

Destined for Fresno

3,000 Hmong living in a Thailand refugee camp are expected to arrive in July.

By Bill McEwen
The Fresno Bee

(Updated Sunday, May 9, 2004, 10:16 AM)

SARABURI PROVINCE, Thailand -- The Hmong of Wat Tham Krabok live in squalor. Their air is fouled by the stench of open sewers and by dust from a nearby quarry. Women give birth in bamboo huts with dirt floors. Most children grow up without learning to read and write. There is no running water.

The elders have lived hand-to-mouth in this and other refugee camps ringed by barbed wire since Saigon fell and the United States retreated from Vietnam and Laos nearly 30 years ago.

The estimated 20,000 refugees held here on 120 acres at a Buddhist monastery in central Thailand have been championed as heroic allies of democracy, defended as innocents caught in the machinations of world politics and denounced as opium addicts and vagabonds.

Now, about 3,000 of these refugees are moving to Fresno.

The first families are expected to arrive in July, and they will need medical care, education, jobs and help understanding a place radically different from Wat Tham Krabok. Some will need counseling to deal with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

But unlike the first Hmong who resettled in Fresno in the mid-1970s, this latest wave of immigrants can count on friends and relatives who've formed a tightknit community. They will be assisted by central San Joaquin Valley agencies with long histories of helping Southeast Asian immigrants.

Resettlements also will occur in Hmong-American strongholds such as Sacramento; Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minn.; and Milwaukee. When the program is completed, about an eight-month process, as many as 14,696 refugees will have left Thailand.

Thong Yang Xiong, 74, is a clan leader and former army captain who fought in the secret war orchestrated by the Central Intelligence Agency in Laos. Xiong joined the army in 1961 and served until the communist Pathet Lao took over Laos in 1975.

"The Hmong did their part," Xiong says through an interpreter. "The United States should have done more to help the Hmong. We are the ones suffering the most. I've lost eight people in my family fighting the communists."

Where would Xiong like to move?

"To Fresno," he says. "But all my sons are in Wisconsin, so that's where I'll go."

Along with kindling dreams of a better life in America for the refugees, the resettlement program announced last December by the U.S. Embassy has stirred old controversies and created new fears.

While a vast majority of residents relish starting over in the United States, some -- particularly the elderly -- are apprehensive. They would prefer to gain Thai citizenship and live in surroundings reminiscent of the lush Lao mountains.



Girls push carts filled with empty water containers through Wat Tham Krabok, Thailand. There is no running water in the camp, so residents have to cart jugs of drinking and bathing water to their homes from a distribution area. Nearly 15,000 residents are expected to leave the camp within months for the United States.

Darrell Wong / The Fresno Bee

RESOURCES

-  [E-mail This Article](#)
-  [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
-  [Receive the Daily Bulletin](#)
-  [Subscribe to Print](#)
-  [Join a Forum](#)

MULTIMEDIA

-  [Thailand Gallery](#)
-  [Hmong History Timeline](#)

A few cling to faint hopes that about 800 resistance fighters still hiding in the jungle will overthrow the communist Lao government and create a permanent, democratic home for the Hmong.

Add mistrust of Thai officials and the presence of Thai soldiers at Wat Tham Krabok, and the result is a boiling stew of hopes, gossip and opinions that threatens the Hmong clan structure. Reports of divorce and suicide are common.

"The rumors are true," says Nhia Me Xiong, leader of one of the camp's five sections, "father against son, son against father, wife against husband."

Another man, a former soldier and farmer who is in his early 80s, says he wants to stay at the camp. He knows of Hmong patriarchs living broke and alone after moving to America because their families had split up.

"Life in the United States would be totally different," he says. "I would lose my identity."

But Chong Bliá Thao, 59, a former soldier who has lived at the camp since 1993, speaks for many:

"They say life in the United States is a walk in the park, but I have second thoughts about that. Anywhere you live, life is not that easy. It depends on your determination to make things happen.

"I want to go to United States."

To survive, the families of Wat Tham Krabok do what Hmong at other refugee camps have done since leaving Laos: They make traditional Hmong clothing, jewelry, knives and paintings.

The wares are sold by friends and relatives in Thailand and the United States, with the profits returning to the refugees.

