

THEY HUNT US DOWN LIKE ANIMALS

Massacres and grave human rights violations
against the Hmong in Laos



Human Rights Report No. 42
of the Society for Threatened Peoples

Society for Threatened Peoples

**HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATION with consultative status with the UNITED
NATIONS and with participatory status with the COUNCIL OF EUROPE**

P.O. Box 20 24 • D-37010 Göttingen • Phone: 0049 0551 49906-0 • Fax 0049 551 58028 •

E-Mail info@gfbv.de • www.gfbv.de

Bern - Bozen - Göttingen/Berlin - Groningen- Luxembourg - New York - Pristina -
Sarajevo/Srebrenica - Temuco (Chile) - Vienna

Society for Threatened Peoples

P.O. Box 2024
D-37010 Göttingen
Phone ++49 (0)551 49906-0
Fax ++49 (0)551 58028
E-Mail: info@gfbv.de
www.gfbv.de



Donation Account: 1909 - Sparkasse Göttingen - BLZ 260 500 01

Imprint:

Author: Angelika Gerstacker, Ulrich Delius, Rebecca Sommer

Photos: Rebecca Sommer

Edited by: Angelika Gerstacker, Yvonne Bangert

Translation: Owen Beith, Anna Bucur

Layout: Eva Söhngen

5,- Euro

Published by the Society for Threatened Peoples October 2006

CONTENTS

1. A human rights tragedy intensifies	4
Thousands of Hmong are afraid to emerge from the jungle	
Severely traumatised survivors	
Reporters unwelcome	
Decades of discrimination suffered by the Hmong in Laos	
Laos is in breach of international humanitarian law	
2. The accounts of Hmong refugees	8
How the research was carried out	
The older generation	
Severely traumatised children and young people	
Credibility of witness statements	
3. Summary of witnesses' statements	10
Attacks on villages	
Thirty years under attack and living in poverty	
"We are simply defending our lives"	
Use of chemical weapons	
Hunger	
Women suffer particular hardship	
Mutilation	
Betrayed and deceived by the government of Laos	
Traumatised	
4. We are fleeing for our lives - save us	13
Hmong voices	
5. Witness statements	14
6. Recommendations	19
7. Footnotes	21

1. A human rights tragedy intensifies

In recent months and since May 2006 in particular, the number of appeals for international assistance emerging from the jungles of Laos has increased dramatically. Lao and Vietnamese military units have been conducting major offensives to track down all the groups of Hmong tribespeople still hiding in the rainforest in the Xaysomboun Special Zone. The soldiers continue to regard these groups, consisting mostly of unarmed and desperately scared women and children, as “resistance fighters”, despite years that have passed without any sign of armed resistance.

The most recent major offensive took place during July 2006 when three groups of Hmong whose presence in the forest was suspected were surrounded. A member of one of the groups informed film-maker and SFTP representative Rebecca Sommer over a satellite telephone link that 66 companions had been killed in the offensive.

For many years there have been reports of horrific massacres of groups of Hmong hidden in the jungle of the Xaisomboun Special Zone. However the international public is still unaware of the extent of the human rights violations and humanitarian distress suffered by the forest-dwelling Hmong, primarily because the Lao authorities have declared the area where most of the Hmong are hiding a prohibited area for foreigners so that very limited news of what has been happening in the area has reached the outside world.

One of the most recent massacres of unarmed Hmong occurred on 6 April 2006, near the Laotian town of Vang Vieng, when at least 26 women and children – among them 12 children under 10 years old - were slaughtered by soldiers. Four more individuals were wounded and five suckling infants starved to death after their mothers died. The unarmed Hmong were massacred while they were searching for food away from their hiding place. (1)

Another individual massacre reported by credible sources took place in the Xaisomboun area on 19 May 2004, when five unarmed young Hmong out looking for food were attacked by soldiers. Four young women aged between 14 and 16 years old were raped before being killed. Their 15 year old brother was also killed. The bodies of the victims were shot through with bullets fired from very close range. Although the Lao government denies that regular soldiers are in any way responsible for such human rights violations films smuggled out of Laos show the bullet-riddled bodies of the young people.

The few severely traumatised refugees who have managed to flee to Thailand report that in recent months thousands of soldiers have been flown into the special exclusion zone to - literally - hunt down the Hmong groups in hiding. Typically fighter planes and helicopters are used to locate the groups from the air and drop chemical weapons and bombs on them. These attacks are often followed a few days later by a ground assault by troops who start shelling the fleeing Hmong without giving any advance warning.

According to Hmong witnesses who fled to Thailand to escape the massive military presence in the region, captured Hmong prisoners have repeatedly been subjected to horrific torture, mutilation and rape before without exception being killed.

Not even children have been spared. Hmong refugees have reported instances of babies being dashed against trees and children disembowelled by Vietnamese soldiers. These children died a long and painful death, some still fully conscious, as their desperate parents tried to push their intestines back inside their bodies – without any emergency medical supplies or hope of success.

Film material documenting such atrocities was recently smuggled out of the Special Zone and passed to SFTP's U.N. representative Rebecca Sommer.

Thousands of Hmong are afraid to emerge from the jungle

The several thousand Hmong still living in the forest are eking out a miserable existence there in atrocious circumstances, lacking the most basic necessities of life, medicine as well as food. Wounds cannot be dressed and limbs and other body parts are often amputated because wounds cannot be treated properly.

In 2003 the leader of an once sizeable Hmong community used a smuggled solar-powered satellite telephone to give a journalist working for Time Asia Magazine (Time Magazine, 2003-4-28) details he had recorded of the suffering endured by his group. In 1975, when he first began keeping a record of the community's health, there were 7,000 members. In the years that followed the group broke up into several smaller groups, always on the move from one hiding place to another. By 2003 there were only 800 people left in these groups, including 56 orphans, 40 widows and 11 widowers. 30 per cent of them were suffering from the effects of gunshot wounds. The leader had had to have his own left hand amputated in the rain forest in 1974. The extraordinarily high level of injuries sustained by the members of this one group is indicative of the grim health conditions that the Hmong hidden in the jungle face.

