new **immigrants** husbands, mothers, sons, fathers, grandparents and cousins.

The **excavations** have prompted the State Department to monitor the situation. A State Department official said Friday that crews had **removed** 900 corpses as of last week, nearly doubling original projections.

Many consider the exhumations an affront to **Hmong** culture, almost like an act of genocide against their dead.

"This violates everything we do as a people and what we believe in," said shaman and English student Chue Hang, 55, speaking through an interpreter. "This is a crime against human beings like us."

Xai Yang of St. Paul, who also is taking English classes at the **Hmong** American Partnership, has a nephew buried on the site. The videos he has seen are "too ugly" for his children to watch. A swarm of questions nag at him — in particular, why?

He has heard from relatives that the religious organizations, believed to be Chinese, have deliberately targeted **Hmong graves** while leaving the nearby burials of Chinese at peace.

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"This is horrible, unacceptable," Xai Yang said through an interpreter. "This is (done) intentionally to damage the Hmong and their culture. It must stop."

Mee Moua said her Hmong-American constituents in St. Paul, as well as a couple strangers still living at the refugee camp, have called to report the violations. She has delivered copies of the video to the offices of 4th District U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum and U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton, hoping the Minnesota Democrats could urge the State Department to seek a halt to the removal of the bodies.

Mee Moua compared the burial disturbances to disturbances of sacred mounds revered by American Indians.

"It's desecration in the worst kind of way," she said. "It affects us intergenerationally. It affects the realm of the living. It affects the physical and spiritual realm."

McCollum and Dayton's offices have issued statements expressing concern about the content of the videos and the disregard for Hmong cultural practices. McCollum is preparing to join members of Congress who represent large Hmong populations to notify the State Department and the Thai government of their concern.

But with no immediate action in sight, Mee Moua fears that it will be too late to save the remaining graves. If the graves must be moved, she hopes that the families of the deceased can at least find new locations for the corpses.

"My sense is that if nothing happens to stop the digging ... there won't be anything to talk about," she said. "They will have dug up and cremated them. And the powers-that-be will throw up their hands and say nothing can be done."

In one video, workers in white T-shirts chat amiably as they dig up the graves. Some of the corpses are still clothed in their colorful Hmong burial garments. Workers saw off the skulls of the skeletons with what appear to be butcher knives. A man directs the others to chop the remains into smaller pieces.

The unidentified Hmong narrator of the video addresses his mother and father in the United States, telling them that he wants them to see what has happened to the burial place of his grandparents.

Another photograph sent to the office of Mee Moua shows a bowl full of bones, apparently to be cleaned in a vat of boiling water. Hmong-Americans in St. Paul contend that the excavators believe they will earn "merit" in exchange for the bones, which will lead them to a good rebirth.

Making matters worse, Mee Moua has heard that the monastery recently shut off electricity to the camp. The once-bustling ramshackle camp feels like a ghost town. Most of the 15,000 eligible for resettlement have left the camp, which the Thai government ordered closed after the U.S. government agreed to take in the refugees. Left behind are only about 800 residents, many of whom are wrapping up tuberculosis treatment before they can enter the United States, Mee Moua said.

At the English language class in St. Paul, all the students verified that the footage was taken at their former camp, noting landmarks they recognized.

The state senator, too, had no reservations about the authenticity of the images. "I don't think it could be staged," she said.

John Borden, executive director of the International Institute of Minnesota, was saddened when Hmong families in St. Paul began telling him about the exhumations at the Thai refugee camp, which resulted when the minority Hmong — U.S. allies during the Vietnam War — fled their native Laos when it fell to communist forces in 1975. Borden visited the Wat Tham Krabok area as part of a 19-member fact-finding delegation led by Mayor Randy Kelly in March 2004 in advance of the Thai government's closure of the camp.

Kelly, through his spokesman, declined to comment for this article.

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"I don't know who or why they did it, but the implication was very inhumane," Borden said of the grave removals. "I think it probably was deliberate. I just see a lot of pain and anguish from people who are Hmong because they don't know, either, why it's happening."

Back in the St. Paul English class, instructor Nancy Meyer has forgone the typical functional-work vocabulary to introduce new phrases, such as "digging up the graves" and "chopping the bodies." Although her adult students are thousands of miles away from the gravesite, they say they have more power in St. Paul to draw attention to the desecration than they ever would back in Southeast Asia.

They say they recall at least two additional Hmong gravesites that were destroyed at other Thai refugee camps. Disturbing the dead will not only affect the spirits but also the prosperity of their descendants, they say.

As for the spirits, they may forever be without a home, the students fear.

"Usually, there are things that can be done in a ceremony by a shaman," Chue Hang said. "But in this case, it's nearly impossible because everything will be cremated."

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FYI

State Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul, is hosting a town hall meeting at 9 a.m. today at the Hmong American Center, 1075 Arcade St., to discuss concerns about the camp outside the Wat Tham Krabok temple.

Relatives still waiting to be reunited with family members in Minnesota have complained about living conditions there and the desecration of hundreds of Hmong graves near the temple.

The meeting also will give Mee Moua a chance to learn how the Hmong newcomers have adjusted to life in St. Paul since the last wave of resettlement began last year.

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