"Anything that sells," says Chang Ger Yang, an artist who says he receives up to \$300 each for paintings depicting Hmong fairy tales.

His most popular piece portrays a bow-and-arrow-wielding prince slaying supernatural tigers threatening a princess.

"They're were-tigers, like werewolves," Yang says.

This money is vital to Yang, 40, and his family of 10 because the camp receives no humanitarian aid from the United Nations, which is participating in the resettlement program but doesn't recognize Wat Tham Krabok as a refugee camp.

Yang pays for food, water, firewood and other needs out of his own pocket; there are no free rides in Wat Tham Krabok.

For years, Thai officials said Wat Tham Krabok was filled with drug dealers, opium addicts, rebel soldiers and illegal immigrants from Laos and Myanmar -- not political refugees fleeing persecution.

Until the early 1990s, the monastery was best known as a place where monks helped drug addicts kick their habits through a regimen of herbal therapy and meditation. Among the patients through the years: thousands of Hmong who fought on the communist side during the secret war; some of them still reside in the camp alongside the anti-communist Hmong headed to America.

But when the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees began repatriating Hmong refugees in other camps to Laos in 1992, many Hmong fled to the monastery. The abbot, Luangpaw Chamroon, took them in and they soon were joined by other Hmong who had turned down chances to resettle in the United States.

Until a year ago, residents were able to come and go. Many found work by accepting lower wages than the local Thai would. A few would leave camp and join the bands of rebels sniping at government soldiers in the high-mountain jungles of Laos, residents say.

Reacting to suspicions that Wat Tham Krabok provided sanctuary for opium dealers, the Thai army moved into the camp last year and encircled it with razor wire. The military allows only a handful of residents to work outside the camp, forcing the refugees to rely increasingly on their craft skills and the generosity of relatives in the United States.

"Before they closed off the camp, families had two meals a day," says Yang Chue, director of the camp's makeshift school. "Now it's one meal a day for many families. Malnutrition has increased."

All through the camp, women turn out paj ntaub, vivid artwork that tells the Hmong odyssey with stitched pictures.

Paj ntaub combines embroidery, needlepoint, appliqué and reverse appliqué, and it takes a determined, skilled hand to produce the colorful pieces the Hmong are famous for. The women don't use patterns, relying instead on the time-honored techniques of folding and thread counting.

Mai Yia Chang -- wife of artist Chang Ger Yang -- sews silver coins into elaborate vests worn during New Year celebrations. The coins symbolize armor Hmong warriors wore into battle against the Chinese centuries ago. The vests sell for about \$70 each in the United States.

Za Yeng Vang, 70, makes ceremonial knives. At midday, with the outside temperature 100 degrees and the humidity stifling, he tends to a forge in the metalsmith shed. He says he has lived in refugee camps since 1975.

"I learned how to do this from a friend," he says. "Before that, I was just a peasant."

Lee Khoua Pao, 23, wanted more than anything to go to America. Instead, he died in early April from an unknown sickness, his father says, resulting from a job clearing grass on a farm outside the camp.

Pao's wages for one day's work: 150 baht, about \$3.85.

Nhia Khoua Lee, 60, offers few details about his son's death, and no autopsy was conducted. Standing outside his hut while family members prepare for the funeral, Lee says, "Monday he had his X-ray. Tuesday he died."

The X-ray Lee talks about is part of the physical given to everyone wishing to come to the United States.

Many of the children and young adults haven't experienced life beyond a refugee camp. They were born here or in other shantytowns since closed, such as hellish Ban Vinai, which housed 42,000 Hmong on about 400 acres near the Lao border.

But the young have had a small taste of American life. One of the camp's many paradoxes is that families surviving on one or two meals a day of pork or fish, rice and vegetables have television sets and cell phones.

Because few huts have electricity, car batteries power videocassette recorders, stereos and light bulbs. Teenagers listen to rock music made by Hmong bands popular in the United States and Thailand and to American top-40 hits. Some of the movie videos are dubbed in Thai; others are in English.

"These kids are going to have a future," says Pao Fang, who has visited the camp many times in his capacity as executive director of Lao Family Community of Fresno Inc., a nonprofit organization.

"They are going to be our leaders. They are going to adapt even though they live in this camp. They have televisions; they have the news. They see what America has to offer. Tham Krabok is not the end of their journey."

