
RI BULLETIN

A POWERFUL VOICE FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

November 23, 2004

Contact: Ken Bacon and Ghazal Vaghedi
ri@refintl.org or 202-828-0110

Resettling Hmong Refugees From Wat Tham Krabok

The decision by the U.S. State Department and Thailand to resettle over 15,000 Laotian Hmong refugees into the United States is producing a real success. But as the program nears completion, some refugees at Wat Tham Krabok worry that they or family members will be left behind and wonder what will happen to those remaining, including single women and children, after the Thai army closes the refugee camp next year.

The Royal Thai Government, the U.S., the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and other agencies have designed an effective and compassionate refugee resettlement program for the Hmong at Wat Tham Krabok, a Buddhist temple turned refugee camp. Resettlement programs can involve painful and seemingly arbitrary choices about who goes and who stays, but there is time to hold disruptions to a bare minimum.

Resettlement processors estimate that hundreds of camp residents were not registered by the Royal Thai Government in August 2003. Many had been living at the camp for years, but because they weren't registered, they aren't on the official list that determines who is eligible to be considered for resettlement to the U.S. Some were working outside the camp, others say they were dealing with problems that prevented registration.

Refugees International spoke with a woman who has been living at the camp since 1996; she says that her father died in 1969 while helping the U.S. fight the Vietnamese. She missed registration because she was out farming when the RTG conducted registration, she explains. Although she returned in time to get her name on the list, her picture wasn't taken. Without a picture, she can't be put on the "movement list" for further resettlement proceedings. Another woman, a single mother, said she was unable to get her name on the list because her roof fell down on registration day. Other residents have similar stories explaining why they missed registration.

Thai officials say that they will allow resettlement of residents of the Wat, where Hmong refugees have lived for years in substandard houses built from scrap, and family members approved by the U.S. American embassy officials in Thailand pledge to take a compassionate approach to resettlement questions concerning the Wat population. But until these decisions are made, anxiety will mount as the camp empties out. About 7,000 residents have left already.

Another group that worries it could get left behind includes women and children in households headed by men who don't want to resettle, even though the rest of the family does. Since current registration policy specifies that the father or husband must be the "principal applicant", the decision to resettle the

entire family is the man's alone. Workers at the Wat say that there are about 40 families in which the man and woman disagree over resettlement. Registration policy should allow women to make decisions independent of their husbands. Such situations at the camp have caused severe tension within some families, leading to domestic violence and attempted suicides.

There are also cases where an individual initially did not want to resettle, but has since reconsidered. RI spoke with a young man who initially declined a resettlement opportunity but later changed his mind. Fifteen members of his family are resettling in the U.S, and he realizes that he does not want to be left behind. Those who first turned down resettlement should be given a second chance.

There are also cases of married children of Hmong at the Wat who were outside of the camps when the list was developed. UNHCR considers these married children as part of the larger family and favors U.S. resettlement of them, noting they often contribute to support the elderly parents. Camp workers say there may be up to a 1,000 cases where married children could be left behind while their parents resettle because the children missed registration. The RTG worries that stretching registration rules will create a "pull factor" by drawing others into the camp, but the camp is too well patrolled by the Thai army to allow that.

After the resettlement program has been completed it is still unclear what will happen to hundreds who chose to stay or did not qualify for resettlement for varying reasons, such as a past criminal record or having been identified as a "fighter". The RTG will be left with the responsibility to determine to what extent it will be willing to integrate these cases within Thai society. RTG officials say they will show compassion in such cases and have assured RI that they will not force refugees to return to Laos where the Hmong returnees could face persecution. But the status of those who don't resettle remains to be determined. Work permits, access to health care, unrestricted travel, registration of children's births and education would be essential requirements to help the Hmong live stable lives once the camp is closed. As a minimum, those who stay should be no worse off, whether they remain near the Wat or join other Hmong communities in Thailand, after the Wat closes.

Refugees International recommends that:

- The U.S. Government amend its principal applicant policies to allow women to apply for resettlement if their husbands chose not to resettle.
- The U.S. Government allow for reconsideration of resettlement for individuals who have changed their mind since the initial registration.
- The U.S. Government consider cases of long term Wat Tham Krabok residents who did not appear on the Thai military list or were not present during the initial registration.
- The U.S. Government consider for admission married children of Hmong at the Wat, who were outside of the camps when the list was developed.
- Royal Thai Government provide a feasible, durable long term solution for Hmong who, for whatever reason, do not resettle.

RI president Ken Bacon and RI development associate Ghazal Vaghedi recently surveyed conditions at Wat Tham Krabok.