

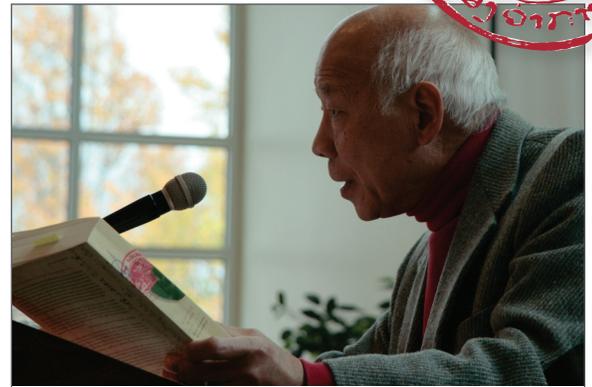
I LITTLE SLAVE

Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo talks about human rights issues in Laos.



The recent repatriation of over 4,000 Lao-Hmong from Thailand to Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) stirred up international condemnation. What are your thoughts on the situation of Lao-Hmong who have escaped Laos to refugee camps in neighboring country Thailand?

This is an outrage! I was shocked and angry over the deportation when I learned the news on the internet. With the forced repatriation of around 5,000 Lao-Hmong by the royal Thai government back to Laos, the plight of these victims, whose elders and families fought for U.S. during the Vietnam War in the "secret war" in Laos, continues to alarm many in the international human rights community. According to legal definition of refugee status, no state should return a freedom seeker to another state where the seeker would be in danger of being tortured, or have a well-founded fear of persecution. Because of incorrect human rights behaviors of Thailand and Laos, I seem to live in a lawless world where no one cares about anyone any longer.



Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo discusses his experience with students and faculty at Clark College, Vancouver, Wash., Dec. 2009.

By carrying out this irresponsible and unlawful policy, Thai government has damaged its traditional reputation of a nation of hospitality and of smiling people. Thai authorities have defied international appeals by U.S. government, European Parliament, Amnesty International and World Human Rights Watch to grant political asylum to the Lao-Hmong refugees. The deportation of these people made me worry about the failure of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other regional and international human rights instruments ratified by Thai government.

I want to ask my brother and sister Thai neighbors: "If there is a radical political change in Thailand, a Thai seeks refuge in a neighboring country and this country returns him or her back to Thailand that he or she did not agree with the government policy, what is his or her reaction?"

Recently, Laotian government has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on 26 September 2009 at the U.N. headquarters in New York. This means the government is obliged to guarantee all people in Laos the right to be free from torture, to liberty of movement and freedom to choose their residence. But the government does not apply the treaty that provides safeguard for the fair treatment of refugees.

The excessive use of force in the recent Lao-Hmong deportation, with reports of 4,500 to 5,000 troops and police participating, highlighted the determination in which both Thailand and Laos have regarding policies on the Lao-Hmong. Why are they the one group that the government most dislikes?

When the Cold War started in Europe and shifted later to Asia, America needed Laos to "contain" the spread of communism in Asia, particularly North Vietnam's infiltration to South Vietnam using the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which passed part of southern Laos. Therefore, CIA recruited secretly Lao-Hmong as combatants under the leadership of General Vang Pao to do the job. They fought alongside U.S. forces during the war. General Vang Pao's soldiers were the most anti-communist and the most determined warriors to fight against the Pathet Lao forces and Vietnamese troops stationed in Laos.

Since the takeover of the country by the Marxist revolutionary Laotians in 1975, they have not forgotten the Lao-

Hmong's involvement with American administration. The new communist government has continued to see these "forgotten allies of the USA" as public enemies. Most of the Lao-Hmong have long suffered from persecution, including arbitrary arrest and internment in re-education camps. Accordingly, they did not feel secure and fled into jungles to wage a low-level insurgency against oppression as evidenced by many human right reports published in the world, for example Television France 2, BBC, the International Tribune, the New York Times, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Forum Asia, the International Federation for Human Rights, Doctors without Borders, and Transparency International.



Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo at the temple prayers shortly after his 1988 release from Sop Hao, a political prisoner re-education camp near the Vietnamese border of Laos.

Yong Chanthalangsy, Lao Ambassador to the U.N. announced on December 30, 2009, that the repatriated Lao-Hmong would be sent to re-education programs. Having experienced what that means, what do you see its meaning for the Lao-Hmong?

You know that in any communist country in the world the word *prison* does not exist; there is only "psychiatric clinic" for opponents like the one in the former Soviet bloc. In Laos, "re-education" is a euphemism to name prison. Re-education is to keep "enemy of the socialist state" in the party line, so he or she does not dissent or seek ideas such as individual freedom and true democracy and open society.

The Lao-Hmong are human beings like you and me. They are asylum seekers who have the right under international law to not be forced back to the one-party communist state that persecutes and hunts them with its military and security forces. The Lao-Hmong refugees have the right to live, to be protected from persecution, torture and human rights abuses against them. They have not committed any crimes and have not violated

any law. They only want to be alive, live in peace, free from persecution, torture and the ongoing killing by the government.

Laotian government has always denied there is a Lao-Hmong crisis in Laos, saying that the conflict with the Lao-Hmong has been over for a long time. There are no more Lao-Hmong hiding in the jungles to fight with Laotian government. It's not true. When I was in prison, I witnessed many Lao-Hmong were kept prisoners on the battle fields. Today the conflict remains unchanged. Government cannot solve the Lao-Hmong crisis by force but negotiation.

All I can say as an eye witness and as an ex-political prisoner myself that the forced returnees will be persecuted undoubtedly. They will see forced labor, disappearance, no medical treatment, suffering, torture, starvation, gang rape and slow death inflicted on them.

Of course, Laotian government promises a decent living and safety to these returnees. Since Laotian government cannot take care of its public servants by not being capable to pay their salaries on a regular basis, how can it provide the necessary needs to the Lao-Hmong they consider as enemies? It's impossible.

The LPDR has continued to refuse any international oversight of humanitarian aid or human rights in Laos. They have also denied the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) from accessing the Lao-Hmong. Is there any way to assess what is happening to the Lao-Hmong now in Laos?

Refusing oversight does not make difference because the Laotian government orchestrates visits to refugee villages. If the authorities allow visits, they control what you see and hear. That's the way of conducting public affairs in any dictatorship. In Laos, the secret police accompany you wherever you go so that you cannot say anything to the refugees freely in the presence of the authorities.

To me, the best way to assess what is happening to the Lao-Hmong now in Laos is to have humanitarian independent agencies to carry out the task. UNHCR has full responsibility to take care of refugee issues, but I don't think it can implement its mission properly because it has no office in Vientiane. In addition, Laotian government has denied that there is a refugee problem in Laos!

The Lao-Hmong do not and cannot be, in the eyes of the Party, considered Lao citizens. How can they survive inside a country that will not recognize them as citizens?

The Party has made a big and historical mistake to treat Lao-Hmong like that. By wiping out Lao-Hmong, it can lead other Laotians to look down on Lao-Hmong. This attitude toward Lao-Hmong has been a long time in Laotian history. Do you know that the Party still calls Lao-Hmong by the word *Meo*, which was used under the old regime and was considered as pejorative by the revolutionaries? The Party has abolished the word *Meo* when it has overthrown the monarchy regime.

For most of us living in adopted countries, life is joy, opportunity of fulfillment of our dreams, and happiness, but for Lao-Hmong victims in Laos nothing but miseries and death await them. Let's organize to help our brother and sister Lao-Hmong, for that's what they are as fellow countrymen of Laos. Let's put our heads together for ideas and actions for a new relationship between Laotians and Lao-Hmong without ethnic discrimination.

The governments of Thailand and LPDR entered into the agreement months ago for the repatriation of the Lao-Hmong. Has Laos entered into such agreements with other countries? And do you agree with Thai government that says these refugees are economic refugees and not political refugees?