When the Hmong first trickled into the United States, Vang Pao, the army general idolized by many refugees, gave this order: Everyone under 40 must go to school and learn English; everyone over 40 must get a job.

But succeeding in America is more difficult than following a soldier's command. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 30.3% of Hmong in the United States receive public assistance, 34.8% have incomes below the poverty line and 50.7% of Hmong 25 and older have less than a ninth-grade education.

Yang Chue, the camp school director, says about 1,000 children attend a Thai school outside the camp, which costs \$45 a year. An equal number of children are learning ABCs and basic English at the camp. About half of Wat Tham Krabok's 14,696 registered residents are younger than 15.

Camp volunteers lead the daily two-hour English classes. Because most of the volunteer teachers have limited English proficiency, their classes consist solely of written exercises.

But Pao Ze Vang tells the 50 children in his class to repeat six sentences written on a blackboard. They pronounce every word correctly except "pupils," which is in four sentences. It comes out "poo-pills" every time.

Residents -- who speak Hmong, Thai or Laotian -- also gather around chalkboards for informal English sessions throughout the camp. At La Xiong's shanty, his brother teaches 15 phrases copied from a book. Among them: "Hello," "Good morning," "I'm John Smith," "Are you Bill?" and "How are you this evening?"

A delegation from Minnesota involved in the resettlement recently donated \$500 and books during a visit to the camp school. A Fresno delegation gave about \$1,000 in books and supplies.

As well-intentioned as these efforts are, they are window dressing. Asked what job he'd like in America, Chue says, "I have no idea."

It's the nearly universal answer to one of Wat Tham Krabok's most-asked questions. The real education and job training will begin in Fresno and other U.S. cities.

"The kids are eager to learn English, but I don't think they are learning," says Tony Vang, a Fresno Unified School District trustee who toured Wat Tham Krabok in April. "The kids don't have any schooling whatsoever. They will have to start from scratch."

Fresno Unified Superintendent Santiago Wood wants to open a resettlement center for Southeast Asian immigrants at a closed school site. Wood says the district will pursue federal grants to help pay for teaching the incoming Hmong.

"Fresno is well-positioned to embrace this diversity," Wood says. "We have programs that have worked well, and this site would be used as a multilevel center incorporating social services, health service, education and job training. I am extremely excited about the prospect."

But Lee Khoua Pao isn't coming to Fresno or anywhere else in America. His journey ends in a shallow grave in the crowded, rock-strewn cemetery on the limestone mountain above Tham Krabok.

A man playing a qeej, a Hmong reed instrument that resembles a bagpipe, leads a funeral procession of 30 people along a sun-baked trail up the mountain. At the front of the procession, Pao's body -- dressed in traditional Hmong garments and placed on a homemade stretcher -- is shouldered by pallbearers.

And a father grieves.

Says Nhia Khoua Lee, "That's all he wanted -- to go to the States."

Four hundred miles north of Wat Tham Krabok in the hills above the Thai city of Chiang Mai, a man with a machete tucked against the side of his blue sweat pants points to a house where Pracha Kosa awaits.

Pracha Kosa is the Thai name of a Hmong soldier who fought in his mountain homeland against the Lao communists in the 1970s. In those days, Kosa went by his Hmong name, Nhia Long Moua.

Kosa says he was the first refugee to enter Wat Tham Krabok in 1992 when the monks opened their gates to fleeing Hmong.

But Kosa and about 300 other refugees bolted the camp after the Thai military moved in. Instead of dreaming about America, they hope to return to Laos or become Thai citizens.

According to published reports citing U.S. Ambassador Douglas Hartwick, the Laotian government is allowing Hmong rebels to come home.

Kosa counters that Hmong refugees won't be able to live safely in Laos unless the United States and United Nations oversee resettlement there.

Lao Veterans of America agrees with Kosa. Last month the group organized simultaneous rallies in Fresno and other U.S. cities to protest attacks against civilian and opposition groups in Laos.

"We are willing to throw down our arms if we can go home," Kosa says. "America can't leave us like this."

U.S. State Department officials say that the future of Hmong refugees living outside Wat Tham Krabok -- an estimated 35,000 to 60,000 in Thailand -- will be determined by the Thai government.