The group now (summer 2006) numbers only 300-500 members, the group's leader told his brother in the U.S.A. when they spoke over the solar-powered satellite telephone. He could not give a more precise figure because the four sub-groups were surrounded by soldiers and unable to communicate with one another.

Members of the Hmong emerging from their hiding places in response to the various amnesties promised by the Lao government's rightly fear arrest and detention. When a group of 171 Hmong forest-dwellers gave themselves up to the authorities in June 2005, what they found waiting for them instead of the promised amnesty was internment in a concentration camp in Xieng Khouang province. In desperation these people had given themselves up after hiding in the jungle for 30 years because they could see no prospect of survival. "We are surrounded, we are always under attack. (...) We're not able to go looking for food, we're starving", said one of their leaders, "If we wait till the end of this month or next month, our women and children will all be dead, as a result of attacks by the soldiers or the impossibility of finding food."

Eye witnesses reported: "We saw old people being carried on the backs of younger people. We saw little children who were afraid and traumatised. They were clothed in rags, many of them were filthy. (...) They were just looking for someone to help them. (...) I have never seen anything so sad in my life." United Nations staff waiting for the group of half-starved individuals with emergency food supplies were promised access to them. Four U.S. citizens who filmed their arrival were arrested and questioned for 48 hours. One, a U.S. citizen of Lao origin, was held for longer while the others were released after two days and deported back to the U.S.A.. Their film materials were destroyed by the Lao authorities.

On 6 October 2005 another 242 Hmong emerged from their jungle hiding place in Bolikhamxay province and gave themselves up to the authorities. Their current whereabouts are unknown, like those of the approximately 600 Hmong who gave themselves up in 2004.

Another cause for great concern is the fate of a group of 26 Hmong refugees – including 20 young women aged between 12 and 16 years old, according to the Lao Human Rights Council – who were forcibly sent back from Thailand to Laos in December 2005. According to reports received by the Society for Threatened Peoples (SfTP) the young women are still detained in various prisons and military camps, where they are cut off from the outside world have been brutally treated and raped. The male members of the group are said to have been taken to a remote prison in northern Laos and two youths have reportedly been shot and killed.

Severely traumatised survivors

Children and young people have been particularly affected by shortage of food and the ever-present danger that life in the rain forest means for many of the Hmong groups. Many are severely traumatised after years of living in constant fear of dying and witnessing the death of many of their close relatives. Yeng Houa, now 13 years old, tells how in August 2002 a mortar round landed a few metres away from his family as they were preparing their evening meal together. His parents were killed while he himself was hit by 18 pieces of shrapnel in his leg. His jaw was broken and a wound in his thigh became infected.

Reporters unwelcome

It is only very rarely that reports of the large-scale human rights violations perpetrated against the Hmong and the humanitarian disaster they are experiencing get through to the outside world, thanks to the draconian measures taken by the Lao authorities against foreign journalists who have succeeded in gaining access to the "exclusion zone" in spite of official bans.

For example on 4 June 2003 two European journalists, Thierry Falise and Vincent Reynaud, accompanied by their interpreter, Naw Karl Mua, an American of Lao origin, together with four other Lao companions were arrested and charged. After a trial that lasted a mere two hours the two Europeans were each sentenced to 15 years imprisonment on charges of "non-possession of a journalist's visa" and "being an accessory to murder". Representatives of the foreign media were excluded from the proceedings. Three of the arrested Lao received prison sentences of 12, 15 and 20 years. Eye witnesses reported that they had been tortured. In response to large-scale international protests the Europeans were set free within a week after their show trial and deported. Reynaud appeared shocked by the extent of the humanitarian tragedy affecting the Hmong: "The first thing we saw when we reached the area under Hmong control was old women searching for food and children dying from malnutrition. They urgently need help." (IPS, 2005-7-17)

Andrew Perrin of "Time Asia Magazine", who was more fortunate in avoiding detention, described his horror at the extent of the "humanitarian tragedy" on his return from Laos (BBC, 2003-6-30). His April 2003 article in "Time Magazine" is one of very few contemporary accounts of the terrible situation in the areas where the Hmong live. In his article he makes it clear that this humanitarian crisis is exacerbating the already dire situation facing the Hmong and forcing them to consider abandoning their hiding places and laying down the limited number of weapons still in their possession. Even so many of them hesitate to do so because they are afraid of being mistreated and killed and do not trust the government's offer of an amnesty.

Ruhi Hamid, a young BBC correspondent who a few years ago made the difficult and dangerous journey across the Lao forces' front line to find out more about the everyday life of the Hmong, was greeted enthusiastically as their first European visitor in 30 years. Her eye-opening film brought this forgotten conflict to public attention again for the first time in years.

Ruhi Hamid remains anxious about the fate of the Hmong in the jungles of Laos. "There is a humanitarian crisis", she told SFTP not long ago, "and it's time the world takes notice! These people aren't rebels or resistance fighters, they're desperate women and children and a few men trying to look after their families. They have no ammunition and the limited weapons they have are old and rusty. Unless they receive get help from the international community soon, they have no hope of survival."

Decades of discrimination suffered by the Hmong in Laos

The Hmong are one of the largest indigenous groups in the Four Corners area where Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and China meet. There are nine million Hmong in China alone, where they are known as the Miao. In multi-ethnic Laos they are one of the largest ethnic groups in the Lao Highlands, making up approximately 60 per cent of the area's total population.

Approximately eight per cent of the 5.3 million inhabitants of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos are Hmong. Individual Hmong hold high government office in the socialist state but the situation of the group as a whole has been extremely difficult ever since the Communist Pathet Lao seized power and established the People's Democratic Republic in 1975.

The main reason is that from 1960 onwards the Hmong were systematically recruited by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) to fight the Pathet Lao and prevent them gaining power. At one time or another as many as 40,000 Hmong were in the pay of the U.S.A.. The Hmong have paid a high price for their cooperation. At least 30,000 of them were killed in the armed conflict with the Pathet Lao in the period up until the mid 1970s - approximately a tenth of the Hmong population of Laos at the time.

Following the Pathet Lao's eventual seizure of power as many as 300,000 Hmong fled Laos. Hundreds of thousands are now living in exile in the United States. Since 1976 the Lao and Vietnamese armies have repeatedly used chemical and biological weapons, as the U.S. did during the Vietnam War, to destroy vast areas of forest in the effort to locate the last hiding places of the Hmong and destroy any potential resistance.

