

SPECIAL REPORT: The Leftover People

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WAT THAM KRABOK, Thailand – The 16,000 Hmong refugees headed to America after years in this dead-end squatters camp will leave behind at least as many broken hearts.

Their relatives who moved away from the camp in search of a better life - about 20,000 of them - will be stuck in a legal and emotional twilight zone: unsafe in Laos, unwanted in Thailand, unwelcome in America.

They are people like Pang Vang and her husband, who struggled for 11 years in the camp, then fled to western Thailand last year with their nine youngest children out of fear that the Thai government would send them back to Laos. The couple never thought that leaving would tear them from the rest of their family forever.

In December, the U.S. State Department reached an agreement with the Thai government to give those Hmong officially registered in the camp a last chance to go to America.

Pang Vang's oldest daughter Kou Yang, 22, her husband and 5-year-old daughter stayed in the camp and registered with the Thai guard there. Kou plans to start a new life with relatives in California later this year. But she can't bear the thought of leaving her parents in Thailand.

To leave or be left behind. Again and again through history, the Hmong have had to make this devilish choice: the guilt of leaving loved ones to save yourself, or the terror of being left.

In March, when Pang Vang learned Kou would be going to Northern California without her, she put a bottle of silver polish to her lips and tried to kill herself.

"My husband tried hard to stop me," said Vang, 37. "We struggled for the bottle and I fell and hurt my back. I've tried to commit suicide twice already. I feel this is really unfair."

So do other Hmong who lost their land and loved ones because they or their relatives joined the CIA's secret Hmong army in Laos in the 1960s and '70s, believing the United States would never let the Lao communists win.

Today, refugees from the camp - considered illegal immigrants in Thailand - have moved to Hmong villages such as Than Thong, a few miles from the Mekong River in the far northeast.

Kay Ying Xiong, a former guerrilla who went to Than Thong with 25 other families in 2000, spoke for the outsiders: "What's the difference between the people who stayed in Wat Tham Krabok and those who left? We are all the same family. We're both suffering inside and outside - I farm rice and nothing else, and there's only enough for my wife and five children."

In August, more than 2,000 of the outsiders descended on the squatters camp, begging to go to America, too. The Thai military ordered them back to their villages.

Pam Lewis, one of the State Department officials overseeing the resettlement, said Hmong

who left the temple at Wat Tham Krabok had plenty of time - between April and August 2003 - to return and register with the Thai military at the camp.

The military, Lewis said, was "very thorough in asking, 'Are there other very close family members, like a spouse or minor children, on the outside?' "

But Lewis acknowledges the Thai soldiers never said why they were registering Hmong in the camp, and many of the refugees feared that they would be signing their own death warrants.

They may have had reason to worry. A senior Thai diplomat in Washington, D.C., confirmed a common suspicion in the camp: that the Thai and Lao governments were discussing repatriating the Hmong back to Laos. There, the hatred hasn't cooled. The Hmong say the communist Pathet Lao are like "pepper in the eyes," while the Pathet Lao call the Hmong "an American disease."

Amnesty International has received reports from Laos that more than 1,000 Hmong in the jungles - many of them women, children and civilians - have been surrounded by Lao communist forces and starved to death over the last year.

Getting their relatives out of Laos was what led Pang Vang and her husband, Toua Yang, 47, to pass up chances to go to America in the 1980s and 1990s.

From 1982 to 1992, Toua Yang said, he and his six-man guerrilla team helped more than 1,000 Hmong escape Laos. "But an equal number were killed. Many tried to cross the border into Thailand without enough protection and were gunned down," he said. His own brother was badly wounded when a communist soldier shot him with an AK-47 assault rifle "and blew up his chest," he said.

While relatives left the last official Thai refugee camp, Ban Vinai, for Sacramento, St. Paul, Minn., and other new Hmong frontiers, Toua Yang's wife waited for him at the camp. "I'm very proud of what he's done for my people," she said. "I love him very much. That's why I kept waiting for him."

By the time Toua Yang returned to Thailand, Ban Vinai had closed and he felt his only choice was to move to the Hmong squatters camp at Wat Tham Krabok. "We thought it would be a safe place," he said.

But on April 1, 2003, the temple became a detention center when the Thai military, under Maj. Thanongsak "Poek" Tannarat, moved in to rid the area of drug dealers.

Poek estimated that about 500 people around the temple were either selling or addicted to yaba, a methamphetamine pill used by Hmong laborers. The soldiers rounded up more than a dozen dealers, Poek said, including alleged Yaba kingpin Na Kao Her. "We heard he had more than \$80,000 and more than 1 million pills hiding in the mountain above the camp," he said.

Poek said Her offered to lead the soldiers to his stash, then escaped and jumped off a cliff to his death.