Earlier this year, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Daly said that refugees eligible to come to the

United States should seize the opportunity because it could be their last chance.

The Wat Tham Krabok resettlement comes as the United States is trying to open up trade relations with Laos.

Willis Hesser Bird, a Thai-American who owns extensive property near Chiang Mai, was involved in a Hmong resettlement proposed by Thailand in 2002. The program, which would have granted Thai citizenship to Wat Tham Krabok refugees, was suspended when the United States announced its resettlement plan.

Bird now is lobbying U.S. officials to give Hmong refugees the option of becoming Thai citizens, returning to Laos or moving to America, France or Australia. He wants the United States to help with funding, saying his plan would cost less than sending all the refugees to America.

"The Hmong are no one's enemy," Bird says. "They are innocent people who got caught in the political problems between nations."

Bird calls Wat Tham Krabok "a concentration camp" because the refugees aren't receiving humanitarian aid.

"The people live in shambles -- tin roofs, no proper sanitation," Bird says. "It needs to be closed as soon as possible as a matter of human rights."

A refugee living near Chiang Mai approaches a television reporter who had interviewed Kosa. Out of the other refugees' sight, he quietly asks: "What is it like to live in the United States? How are the schools there?"

The television reporter, KSEE Channel 24's Zoua Vang, is a native of Laos and lived in a Thai refugee camp before coming to the United States in 1980.

She answers his questions.

He thanks Vang and says, "I want to go to the United States."

Family is everything to the Hmong -- a fact lost on U.S. officials who spread the hill-tribe people over 25 states during the first resettlement in the mid-1970s. Over time, the immigrants scouted out preferable locations and clustered together.

This helped the refugees understand American ways and increased their economic and political power, according to Su Thao, a Fresno businessman who hosts a Hmong radio show and makes Hmong documentaries. Thao immigrated to Iowa in 1976 before eventually moving to Fresno.

"It helps to be together," says Thao, who has visited Wat Tham Krabok twice since March. "For example, Hmong don't know about credit. They need to be taught that by a family member. And when someone buys a house, many families will put their money together for the down payment."

But those secondary migrations strained government budgets in popular Hmong destinations such as Fresno. That's because federal resettlement money doesn't follow refugees; it goes to the first place they land.

This time federal authorities are providing \$800 for each refugee and millions of dollars more for long-term social programs. Based on past experience, Fresno County officials are telling camp residents: We're not here to recruit you, but if you're coming to America, come here first.

"The biggest impact is going to be to the welfare system," says Fresno County Supervisor Susan Anderson, who toured Wat Tham Krabok last month. "The biggest burden will be to the school system."

"I really feel for the people coming here because there are no jobs for them here. Basically, their American families will be supporting them. The greatest hope is for the children, because their lives will be dramatically improved."

According to refugee advocates, people in the camp need medical care, counseling, English instruction and food even before they come to the United States.

"The sick are not going to the existing camp clinic or Thai hospital because of a lack of money and a lack of trust in the care provided there," says a report issued April 28 by an assessment team from St. Paul, Minn. "People are suffering unnecessary death and disability"

The assessment team asks that Hmong-American teachers be sent to the camp to help train camp instructors and

assist with English lessons through the end of the year.

"The level of English language literacy and speaking ability is significantly lower in Wat Tham Krabok than we have typically seen in refugee camps in Thailand. Even a few months of English language study could make a significant impact on the successful resettlement of these refugees."

Pao Fang says special attention must be paid to individuals whose families could be broken up by resettlement: "I talked to a woman -- she was 19 or 20 -- who said she would commit suicide if she couldn't come to America with her in-laws."

As miserable as life is in Wat Tham Krabok, it's a place people want to be.

There are the local Thais who operate the camp's open-air markets, and the recently arrived Hmong who flooded into the camp past the razor wire after the resettlement program was announced.

Nhia Me Xiong, the camp section leader, estimates the camp's population as 30,000, but others say the number is about 20,000. He says the United States has an obligation to live up to the promise the CIA made decades ago to reward the Hmong for opposing the communists in Indochina.

"If you take one, take them all," Xiong says. "Give them legal status."