Hmong are still fleeing in their thousands into neighbouring Thailand in fear of their lives or to escape discrimination in Laos. Among the other problems faced by Lao Hmong have been the large-scale relocation projects associated with a dramatic rise in the demand for hydroelectric power and the construction of new dams. Campaigners for democracy and Hmong rights in Laos put their lives at risk. In the last few years many Hmong have been handed down lengthy prison sentences after an unfair trial.

Laos is in breach of international humanitarian law

In 1980 Laos ratified the Protocol Additional to the four Geneva Conventions and relating to the protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts (Protocol II). As a signatory Laos is obliged not only not to attack civilian groups and individual civilians but also to guarantee protection to all persons not taking a direct part or who have ceased to take part in hostilities.

Laos is also signatory to the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and therefore under an obligation not to tolerate or support any discrimination on grounds of membership of an ethnic group.

Laos is also a signatory to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires state parties "to ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child" (Article 6) and establishes that a child must not be separated from his or her parents against their will, except when such separation is necessary for the best interests of the child.

Numerous witness statements confirm that Laos has demonstrably failed to protect or defend the human rights of Hmong children living in hiding in the jungle with their families. On the contrary, the Lao Army has been responsible for causing the death by hunger of large numbers of those children, in addition to the horrific massacre and torture of other defenceless children. Many Hmong children are still detained in Lao prisons without any contact with their families or the outside world and at very considerable risk of grave human rights violations.

Rebecca Sommer, an independent documentary film maker, president of the indigenous peoples' organisation "Earth Peoples" and representative in the U.S.A. and at the U.N. of the Society for Threatened Peoples, spent three months in South-East Asia in the autumn of 2005 researching, filming and recording written and film reports of grave violations of the human rights of indigenous peoples including the Hmong in Laos.

The findings of her personal research are contained in a 92 page report (2) that also includes current information provided by Hmong organisations in the U.S.A. and representatives of the Hmong. The report describes the desperate situation of the

Hmong hiding in the jungle in Laos and living in refugee camps in Thailand. The refugees are afraid of being sent back to Laos where they are liable to suffer grave violations of their human rights.

2. The accounts of Hmong refugees

Rebecca Sommer, an independent documentary film maker, president of the indigenous peoples' organisation "Earth Peoples" and representative in the U.S.A. and at the U.N. of the Society for Threatened Peoples, spent three months in South-East Asia in the autumn of 2005 researching, filming and recording written and film reports of grave violations of the human rights of indigenous peoples including the Hmong in Laos.

The findings of her personal research are contained in a 92 page report (2) that also includes current information provided by Hmong organisations in the U.S.A. and representatives of the Hmong. The report describes the desperate situation of the Hmong hiding in the jungle in Laos and living in refugee camps in Thailand. The refugees are afraid of being sent back to Laos where they are liable to suffer grave violations of their human rights.

How the research was carried out

Rebecca Sommer carried out a large number of interviews with Hmong refugees in the "White Water" refugee camp at Ban Huay Nam Khao, in the Khao Kho district of Phetchabun, Thailand, which she also recorded on video. She interviewed approximately 1100 Hmong refugees from Laos who had arrived in Thailand in 2004 or later. Before they fled the country the refugees had been living in hiding in six different areas in the three Laotian provinces of Xieng Khouang, Bolikhamsay and Vientiane, in the Xaysomboun special zone from which foreigners are barred.

The six focus groups

Phu Bia: 42 families, 203 individuals

Phu Ba: 3 families, 14 individuals

Choua Hlau-Choua Dai: 32 families, 161 individuals

Phalai: 103 families, 539 individuals

Phukongkhao: 3 families, 20 individuals

Bolikhamsay: 21 families, 96 individuals

All of the refugees were asked to provide a written account of their experiences. Since many of the Hmong are illiterate, eleven individuals were assigned the task of recording statements which were then read back to the witnesses, who then put their signature or their fingerprint to the statement.

A "Round Table" discussion with representatives of various non-governmental organisations working in the refugee camps took place on 21 October 2005. It was clear that few of the non-Hmong-speaking NGO representatives knew what the Hmong who had fled the jungle conflict zones had been through. "Médecins sans Frontières" staff were very concerned about shortages of food in the camp.

The older generation

The refugees included relatively few members of the older generation. Most said that they had been recruited by the C.I.A. during the 1960s to provide support for various U.S. military operations during the Vietnam War. Others said that they had only ever been civilians and farmers and had gone into hiding in 1975 because of their fear of persecution or later after their villages had been attacked without warning, most recently in 2003.

Severely traumatised children and young people

The six groups questioned consisted mainly of children and young people, most of them born in the jungle and whose parents or grandparents had been recruited by the C.I.A. during the Vietnam War. Most said that their parents and other relatives had been killed by the Lao P.D.R. (Lao People's Democratic Republic) in reprisal, often many years after the end of the war. Other young people and children in the focus groups had been living in villages near to Hmong hiding places until they were threatened or actually attacked by soldiers and had fled into the jungle with their parents or other relatives and gone into hiding.

Very young refugee children spoke about their terrible experiences before leaving the country, the suffering caused by repeated attacks by armed military units and the pain of watching their close family circle continue to shrink. Many of the children, whether born in a village or in the jungle, had lost parents, brothers and sisters and other close relatives. Orphan children were usually looked after by the families of blood relatives or by members of the same clan living in small groups. According to the refugees the reason why they split up into small groups was for safety, in addition to the near-impossibility for larger groups to find enough food.

In the course of their interviews all of these young people without exception described their experiences as having been extremely traumatic. They expressed their anguish as they told how much they missed the rest of their family and how they grieved for them. Orphans appeared particularly severely traumatised, after having probably observed the violent death of their parents and then, after finally reaching safety, often being separated from their brothers and sisters for "practical reasons".

Credibility of witness statements

The many personal and videotaped interviews conducted by Rebecca Sommer with members of the six different focus groups described very similar events and experiences. Children often corroborated what adult group members had told her.

