

The fate of Hmong refugees

MSF/February 2006/Translated by Liz Green

In July 2005, MSF decided to assist Hmong refugees in the province of Phetchabun in Thailand. In the absence of other humanitarian organisations, MSF has progressively increased and diversified its activities, while supporting the transfer of these people to a new site so that they are not returned to Laos without guarantees.

The Hmong population in the MSF refugee camps near the village of Huai Nam Khao are originally from Laos, and are part of one of the many different minorities in that country. During the Vietnam War, certain Hmong were recruited by the CIA to support the American army in its war against communism in Vietnam and Laos. At the end of the war, in 1973, the defeated Americans withdrew their troops and the

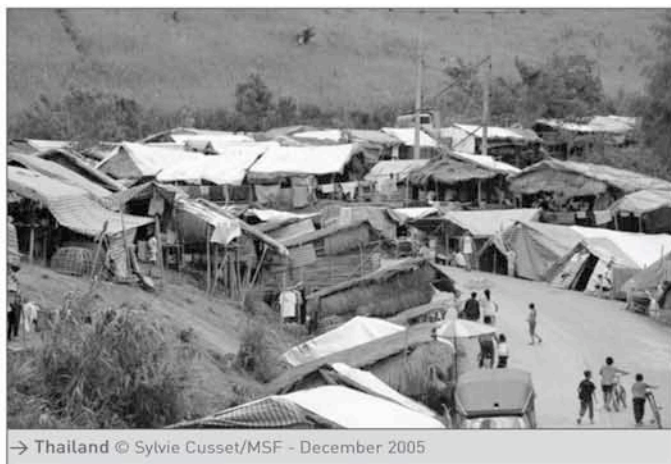
communists took control in Vietnam and, two years later, Laos. Following the departure of the Americans, several hundred thousand Hmongs, initially taking refuge in Thailand, were welcomed by third countries, particularly the United States, Canada, Australia and France. Some Hmongs continued to fight the communists in the hope of establishing a sovereign Hmong nation.

What remains today of the anti-

communist resistance, which has received almost no external support for over thirty years? Probably not a great deal, but many former soldiers and their descendants are trapped in the jungle (particularly around the special areas of Borikamxai and the Xaisomboune), victims of constant

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attacks by Laotian soldiers. They have wanted to lay down their arms and lead a normal life for a long time now, but they are convinced that the Laotian government will show them no mercy. Some risk leaving the jungle to take refuge in Thailand in the hope of a better life; those who succeed have but one goal: above all, not to be sent back to Laos. [See account on following page]



→ Thailand © Sylvie Cusset/MSF - December 2005

EXPLORATORY MISSION IN LAOS, IN THE REGION OF XAISOMBOUNE

Our exploratory mission in Laos gave us further understanding of the situation. The mountainous terrain and vegetation (mainly jungle) of the Xaisomboune region, as well as poorly developed road networks, make access into this part of the country extremely difficult. There are still areas where public access (especially by foreigners) is strictly forbidden: for example, we were blocked by a military barricade at the entrance to Longcheng, in the special area of Xaisomboune. The reason given was that the area is dangerous and our safety could not be guaranteed. In these mountain areas, there are military encampments in nearly every village.

But what exactly is happening in these areas? Who are the military fighting?

- Are they groups of rebels who refuse to yield to communist rule?
- Are they opium traffickers who also occasionally commit other acts of banditry?
- Or are they a few thousand Hmongs trapped in the jungle for decades, who are quite simply trying to survive attacks by a military determined to make them pay the price of their former collaboration with the American enemy?

The local population are little inclined to speak about sensitive issues. But the stories told by the few international journalists who have been able to penetrate this jungle and visit the people living in hiding there concur with accounts by Hmong refugees in Huai Nam Khao.