That won't happen, according to the U.S. State Department. Only the refugees registered by the Thai military during a census last year are eligible to move to the United States.

Each applicant also must pass a drug test and neither have a criminal history nor be considered a terrorist. The Department of Homeland Security has final authority on who stays and who goes.

Not unexpectedly, resettlement has created hard feelings in the camp. There is talk of people bribing their way onto the list to go to America and deserving refugees left off.

Among those who missed the census is Chia Vang Her, a former army major. He says he has lived in Ban Vinai and Wat Tham Krabok. But last year, when the list was compiled, he was in Nan, a northern province near the Lao border.

To make his case, Her has enlisted the help of relatives in Minnesota and assembled documents detailing his military record.

"I want to go to the United States. I should be going to the United States," he says.

A State Department official in Washington, D.C., acknowledges there are rumors of bribes but says those in charge of the resettlement are using a system designed to prevent corruption.

"We're talking about a list that is protected," the official says. "Each applicant is photographed and fingerprinted. We are hopeful there will be no shenanigans."

People initially denied entry to the United States can ask for reconsideration, according to the State Department. A Fresno official familiar with the situation says a small number of unregistered refugees with relatives headed to America might be added to the list.

The future of those left behind will be decided by the Thai government, although U.S. officials are expected to influence that decision, refugee advocates say. Among the options: granting Thai citizenship or sending the Hmong to Laos.

The prospect of living in Laos frightens some in the camp, particularly those afraid of being recognized as opponents of the Pathet Lao. Following the communist takeover and the defeat of Vang Pao, thousands of Hmong were killed or rounded up and held in camps.

A man who was a farmer and a soldier before spending 25 years as a refugee watches a Thai soldier shadowing a reporter in Wat Tham Krabok and asks, "Are you here to give my name to the communists?"

Other refugees hope to return to the Laotian hilltops and continue the fight.

"I still have family in the resistance," a man in his 40s says. "I made a promise to go back there and help them."

One of Wat Tham Krabok's mysteries is why the refugees previously turned down the chance to join other Hmong in the United States.

Joe Davy, associate director of Hmong International Human Rights Watch, worked in Thai refugee camps in the late 1980s and has visited Wat Tham Krabok several times.

He says the refugees' reluctance to leave is more complicated than it might appear to non-Hmong observers:

"You are dealing with extended families. One person's decision can affect 30. You have people waiting for relatives in the jungle because you don't leave any of your own behind."

Other Hmong have chosen to remain in Thailand, Davy says, because they practice polygamy, want to die where their fathers died or fear modern medicine.

Davy says some people at Tham Krabok simply missed a U. N. deadline to apply for refugee status and weren't previously eligible. Still others, suspicious of Thai intentions and worried about being repatriated to Laos, insisted they weren't refugees.

"In 2002, when I went there, nobody would admit they were refugees," Davy says. "They said, 'No, no, we're from the north' " in Thailand.

But amid the hunger, the harmful lack of sanitation and the sad memories of lost relatives and lost wars, hope is evident.

Fresno Hmong leader Su Thao saw it when a Fresno-based group of Hmong advocates presented 11 tons of rice to residents.

"The people were overwhelmed," Thao says. "They said no one had ever given them anything before. They said that Fresno must be a wonderful place."

You can see hope, too, in the teenagers strolling arm in arm. You see it in the young and old riding small motorbikes through the village's nooks and crannies -- kicking up dust and dodging roosters, dogs and the occasional water buffalo along the way.

You see it in young girls gathered in front of a hut, sharing a cracked mirror, combing one other's hair and trying on make-up. And in the kids who excitedly push heavy carts stocked with water jugs -- white for drinking, blue for bathing -- through the crowded camp.

Most of all, you hear it in the voice of La Xiong, 29, who has endured poverty his whole life as the eldest son in a family of 14.

Says Xiong: "Life in the United States has to be better than this."

The reporter can be reached at bmcewen@fresnobee.com or (559) 441-6632.

FresnoBee.com

THE McCLATCHY COMPANY

© 2004, The Fresno Bee

[News](#) | [Sports](#) | [Business](#) | [Classifieds](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Text Only](#) | [Subscribe](#)
[Your Privacy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Child Protection](#)

[Modbee.com](#) | [Sacbee.com](#)