Without exception all the adults and young people interviewed reported losing husbands or wives, children and other relatives or friends during attacks by the Lao or Vietnamese military. They frequently produced photographs or documents belonging to their lost ones or would point to injuries they had suffered, such as missing limbs or other body parts and disabilities such as blindness, to emphasise the truth of what they were saying. The majority of these stories were confirmed by other group members. Many of those present during the interviews openly expressed feelings of empathy with the individual being interviewed – there were many emotional outbursts during the filming.

3. Summary of witnesses' statements

Attacks on villages

According to various witness statements many of the members of the six focus groups had still been living in their traditional villages as late as 2003. They had never taken part in or supported "rebel activities" of any kind. Without warning they were arrested, subjected to intimidation or harassment or led to fear violent attack, arbitrary arrest and even torture. Eventually they were forced to abandon their villages.

Villagers accused of being in contact with local Hmong in hiding gave told similar stories with few discrepancies. The military had intimidated them, threatened them with imprisonment or used violence to persuade them to reveal the Hmong hiding places. When these efforts proved unsuccessful, either because the villagers had no idea where these hiding places were located or they were unwilling to endanger lives, increased force was applied, involving extreme violence and destruction, in clear violation of international law. In many cases soldiers carried out arbitrary killings of villagers. In others they began by killing all the village leaders, so that other villagers and often the whole of the rest of the village fled into the jungle in fear for their own lives, abandoning all their possessions. They often met up eventually with another group already in hiding and joined them, or in other cases they formed small independent groups.

Thirty years under attack and living in poverty

The refugees interviewed had many experiences in common. Many had been hiding in the jungle ever since the Pathet Lao (3) came to power in 1975, others had been born in the jungle and spent their entire lives there, in constant flight, and a third group had been forced to abandon their villages and farmland only relatively recently as a result of repeated military action and surprise attacks. All had fled from military violence and finally joined up with one another to form large or small groups hiding in the jungle.

All of the members of the six focus groups reported experiencing frequent brutal attacks by armed military units, often dating back to 1975, and said that the Lao PDR was continuing its relentless efforts to find Hmong hiding places. They had all been driven countless times from their hiding places by military units using guns, artillery and even chemical weapons. The military forces deployed often appeared to include Vietnamese soldiers.

The refugees reported that over the past few years there had been a steady increase in the number of military incursions into the area where the Hmong were hiding and increasingly aggressive efforts were being made to locate and destroy their hiding places. The number of aerial reconnaissance flights had increased to the extent that the Hmong were no longer able to build themselves permanent housing, clear the undergrowth from around their huts or light fires, from fear that rising smoke could betray them. Once they had been spotted from the air it was not long usually before ground forces surrounded their hiding place and they were attacked without warning on all sides. Frequently aircraft would spray poisonous chemicals over the area surrounding their hiding place.

All of the adults without exception and most of the younger children reported having personally experienced surprise attacks carried out by Lao military units. Ground forces surrounded the group or their hiding place and shot at them without giving any warning. Group members or relatives had often been killed in the course of such attacks – usually while inside their leaf huts or outside digging for roots. After an attack the military usually set fire to the huts and the Hmong's possessions and either destroyed everything or occupied the "hiding place" and turn it into a military encampment.

They all described in close detail the trauma and stress that these lightning attacks caused, describing how people would be running to escape the volleys of gunfire and at the same time desperately trying to find their children or their husband or wife, how they would struggle to carry infants and small children unable to run to safety, and how they themselves had had to run for their lives, often losing all contact with their family. Weeks would often pass before members of a family would find one another again. Children were often found dead because without adults to find food and care for them they had no means of survival. According to these witnesses the Lao authorities have never made any serious effort to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Once a Hmong group is located it is attacked without warning and no opportunity to surrender.

The situation in which the Hmong find themselves is intolerable – constantly forced to hide or flee, forced to remain alert and prepared to defend themselves, always hungry and suffering the loss of family and fellow group members in ever increasing numbers.

All the reports confirmed that the basic struggle for survival in the hills of the Xaysomboun Special Zone had become extremely difficult. New roads and permanent military bases are built in once remote countryside. There is a relentless succession of arbitrary attacks and killings. There are no safe areas left to farm, so food is in life-threateningly short supply. The Hmong are living in constant fear of death. The situation is desperate.

“We are simply defending our lives”

The interviewees all maintained that they had never sought to engage in armed conflict with the Lao government. Only one group - from Bolikhamsay – declared that they had resorted to pre-emptive strikes in order to defend themselves after military units established a base dangerously close by (less than a kilometre away). Refugees from Bolikhamsay also said that members of their group still inside Laos would actively defend themselves because they had no alternative.

Members of the other groups said that they would defend themselves as best they could if attacked but they had no ammunition and only a few usable weapons. They often had no more than six or seven bullets that they fired in the general direction of the soldiers attacking them. The Hmong did not have the capacity to engage in a proper fight. A few members of each group would be assigned the task of defending the group and would fire off the few bullets they had in order to gain time while the others fled for their lives.

Use of chemical weapons

Many refugees reported that chemical weapons had been used. The chemicals were described as being variously yellowish, greyish or darker coloured, and were reported to have resulted in diarrhoea, loss of teeth, stomach upsets and blindness. Many of the victims were described as having swollen grotesquely before suffering a very painful and protracted death, often taking as long as a month. The refugees also remarked that after a chemical attack residues persisted on vegetation and in water, and people eating or drinking contaminated plants or water became seriously ill and often died. Sick and dead animals were often found in areas where chemicals had been sprayed.

Hunger

The Hmong refugees interviewed said that they lived in a state of constant fear, hopelessness and despair, in constant hunger and ready to flee at a moment's notice. All of those interviewed had survived, in many cases for as long as thirty years, on nothing more than the wild plants and roots they had been able to gather.

Women suffer particular hardship

Most of the Hmong refugees were women and they spoke frankly about women's concerns. In Hmong society it is the women who tend the fields and whose job it is to provide their family with food, herbal medicines and water. Consequently it was usually the women who went out into the jungle looking for food and water. They were extremely afraid of being discovered by soldiers and killed, and even more afraid of being raped. They said that many women and children captured by the soldiers were subsequently found dead, apparently after having been gang-raped and tortured.