As far as I know, there are no other agreements with other countries regarding returning refugee issues. The word *economic refugee* is invented by governments of Thailand and Laos to disqualify Lao-Hmong the status of refugee. The so called economic refugees are actually political refugees because they escaped from economic and political oppression in Laos.

Before the unification, Germany did not distinguish the refugees between political refugees, economic refugees or religious refugees. Refugees are refugees, as long as they run away from tyranny of communism, they are refugees. In East Germany, whoever crossed the Berlin Wall were refugees, they had no need to be screened. So East Germany collapsed quickly. Lao-Hmong also crossed Mekong River, so they should be called political refugees.

Nowadays, the USA provides asylum to Cuban, Afghan, and Iraqi refugees. Is there distinction between who are considered political refugees and who are economic refugees?

Is the ethnic discrimination of the Lao-Hmong inside Laos a government policy and has it affected how Laotian citizens see the Hmong?

There is no official written document stating it, but in practice yes. The Party has organized in the past nationwide political seminars to brainwash Laotian citizens to dislike Lao-Hmong. The Party committed an enormous mistake and responsibility for the disunion of the nation, which would have an important implication on the people and have grave consequence in the long term.



The citizens of Laos are prevented from voicing any viewpoint or opposition to the LPDR. Without any means of freedom of expression, how does the population work within such oppression to voice any opinion?

They cannot. Speaking out your mind can be the cause of troubles in Laos. Remember, Laos is a very secretive country and is a police state. If Laotian citizens want to know what is going on in Laos, they have to go to Thailand, France or America to learn about the truth. Internet helps a lot to open people's eyes and ears despite that the government has blocked so-called "subversive" information. People are fed up with the repressive regime in Laos. They long for an open society.

So far, Laotian people have tried to voice their views by ways of demonstrating for getting rid of totalitarian communism, but they were suppressed right away, for example the "Student Movement of 26 October 1999" and a peaceful manifestation in November 2009 in Vientiane. I would say direct resistance to dictatorship is led by Lao-Hmong, and indirect resistance is led by Laotian people.

The LPDR has pushed for advanced technology in the country's communications, but is known to heavily monitor its citizens. Such advances play two ways in other countries like China and Iran. Do you think such technology can offer some hope for its citizens to realize their voice or will it become a way to push further oppression?

The internet itself is a very good tool for long distance instant communication, but it becomes a force in repressive regimes such as China, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Burma, Iran, and Cuba. The free flow of information and idea exchange has been perceived as a threat, rather than a blessing, by the governments of these countries. Laos is not an exception but in a smaller scale. The Laotian dictatorship has imposed censorship on Internet usage by monitoring, filtering, tracing and blocking data flows. Confined to a tailored and distorted cyberspace, innocent citizens face constant threats when they read, write or speak on the Internet, as their privacy is exposed under the Ministry of Public Security's watchful eyes.

I am glad to learn that in 2006 there is an Internet Users Consortium, which is an alliance of organizations that develops and deploys anti-censorship technologies for Internet users in repressive regimes. I hope strongly that Laos can benefit from these anti-censorship technologies and enable Internet users in Laos to securely visit websites blocked by the government, such as those of Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and other Laotian radio broadcasts in France and Australia.

How can people outside of Laos push for human rights in Laos?

That is a relevant good question! Exiled Laotian people yearn for peace and reject antagonism and division. We have no wish to return to the time of the Vietnam War era that ended 35 years ago. Promoting democratization is the primary goal in our hearts, and it is also the best path toward the peace.