IN BRIEF

→ DRC Nord Kivu: peaks of malaria

Every year the region of Rutshuru is marked by two peaks of malaria. We are currently reaching the end of the second peak which started in October 2006. Our teams increased the hospitalisation capacity of the paediatrics ward of Rutshuru Hospital as there was an increasing number of admissions with 70% of all under 5 year old admissions due to severe cases of malaria. Medical and technical support was provided to key health centres around Rutshuru, and an efficient referral system of severe cases to the hospital was developed. 4000 cases of malaria were treated between November 2006 and February 2007 in Rutshuru hospital and peripheral health centres. This can be added to another 4000 cases treated before November 2006 in Rutshuru hospital alone. The arrival of new medicine such as ASAQ (see margin page 15) will play an important role in areas like these, where simplified treatment will help treat more people, more rapidly.



MISSION

THAILAND

IN BRIEF

→ Central African Republic : Attack on Birao (march 9, 2007)

The north-west of CAR, where we're assisting people displaced by violence, has been calmer since the end of January. However, in the north-east, the city of Birao was attacked on 3 and 4 March by UFDR troops. In fact, UFDR had signed an agreement with the François Bozize government, but the new UFDR (Union of Democratic Forces for the Rally) leader does not recognise this agreement which had been signed by his predecessor. The city of Birao has been largely ransacked, burnt and emptied of its inhabitants of whom a large number are heading for Sudan. During the fighting, the MSF-H team on the ground stayed sheltered inside the house, managing to treat some wounded near the compound. The team was finally evacuated by air to Bangui on Wednesday 7 March. The other MSF-H team based in Gordil was evacuated as a precautionary measure. MSF-H's current priority is to send a team to undertake a new evaluation.



→ Thailand © Sylvie Cusset/MSF - December 2005

→ UNDEFINED STATUS

The Thai government refuses to consider these people as refugees (or 'persons of concern', the term applied in Thailand), and considers them illegal immigrants. The Thai authorities refuse to give the United Nations (particularly the UNHCR) authorisation to work in the area and the latter cannot, therefore, carry out its responsibilities and work in parti-

cular on the definition of the status of these people. In 2007, the Thai authorities plan to move the Hmong 'refugees' to a new site. MSF has undertaken to provide its support for this operation, since our priority is that these people should not be returned to Laos without guarantees. At the same time, we are attempting to involve the international community, specifically by requesting financial support for this operation.

No institutional donor, however, appears to wish to become involved - on the grounds that the status of these people is not clearly defined and because there are probably some 'illegitimate refugees' among them.

→ UNCONDITIONAL ASSISTANCE

Through our activity in this area, we have access to eyewitness accounts of the living conditions of this small Hmong community in Laos (of the 300,000 Hmong in Laos, 10 to 20,000 of them appear to be persecuted by the Laotian government for having fought with the Americans), and we are convinced that these people have good reasons for wishing not to return to Laos. MSF considers humanitarian aid for this population should not be conditional upon the Thai government's official recognition of these people as refugees. The international community should undertake to assist and protect them: the status of each one may be studied later. ■

Gilles Isard,
head of mission in Thailand

OUR ACTIVITIES IN PHETCHABUN PROVINCE

In January 2007, MSF is providing assistance to 8,000 people and has added 'blanket feeding' to its initial activities (primary health, provision of water and sanitation for approximately 6,000 people), as well as the distribution of emergency supplies (plastic sheeting, blankets, soap, stoves, saucepans and coal).

Every day, the MSF medical team provides around one hundred consultations including ten or so antenatal consultations, and manages about 20 births a month. The main pathologies are respiratory infections (32%), diarrhoea (17%), dermatosis and eye infections (11%).

The general distribution provides a daily intake of 3,000 calories for 2,200 children (under 5 years of age or below 100 cm), pregnant women (around 120) and around 100 moderately malnourished children.

The water supply system provides around 60 litres per person daily. Logistics teams also manage the maintenance of sanitation systems and deal with the removal of 6 m³ domestic waste produced each day in the camp.

The cost of this operation was 650,000 euros in 2006. €1,300,000 have been allocated for 2007 (including general food distribution and the transfer of the refugees to a more suitable site).

1- High commissioner for refugees

ACCOUNT

Plagued all her life

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C.Y. is 18. She is originally from Bolikhamxai, a province in the centre of Laos. She arrived at Huai Nan Khao refugee camp on 4 October 2006, accompanied by her 3-year-old brother. She agreed to tell us her story.