All of the women said that they had had to carry their babies and younger children through the thick, thorny undergrowth when walking long distances through the jungle in search of food. It was particularly difficult for pregnant women carrying small children in their arms to escape from military attacks. This is presumably the reason why large numbers of women and children are killed in such attacks. Time and again interviewees told of newly born children dying because their half-starved mothers did not have sufficient milk to keep them alive. Many women are so weak that they die soon after giving birth and their babies die with them. Many of the women refugees interviewed broke down in tears, revealing the profound sense of loss they felt for children and infants who had died from hunger.

Mutilation

Many refugees said that mutilated corpses of men and women had been found in the jungle. The bodies of women and girls usually showed signs of rape; many of the victims had broken arms, legs and fingers and mutilated faces, clear evidence of them having been tortured before they died or were executed. Individual interviewees told of finding the bodies of women from their group who had had bamboo canes inserted inside their bodies. Sexual parts had often been cut off and the bodies arranged in degrading positions. This practice in particular provoked fear and disgust in the six groups interviewed. People who had seen the mutilated corpses also reported observing unmistakable evidence of military presence at the places where the bodies were found - cigarette butts, military ration packs and tracks made by army boots that led back to the military camps.

Betrayed and deceived by the government of Laos

In the 1980s and 1990s the government of the Lao People's Democratic Republic sought to give the impression that it wanted to enter into a dialogue with the Hmong hiding in the jungle. Spokespeople for the six groups interviewed told of experiences at that time that explained why so many of the Hmong in hiding were unwilling to give themselves up. Sometimes the Lao authorities distributed leaflets or sent representatives to encourage the Hmong to come out from their hiding places and meet them for a "safe discussion". They always insisted that their motives were genuine and held out the promise of a ceasefire. When Hmong leaders believed those promises and came out from the jungle, what they found waiting for them instead of the promised "safe discussion" was arrest and detention and sometimes summary execution.

One witness who said that he had been at one of these "meetings" told how he had been very badly tortured and beaten unconscious and only narrowly escaped death. When he regained consciousness, his companion was lying dead next to him. He himself was tied up and left in the hot sun for three days without food and water. He was kept in prison for another eight days. He testified to having seen several executions take place during the "meeting" itself and later in prison. The current whereabouts of many other individuals remain unknown. Their relatives presume that they are dead.

Attempts to intimidate people into betraying other Hmong in hiding continue. Many people said that after they were released from prison by the Lao authorities after spending many years in detention they were urged to lead the authorities to their group's hiding place or somehow coax the group out of the jungle. If they were unwilling to cooperate they were threatened with being thrown back in prison.

Traumatized

Rebecca Sommer describes all the refugees as having experienced severe psychological damage as a result of what they had experienced. They had all been forced to witness the deaths of loved ones, been subjected to extremes of violence over a long period and endured a constant threat of death. Children in particular were often unable to sleep. They were either afraid of falling asleep or their sleep was disturbed by recurring nightmares in which they relived the horror of what they had been through. Some of the children showed obvious symptoms of stress and behavioural disorders. Many of the refugees appeared to be suffering from depression and they frequently broke down in tears that revealed a much deeper unresolved anguish.**4. We are fleeing for our lives - Save us!**

4. We are fleeing for our lives - save us

Hmong voices

Satellite telephone call

From: Tong Pao Yang
 Location: Phu Ban, north of Vang Vieng, Laos
 To: Baua Xang Yang, USA
 Date: 14 April 2006
 Time : 5.00 am

Excerpts from satellite telephone conversation:

"It was about a company of Lao and Vietnamese who attacked us on April 6, around 9 am (...) they were using modern artillery.

It was a heavy onslaught. 26 people have been killed - four of us are injured.

Five babies have died from hunger because their mothers were killed. It was this brutal attack that caused their deaths. Please note down their names:

1.	Wang Chai Her	male	40 yrs
2.	Lou Her (Kong Meng Yang)	female	30 yrs
3.	Doua Thao (Chao Her Thao)	female	30 yrs
4.	Choua Thao	female	40 yrs
5.	Bao Thao	female	32 yrs
6.	Za Thao	female	34 yrs
7.	Voa Thao	female	30 yrs
8.	Ma Her	female	13 yrs
9.	Ger Her	female	12 yrs
10.	Chue Her	female	7 yrs
11.	Bao Her	female	30 yrs
12.	Bee Yang	female	9 yrs
13.	Lou Her	female	6 yrs
14.	Zang Tha	female	8 yrs
15.	Blong Tha	male	12 yrs
16.	Cheng Her	male	6 yrs
17.	Mai Zoua Her	female	30 yrs
18.	Ying Thao	male	16 yrs
19.	Mao Her	female	8 yrs

20.	Cha Bee Thao	male	7 yrs
21.	Kai Thao	male	4 yrs
22.	Vue Thao	male	3 yrs
23.	Lee Thao	female	2 yrs
24.	Koua Yang	male	15 yrs
25.	Cher Yang	male	7 yrs
26.	Phia Lee	male	1 yr

The wounded are:

Cha Pha Yang, male
Lang Her, female
Lou Her, female
Ker Thao, male

The babies who died from lack of milk because their mothers had been killed were:

Baoher, female, 4 months old
Thaothao, male, 1 month and 2 days old
Chuefang, female, 1 month and 4 days old
Thaocha, male, 1 month old
Kaher, female, 1 month and 5 days old."

5. Witness statements

from the report "Report on 1100 Hmong Lao" by Rebecca Sommer

Witness statement of SHONGMA VANG

"I am Shongma Vang, I am 27 years old and belong to the Hmong people. I was born in Chaoua Dai in Laos, where I was a farmer, a civilian. I hereby declare as follows:

On 30 March 1997 Lao soldiers attacked my village. I saw my mother and my sister shot dead by them. I myself received bullet wounds. My 4-year-old sister Khang was very badly injured after receiving several bullet wounds. We escaped into the nearby jungle. I watched as the soldiers came back and shot my little sister several times as she lay on the ground, half dead. Once the soldiers had finally gone we attended to my little sister who had survived all the shots fired at her, and my uncle and my father buried the bodies of my mother and my older sister.