For a long time, the exile democracy movement has never achieved genuine united action. Countries in the world want to support the exile democracy movement but do not know for sure with whom to talk. Tibet's exiled Dalai Lama is a natural leader, so is Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma. They get international attention and support more easily. Exile Laotian democracy movement has not recognized figure, and its forces are dispersed. This is what the Laotian communists want to see. Over the years the Laotian communists have spent a lot of manpower and financial resources to engage in the democracy movement slanders, and then mixed



Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo (left) and the Venerable Phom Phanthavong, a Buddhist monk at Buddhatham-Aram temple in Portland, Oregon. Both were imprisoned at Sop Hao, a political prisoner re-education camp near the Vietnamese border of Laos.

with the democracy movement to split the democracy movement, with an attempt to control democracy movement. Actually, we have several opposition groups scattered all over the world, such as in America, Europe, Canada, and Australia. This is to say it's not an easy task to coordinate the work for democracy and freedom in Laos.

We should unite all forces that can be united and fight for all possible allies, instead of blaming others and creating self-isolation. We must team up. We must put aside our egos. We must stand as one man. We must have a common organization. We must speak in one voice to the Laotian government, free democratic governments in the world, international organizations, and non-governmental organizations. We must clearly say that the democratic world has no interest to make economic cooperation with the authoritarian regime in Vientiane that oppresses its own people; that they must not sacrifice the principles of human rights and democracy for the sake of economic interests; that promotion of democracy, press freedom and the rule of law must be the priority in the democratic world policy toward communist Laos.

The fight for liberty and human rights has a long way to go and the road is arduous. But it's not impossible. The success can only be achieved by maintaining persistent advocacy for the values of human rights, rule of law, freedom of mass media, political pluralism, and promotion of an agenda to encourage this transformation.

I would like to take this opportunity to say to my Laotian fellow countrymen who seek a non-violent move to multi-party democracy: Keep going! We are on the right track and we have the power for change! The future belongs to us!

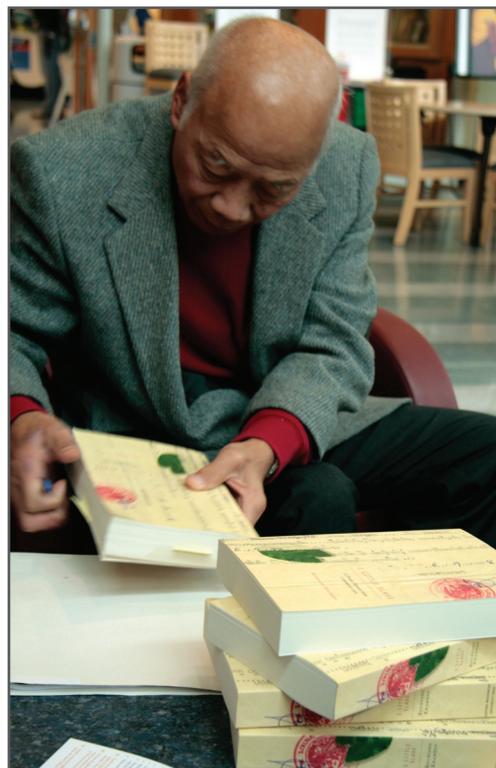
Let's talk about your book. Since its publication in 2006, did the government react to it?

No, how can the Party and the government deny the truth? This book reveals the corrupt, violent, and deceitful nature of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party, a memoir of my personal prison life experience and historical facts and account of wrongdoings during the past 35 years which the Party has tried hard to cover up. "I Little Slave" has been aired by Radio Free Asia, circulating underground in Laos, and the Party is fully aware of the threat, and has been scrambling to launch a low-profile crackdown of those who agree with my work. However, the Party never has tried to publicly condemn the book, knowing well that such actions would only greatly speed up interest, importance, circulation and support for me.

There is a Laotian saying that goes like this: "Like a bone is in your throat, you cannot swallow it down and you cannot vomit it out." The Party and the government are in an embarrassing situation.

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For more information about Dr. Khamkeo's work, check out the "Projects" section at *Foreign Interest* (www.foreigninterest.com). To be added to the project's email list, write to: projects@foreigninterest.com. Be sure to add "ILS Project" in the subject line of the email.



Dr. Bounsang Khamkeo prepares for a talk with students and faculty at Clark College, Vancouver, Wash., Dec. 2009.