'My name is C.Y.. I am 18 years old, I am Hmong and I was born in the jungle in Bolikhamxai province. My father is an SGU veteran [Special Guerrilla Unit, a military unit that fought alongside American troops during the secret war against communist Vietnam – editor's note]. I grew up in the jungle with my family.

I have never been to school as we had to hide all the time and moved constantly - generally we didn't stay more than ten days in one camp, so as not to be discovered by the Laotian soldiers.

We were a group of 4 or 5 families living in shelters made of bamboo and banana leaves. I have never been to school as we had to hide all the time and moved constantly - generally we didn't stay more than ten days in one camp, so as not to be discovered by the Laotian soldiers.

'Laotian soldiers attack us regularly, at least four or five times a year, particularly during the dry season [moving is easier- editor's note]. Laotian helicopters fly over the jungle to find groups of Hmongs. Failing that, they drop troops down close by and the soldiers search for us, surveying the area for several days. To find us in the jungle, the military look out for signs of us, particularly marks made by machetes on the vegetation - so we try to leave as few traces as possible. When there is an attack, we separate, and we normally get together again a few days later, in a predetermined

place. Generally, the soldiers systematically kill the men and capture the women. To defend ourselves, some of our group are armed [one weapon to 3 or 4 men – editor's note], some groups possess a few machine guns [M16s]; in my group we only had a few old rifles, but it is very difficult to obtain ammunition.

'Since my childhood, several of my cousins in my group have been killed. In 2002, one of my elder brothers was killed by soldiers when he was out collecting fruit with my cousins. One day in 2004, at around 8 in the morning, Laotian soldiers found our camp. That day, my mother and two men from our group were killed, the soldiers set fire to our camp, but my father, my two younger brothers and I managed to escape. We later found the rest of the group; we use a sort whistle made of leaves to find each other after we have dispersed.

'In March 2006, soldiers attacked us again and my father and I had to separate, each taking one of my younger brothers. We had arranged to meet at a place. I waited for my father for two days but he never arrived; I was terrified, alone with my brother. Then I decided to walk and, after a day and a night of walking, I came upon a Hmong village on the edge of the jungle. The village chief introduced me some cousins [among the Hmongs, the same surname means you are from the same clan, i.e. cousins; two people with the same surname cannot marry each other – editor's note]. I stayed there for eight months, working, but the village chief then asked me to leave as he considered it too dangerous for him and for the village if the Laotian authorities

discovered me there. He told me there was a Laotian Hmong camp in Thailand, where I would be safe. I had four silver bars*, I paid my cousin one silver bar to accompany me as far as Ventiane. He then negotiated my passage of the Mekong and transportation to near the refugee camp. That cost me my last three silver bars. We crossed the Mekong by boat at around 9 pm, and a vehicle was waiting for us on the other side. With my little brother, we were the only passengers in the minibus which left us near the village of Kek Noi in the early afternoon. Following the driver's

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advice, I waited for Hmong villagers to pass by. They explained to me how to reach the Huai Nam Khao refugee camp. I walked for two and a half hours across the fields, to get there. I now live among people from my clan who have agreed to accept me under their roof.' ■

Interview by Gilles Isard

* One silver bar is worth 4.000 Thai Bahts, i.e. 80 euros.

IN BRIEF

→ Chad: Assistance to displaced people fleeing violence (March 6, 2007)

Far from decreasing in intensity, the situation in southeastern Chad is forcing people to flee the raids of various armed groups. There are some 60,000 displaced people in the Dar Sila district, 22,000 of whom are in Dogdoré. Confronted with growing insecurity, on March 6 we had to reduce the size of our Dogdoré team. We are the only permanent humanitarian agency there. The national personnel who have remained ensure the water supply, and at least minimal medical activities continue for displaced people.

To deal with the Dar Sila emergency, we are also in the process of negotiating with the authorities about taking over the Goz Beïda hospital, which is a referral centre for the whole region. Further north in Adré, fighting between rebel forces and the military also increases the insecurity. Since February, after a rebel offensive, we have treated 180 injured people at the Adré hospital.