After that attack our community decided to split up into small groups and abandon our village, our farmland and our animals and go into hiding in the depths of the jungle. In the course of time we came across many other families there, in hiding like us. Each of them had their own story to tell, but all of them had experienced sudden violent attacks and killings by the Lao soldiers and they were all hiding in fear for their lives.

About a year later, in 1998, the Lao soldiers located our hiding place where 15 families were living and surrounded our settlement. There were so many soldiers that we could not say exactly how many there were. They fired at the adult men. Everyone managed to escape and no-one was killed or injured.

We abandoned our hidden settlement and walked for about one day's journey to a new location, while the Lao soldiers were establishing a military base in the settlement we had abandoned.

We stayed at the new hiding place for about 2 years, but we were too scared to make fires or build houses or plant crops. It was impossible to lead any sort of normal life because we were always afraid of being spotted by military helicopters. We were always very cautious, living under constant stress and fear. We survived by foraging for food and digging for roots, as we could not plant crops or hunt for food because we had no tools or guns.

In 2001 the 15 families in hiding and myself saw 2 helicopters circle round twice in the sky above us. The first one descended and shot at us while the other continued observing us from above. As soon as the first helicopter had used up all its ammunition, the second helicopter descended and fired on us. No-one was hurt because we all managed to hide among the trees. We realised that we weren't safe there any more and we moved to a new location in the Tong Peng area one day's walk away. (...)

In 2003 we joined up with three other Hmong families living in hiding near Pam Tukong, which was a more fertile area.

In 2003 and 2004 we began to feel safer as nearly four years had passed without anything happening to us. We became less cautious and started building permanent homes for ourselves. We cleared some land around our houses to plant crops and we started to lead a normal life as farmers. In 2004 military helicopters spotted the clearings and our village from the air but did not attack us. Three days later a large force of ground troops appeared and without any warning or discussion immediately began firing at the houses nearest to the forest. My family lived in one of those houses. My father and uncle who were inside the house were killed.

Once again we decided to abandon our village and all 18 families fled back into the jungle while the soldiers used our abandoned settlement as a military base. While we were looking for a new hiding place a helicopter spotted us fired at us.

I went back to our old settlement three times, hoping to retrieve the bodies of my uncle and my father. That was how I was able to observe that more and more soldiers and munitions were arriving at the camp, including two more helicopters.

Our 18 families discussed the situation among ourselves and we came to the conclusion that there was nowhere we could go: The Lao soldiers would always come looking for us and try to kill us. (...) We realised that we would never be able to lead a normal life in peace and security and there was no legal system to rely on for help in this life-threatening situation. Our very survival was constantly under threat and it was impossible to farm and grow food. So we decided to split up our 18 families into smaller groups and seek refuge in Thailand. I, my youngest sister, now 12 years old, my wife and 2 brothers took about one month to reach the Mekong river and cross over into Thailand. Here we are now living in the Phetchabun refugee camp under constant fear of being deported back to Laos. We urgently need to obtain U.N. refugee status.

I hereby declare that I am a civilian, I have never carried a gun to kill or even shoot at any other human being, and that I have told the full truth, and I give my signature to that effect."

Witness statement of VANGZE HER

"In 2002 the Lao PDR Government stepped up their hunt for us to an massive extent. Military camps were set up everywhere and the mountains and valleys where they thought the Hmong were hiding echoed to the sound of artillery fire. Helicopters were used to fire missiles and drop bombs on us, including nail bombs, and a yellow chemical was sprayed all around where we were. They even put landmines and grenades everywhere, stopping us from foraging for food.

During this period many members of the Hmong groups living in the area starved to death and were killed or injured in military attacks or from chemical poisoning. We argued amongst ourselves, we were always under stress. Children wanted to leave their parents and husbands chose to separate from their families in order to have a better chance of survival than they would in a larger group. Children became orphans and parents became childless. This was the most worst period that we Hmong went through during the time we spent in hiding in the jungle."

Witness statement of NAO YIA VUE

"I, Nao Yia Vue, 56 years old, married and belonging to the Hmong people, born at and formerly resident of Yathong, Laos, was with the U.S. C.I.A. during the Vietnam War.

After the war in 1975, the Hmong leader Vang Pao, who had been appointed General during the war, left the country and we stayed behind. Later we tried to follow him and escape over the bridge at Hin Her. At Hin Her the Lao military massacred many of the Hmong people as they were trying to cross the frontier into Thailand. (...) Those of the Hmong who were unable to escape were forced to return home. We all went back to our old villages. The Lao government dispatched more Lao troops into the area where we lived to hunt us down. Women and children and many civilians decided to leave their villages and hide in the jungle. (...)

Later the Lao government put out leaflets calling for one of our representatives named Vang Chue Ki to attend a meeting with government representatives. After we received the leaflets on 24 November 1993 I and 35 Hmong spokesmen went to Meuang, in Cha Sysomboune Special Zone. (...) Generals Phueas, Khamoua, Xaoubun Tha, Khamxee and their soldiers waited calmly until we had all assembled at the meeting place. Then without any warning they arrested us. They pointed guns at our heads and told us to lie down on the ground. Two hours later I heard the sound of gunshots coming from the direction where the rest of our group had been hiding in the jungle waiting for us.

I was kicked, beaten with guns and tortured until I fell unconscious. When I regained consciousness, a Hmong member of our negotiating team named Kiobounma was lying next to me. He had been beaten to death. I was tortured again (...) and left out in the sun for three days without any water. Later I was taken to Phouhong prison in Vientiane. (...)

5 years later, on 10 November 1998, I was released from prison and went to live in the village of Phaxam, in Vientiane province, to lead an ordinary life as a civilian. On 16 May 2003 a woman was sent by Lao government officials with instructions for me to contact my old group and my father, who is a religious leader and still in hiding in the jungle today. If I did not, she informed me, the government officials would have me sent back to jail for another 30 years at least. I replied that I was not prepared to do that. (...)

On 4 July 2003 my wife saw the same woman, Lee Her, who had been sent to put pressure on me to contact my father and his group still hiding in the jungle, arrested and imprisoned. (...)