But Her's uncle said Her was nearly beaten to death, taken to say his last goodbyes to his wife and four kids, and then thrown off the cliff - not because he was a drug dealer, but because of his ties to Hmong rebels in Laos led by his famous cousin, Chao Fa chieftain Pa

Kao Her, who'd been assassinated in 2002.

The suspected drug dealer's death sent a spasm of paranoia through the camp.

"I was worried the same thing would happen to my husband," Pang Vang said. The couple fled the camp with their nine youngest children.

They grow rice in a village near the Myanmar border, but sneak back to the camp occasionally to bring money to relatives, including daughter Kou Yang, who has spent all of her 22 years in refugee camps.

Kou and her husband, A Lor, are desperate to start over in Stockton, where Lor has two half-brothers.

"I have no job and no education and I'm almost 29," Lor said. He makes traditional Hmong bamboo flutes and sends them to Sacramento, where his wife's uncle sells them for about \$150 apiece and mails him the money.

In her hut in the temple camp, Kou Yang watched "Is It Truly a Broken Heart?" a Hmong video produced in California and sent by her uncle, who owns a Laundromat in Sacramento.

She's watched it six times. "There's a lot of stories going on in the U.S. about separation and divorce," she said, "but I've decided to do everything to stick together."

Watching the movie with her are her two oldest brothers, Chee Sue Yang and Chee Nou Yang. Chee Sue, 19, wants to be an architect in America; Chee Nou, 17, wants to use his training as an electrician.

They may not get the chance. Even though they've never left the camp, they're not on the Thai list because their parents never got them signed up.

Kou pulled out a yellow registration card her family received after they came to the temple in 1992. It includes all of their names, photos and dates of birth. But Kou said the Thai soldiers have warned her that if she shows the card to U.S. officials, "we're all going to be kicked out of here."

Divided families such as Kou Yang's "will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis," said Margaret Burkhardt, one of the U.S. officials processing families at the temple. "We're not here to split up families and cause chaos."

For now, the officials are strictly following the Thai list, but once the temple-dwellers are resettled, they say they'll work with Thai and U.N. officials to try to find a solution for those outside the camp.

Lives apart Life outside is a struggle, but the 25 families who moved to Than Thong town in northeast Thailand say it beats life in the temple.

"There, the women stayed home sewing and we went out to do jobs for the Thai people, harvesting crops, loading and unloading, construction," said Sai Shoua Xiong, 33, a father of nine who left the temple in 2000. "Here, we can farm corn, rice, sweet potatoes. We're free to travel around, we have running water and our children go to a better school."

Xiong's relatives are scattered around the world: He has three sisters in the temple, a fourth

in Stockton, one in Sacramento, one in Washington, D.C., and still another in France. He has a 23-year-old niece who's a nursing student in Sacramento, and a nephew who's an electrical engineer. He has cousins living everywhere from the jungles of Laos to the suburbs of St. Paul.

Xiong and his younger brother Leng live illegally in Thailand because their dad, C.K. Xiong, longed to return to his life as a village leader in Laos.

After the Vietnam War ended, Gen. Vang Pao, leader of the secret Hmong army, promised he would one day leave his Orange County home to liberate Laos.

So C.K. Xiong waited for Vang Pao's triumphal return "like someone waits for their mom and dad," said his son-in-law in Sacramento.

By the time C.K. and his family realized there was no going back to Laos, it was too late for them to return to the temple and get on the Thai list.

"We don't want to be a family separated any more," C.K., 66, said sadly. He pines for Kia, his effervescent daughter in Sacramento.

Kia, 40, does inventory for a Sacramento auto-parts company while her husband looks after their 11 children.

Kia misses her parents terribly, too, and sends them money and letters. Her oldest daughter is studying nursing at Sacramento City College and she would like her brothers' kids to get the same chance at an American education.

Back in Than Thong, one of those children, 17-year-old Pang, put down the intricate red and black dress she'd been stitching from dawn to dusk for two months, and declared, "I really want to go to America - I'm not afraid of anything. I really want to go to school. I dropped out after second grade because we're so busy farming."

Sai Shoua Xiong, her dad, said he'd go anywhere in America - "It doesn't matter where. But I don't know how we're going to get there."

Past decisions blamed Many Hmong widows on the outside blame their warrior husbands for decisions made decades ago that block their entrance to America today.

One of them is Mee Xiong, whose niece, May Ying Ly, went to see her in March for the first time in 24 years.

Their bittersweet reunion unfolded under a dusty turquoise canopy near the rolled barbed wire that encircles the temple camp.

"I should have come to America a long time ago like you and your parents did - and now I can't go," Mee Xiong sobbed.