Meuang Feaung, the village where I went to live later, was under supervision openly by 4-star Khamoi (high ranking government officials) and also covertly by secret service agents, although we knew they were agents. The Hmong still living in hiding in the jungle were also being monitored and many of them were killed. We came across many dead bodies of Hmong in the jungle, all of them killed by army weapons.

On 28 June 2004 Lao government officials surrounded my house, but fortunately I was out planting crops with my son. The next morning my brother Ge and my wife came out to the fields to tell me what had happened the previous day and that I had been asked for by name. My wife had been told that there was something they wanted me to do for them and when

they found out that I was not home they searched the house. My wife sent them off in the wrong direction to look for me.

My son and I decided to go into hiding in the jungle. (...)

On 9 July 2004 we decided to leave Laos and seek refuge in Thailand, arriving in Phetchabun on 15 July 2004."

Witness statement of BLIAPAO XANGXU

"In October 1990, around mid-day, a helicopter flew over our hidden settlement, circled three times and then flew off. We saw a yellowish rain falling, that fell onto the soil, the water, the plants, the tree-tops, on everything. The body of my 60 year old grandmother who had been out gathering wild plants and had eaten some swelled up. Dark patches appeared on her skin, the texture of the skin changed and it became very soft and peeled off easily. She spent one month in great pain before she eventually died. Three years later in 1993, approximately 200 soldiers, ground forces, shot at our 12 families and killed three people sheltering inside their huts. They fired from some distance away. We fled into the forest. The soldiers camped in our huts for several days before they finally left. We came back again later to bury our dead. (...)

In November 2002 my wife's brother and his wife (named in the original statement) failed to return after going out to look for plants and roots. We eventually found their bodies about 10 metres from where they had been digging for roots. The naked bodies had been deliberately arranged by the Lao army soldiers, lying on their backs, faces upward, the dead husband's hand placed on his dead wife's breast. The dead husband's penis had been cut off and inserted in his dead wife's mouth. We were deeply shocked, terrified, distressed and very scared. After burying the two bodies we hurried back to the hidden settlement at Phoua Xeng (...)."

Witness statement of TZENG LOR

"I was born while my family was in hiding in the jungle. When I was still very small, the Pathet Lao killed my father. My relatives were unable to retrieve his body for proper burial. When I was 5 years old, my mother died of hunger, leaving me an orphan. I lived with my uncle Yia Vue in the jungle.

1993 the Pathet Lao sent Nhia Yang to persuade my uncle to come out of hiding, giving him to understand that their intentions were peaceful. My uncle believed him but instead he found more than 30 Pathet Lao soldiers waiting for him and he was arrested. That was on 24 November 1993. He was brutally beaten until they fractured his skull. Eight other people, who had accompanied him to the meeting in good faith were killed (...)."

Witness statement of SHOUA VUE

"In 1975 my father and mother went into hiding in the jungle. I was born there. In 1982 my parents were killed by the Pathet Lao. I was very young when they died. I was adopted by my group and lived with the Hmong families who had been hiding with us. Every year the Pathet Lao attacked us. We were forced to move from one hiding place to another, always trying to keep ahead of them.

In January 2003 the Pathet Lao soldiers attacked us with helicopters. They dropped bombs containing chemicals which caused blindness, swelling and a sudden paralysis of the arms and legs. We ran away and split up to hide in the jungle."

Witness statement of CHUEKONG VANG

"Sometimes we fire at them with our guns - to scare the soldiers away. Sometimes it saves our lives and the soldiers don't come any closer to us. (...)

We had a few very old shotguns that we used to scare the soldiers off and keep them at a distance from us. I have no opinion whether they are good people or bad people. All that I can say is that we suddenly catch sight of them and they start shooting at us. We don't know whether they are sent by the government or if the soldiers are operating on their behalf. We are living in hiding in the jungle, so we have no idea.

It's true. We did have guns but we did not have enough ammunition. We use the guns to fire off a very few bullets, we need to scare the soldiers off with those few shots to keep them away from our family. That's all (...)."

Video interview with PA XIONG

"I come from Laos, my village is Nam Chia, in the Phu Bia area. It breaks my heart that all my relatives are dead. We have suffered persecution and torture. What a confused world. All my relatives in the Phu Bia area have been murdered. The Lao military killed my parents, my uncles and my brother. They were slaughtered like animals, they did not die like human beings. Now I am here, seeking refuge in this new country, but my heart is broken - I have lost everyone. The Lao authorities continue to hunt us down wherever we are hiding, even in the depth of the jungle.

It was difficult having to live in such hard conditions, without any help, as all my relatives had been killed. Always on the run, having to walk long distances without any shoes through the thorny jungle. Foraging for food over vast areas to feed our children, eking out a bare existence eating the occasional wild root and plant. We ate anything we could find, tubers, roots and plants growing wild. How did we become the target of such violence?

I was born in the jungle and I don't understand modern life in the city. I never went to school. In this country everyone gets an education, life in this society seems wonderful. The first time I saw people driving a car, I had no idea what it was until someone explained it to me.

It is all so confusing to me, I was born in the jungle and grew up all my life eating roots. I'm grateful to the NGOs who provide us with rice to save us from starving to death in this camp. I experienced the taste of rice for the first time in this camp.

I will not return to Laos under any circumstances. If Laos was a decent country we would not be here. If we are forced to go back, we will be killed. (...) We will not go back.

The Lao military is hunting down and killing our people just like they would kill animals. We are terrified. We will not go back. My mother and father did nothing wrong. They were simple farmers bringing up their children. My parents never went to school, they worked hard and led a simple life working on the farm. Then the Lao government came and shot them dead, just like that. When the soldiers fired on our village we scattered and fled into the jungle, I did not see how my parents died.

The Lao soldiers killed three members of my family. The Lao soldiers cut my brother Kou up in pieces like a dog before they buried him. (...) We find our women raped and killed with their sexual organs cut off and stuffed into their mouths. This awful form of torture scared us into leaving Laos and fleeing to Thailand, because we are terrified we may be subjected to torture in the same terrible manner. (...)

We are human beings, why do they make us suffer so much, why are we killed and tortured? Please tell the people who can do something about it that we are suffering from hunger - here in the refugee camp. It is very difficult to survive here (...)."

Video interview with WAMENG THAO

"(...) I, Wameng Thao, am unable to communicate with Lao people even if I am starving. I don't understand a word of the Lao language. I was born and grew up deep in the jungle. My brothers Leexeng, Nhialue, Hao and Nhao were killed by the Lao army.

It is desperately sad to have been born at this point in time and to be unable to speak another language. I cannot read or write. I do not even know how to read the calendar or count from one to ten properly. (...) I feel very sad and depressed. (...)

As regards the chemical weapons that were sprayed on us and the people affected by them, it was mostly the children in the jungle, two of them were my own children. Both of my children died. Pheng died here in this refugee camp from the after effects of the chemicals, and there are witnesses who are able to confirm that. My first child died in the jungle of Laos. I lived in Laos but I do not know the names of places and villages in Laos. When we arrived in this country and reached this refugee camp, the Thai government said that we were "illegal immigrants from Laos". No-one came to talk to us, only to the people in charge of the refugee camp who do not know anything about those of us who have come from the jungle or our situation there. The people running the refugee camp know nothing about where the jungle Hmong live or how things are for them.

My parents are still living in the jungle. If you don't believe me, please come with me and I will take you to see them for yourself. If there is no-one there living in the jungle you may cut my head off. I respect you. Please speak out on our behalf and help save our lives. So that my parents still living in the jungle and I have a chance of being reunited eventually."

6. Recommendations

The mass exodus of Hmong to Thailand and the humanitarian disaster affecting the Hmong hiding in the jungle will end only when the government of the People's Republic of Laos halts the abuse of the human rights of the Hmong taking place in the conflict zone from which foreigners have been excluded (something the government has always denied) and the promises of peace that it so frequently makes to the Hmong are given real substance.

The Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the government of the People's Democratic Republic of Laos,

- to set up an independent inquiry immediately to investigate the massacre on 6 April 2006 in which at least 26 Hmong women and children – including 12 children under 10 years old – were killed by army units near the town of Vang Vieng;
- to clarify the fate of all of the 26 Hmong refugees forcibly returned from Thailand to detention in Laos in December 2005. They include at least 20 children between the ages of 12 and 16 years who should be released immediately and returned to their families;
- to guarantee a life of dignity and security to all civilian members of the Hmong who voluntarily leave their jungle refuges after such a long period of hardship and to provide them with active support for that purpose;

- to put an immediate end to the large-scale abuse of the human rights of the Hmong, which constitutes a grave violation of international human rights standards;
- to bring to justice all those responsible for very grave violations of the human rights of the Hmong including extrajudicial executions and torture in particular;
- to issue strict instructions to any military units and units of the Vietnamese military operating with its passive assent to respect without reservation applicable human rights standards such as the Geneva Conventions and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in their dealings with Hmong civilians, in particular groups of Hmong in hiding in the jungle who consist for the most part of women and children;
- to respect the humanitarian and human rights of groups of Hmong voluntarily leaving their jungle hiding places;
- to halt the forcible resettlement of Hmong away from their traditional highland areas of settlement;
- to order the immediate release of all persons imprisoned because of their peacefully expressed political opinions or membership of an ethnic group such as the Hmong;
- to allow independent rapporteurs, representatives of international bodies such as the U.N. and representatives of international non-governmental organisations and humanitarian aid agencies unhindered access to Laos and to the conflict zone from which they are currently excluded;
- to respect the right of Hmong suspected of having used or advocated violence to a fair trial in accordance with international human rights standards.

The Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam,

- to put an immediate end to large-scale human rights violations committed by Vietnamese soldiers against Hmong hiding in the jungles of Laos, and to ensure that all those responsible for committing such human rights violations in the past are brought to justice.

The Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the government of Thailand,

- to grant Hmong refugees facing immediate danger in Laos official right of continued abode in Thailand;
- to guarantee representatives of the U.N. and in particular the UNHCR access to the refugee camp in Petchabun;
- to guarantee the refugees in Petchabun access to urgently needed food aid.

The international community has for too long failed to recognise the violation of the human rights of the Hmong and the humanitarian disaster affecting them and has failed to assist the people enduring great hardship in the jungles of Laos and in the refugee camps in Thailand.

The Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the international community,

- to press the governments of Laos and Vietnam to put an end immediately to the grave human rights violations committed against Hmong groups in hiding in the jungle of Laos;
- to urge the government of Laos to guarantee a life of dignity and security to members of the Hmong leaving their jungle hiding places and to provide the Lao government with active support in its efforts to achieve this;
- to urge the government of Thailand to grant Hmong refugees facing immediate danger in Laos official right of continued abode in Thailand, to guarantee U.N. representatives access to the refugee camp in Petchabun and to provide the necessary food aid;
- to have the UNHCR exercise its mandate to conduct active inquiries in the refugee camp at Petchabun aimed at establishing which refugees should be granted official refugee status and protected accordingly;
- to have the issue of the extensive violations of the human rights of the Hmong in Laos raised as soon as possible and condemned in relevant international fora including the new U.N. Human Rights Council in particular;
- to have the U.N. Human Rights Council send a fact-finding mission to Laos to investigate accusations of possible genocide committed against the Hmong living in hiding the rainforests of Laos, to take effect measures to prevent such crimes, and to ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

7. Footnotes

(1) In July 2006 a fact-finding mission, whose members for security reasons still wish to remain anonymous, set out to find the location of the massacre and the bodies of the victims in the jungle and to document the evidence of a major atrocity. The mission's findings will be published shortly and communicated to the United Nations.

(2) Report on 1100 Hmong Lao from Laos Conflict Zones who arrived in Petchabun, Thailand, 2004-2005; Rebecca Sommer, May 2006.

(3) Pathet Lao (ປະເທດລາວ - *Land of Laos*) was founded in 1944 as a resistance movement under Communist leadership fighting the Japanese in Laos. After 1945 the Pathet Lao fought the French colonial authorities. Between 1954 and 1973 they conquered over half the territory of the Lao State. In 1975 Pathet Lao forces gained full control of the country and the Pathet Lao assumed absolute political power. The Pathet Lao is now united with the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP). Source: Wikipedia.