Aunt Mee's skin is the color of ginger - the crop she grows near Khao Kho, a mountain village 200 miles north of the temple. She and her teenage daughter See moved there in 2000 when they heard the Thai soldiers were going to force the temple dwellers back to Laos.

Now, the two dozen children and grandchildren they left in the camp are getting ready to go

to America without them.

After meeting May Ying Ly at the camp, they took her home with them to Khao Kho, where the night sky sparkled with shooting stars. As Aunt Mee drank in the cool, fresh air, she was transformed from a fugitive to a confident businesswoman.

In the high, rising tones of Hmong storytellers, Mee recounted her story: In the 1980s, Mee and her sister - May Ying Ly's mother - argued passionately with their husbands, trying to get them to go to America.

Ly nodded. "My mom told my dad you'd better leave if you want to stay alive."

Ly's mom succeeded, but Mee wasn't so lucky. Her husband, an artilleryman, was still fighting when she fled across the Mekong River in 1980 with her five young children, two of them tied to her back and chest.

In 1989, her husband died in Ban Vinai and Mee was ready to join Ly's mom in California. But her husband's younger brother refused to let her take her 15-year-old son, Leng. "I went to talk to the U.N., but they wouldn't let me leave my child behind," she said.

Now, both her brother-in-law and her son - still in the temple camp - are heading for America, Mee said, and "I'm stuck out here. It's so unfair."

Mee's hopes now ride on her daughter See, 20, who's always chatting on her cell phone - a necessity for nearly every Hmong in Thailand - with a Hmong suitor in Sacramento twice her age. If See marries and moves to America, she may be able to bring her mom over someday.

Heroes left behind Even some of those who seem most deserving of refugee resettlement in America - disabled war veterans - are being left behind because they're not on the Thai list.

In Than Thong village, Sai Shoua Xiong's children cling to his cousin Chong Xiong, who lost his sight and the use of his left hand when a land mine blew up in his face in 1969.

Chong, 69, was on the front lines of Gen. Vang Pao's army in the Plain of Jars in northern Laos, one of the bloodiest battlegrounds of the CIA-financed secret war.

He was sent home to his village, where he was never able to find a wife. After the war, his relatives helped him hide in the jungle, brought him to the temple in 1992 and then on to Than Thong.

Chong spends his days maneuvering through town with a long wooden staff, or sits and tells stories to children, whose small shoulders press up against his.

"They love me so much," he said. "They're around all the time."

A blind man with only one good hand is not much use, though. "I just cannot do anything," he said. "I feel so bad that I've lost my eyes."

Like many Hmong veterans, Chong feels betrayed. He accuses the United States of abandoning its secret war in Laos in 1973, just as it was withdrawing publicly from Vietnam.

"They didn't stay to the end," he said. "They left us behind to be defeated."

He would like to spend his last days in America, with a sister in St. Paul or one in Fresno, where he figures he could get better medical care.

"The Americans should not forget my sacrifice," he said. "The State Department should consider my case - I am one of those they are supposed to help."

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Manny Crisostomo

Pang Vang and her husband, Toua Yang, are among the roughly 20,000 Hmong refugees who are being left behind. When she learned her daughter was going to America, she tried to kill herself.

A registration document from the camp at Wat Tham Krabok shows Toua Yang and his family. If they had stayed at the camp, where they lived for 11 years, the entire family might have been allowed to go to America. But Yang fled last year with most of his family, fearing Thailand would return them to communist Laos. The family members who remained are going to America.

Even disabled Hmong war veterans are being denied resettlement in America because they're not on the Thai list. Among them is Chong Xiong of Than Thong village. He is blind and can't use his left hand.

C.K. Xiong and two of his sons survey their farm in the village of Than Thong in Thailand. "We don't want to be a family separated any more," says Xiong, 66, who was a tribal leader back in Laos. He misses his daughter Kia, 40, who does inventory for a Sacramento auto-parts company.

See Xiong, above, and her mother, Mee Xiong, moved to the village of Khao Kho in 2000 after hearing that Thai soldiers in the Wat Tham Krabok squatters camp would force them to return to Laos. Mee Xiong, a war widow, pins her hopes for going to America on See, who has a suitor waiting in Sacramento.

Hmong refugees are scattered throughout Thailand, which considers them illegal immigrants. Bao Yang, above, lives in the village of Than Thong. At left, children play outside the home of C.K. Xiong's son, Sai Shoua Xiong.

Mee Xiong, at right, blames her warrior husband for decisions long ago that blocked her from going to America. Here she holds a bittersweet reunion with niece May Ying Ly of Sacramento, whom she hadn't seen in 24 years.

Sacramento Bee / Olivia Nguyen (map) THAILAND Than Tong Village Khao Ko Village Lopburi Wat Tham Krabok Saraburi Bangkok

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