

**Date:** 20 June 2006  
**AI Index:** ASA 39/008/2007

## **Thai authorities endanger asylum seekers' safety**

Over 160 Lao Hmong people were returned to their home country from Thailand on Saturday 9 June. They had sought asylum in Thailand, a number had only recently arrived from Laos.

One group of 48 who had recently arrived included 30 children. This group was held in police detention in the town of Lomsak and it has been reported that they were forced to sign a document accepting deportation.

Official Lao media reported that the group of 163 were "victims of human trafficking" and were handed over to Lao authorities in accordance with a bilateral agreement signed on 18 May 2007. Their current whereabouts are not known and there is concern that they, and others returned, are at risk of torture and other abuses in Laos.

Thailand provides temporary protection to hundreds of thousands of people who have fled persecution and conflict in neighbouring countries. While it is widely recognized that Thailand is fulfilling a humanitarian role, in cases such as these, the country is in breach of international human rights laws and standards.

The situation is further aggravated by the lack of access to Laos for international human rights organizations to monitor the well-being of returnees.

This most recent case is the second case of unlawful returns in less than a month. Concerns are growing that the Thai government may be changing its policies towards people who enter Thailand to seek asylum and protection from human rights violations.

These forcible returns highlight the serious situation of insecurity and uncertainty faced by other asylum seekers in Thailand, including up to 8,000 more Lao Hmong, all of whom are at risk. UNHCR has not been allowed access to this group to determine their protection needs. The Thai authorities have failed to introduce any fair and satisfactory procedure enabling individuals to seek asylum.

Thailand has an obligation under international law not to return any person, regardless of their status, to a situation in which they would face torture or other serious human rights violations.

### **Background**

#### **The Hmong in Laos**

Ethnic Hmong people arrived in Laos from south-eastern China in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century and settled as farmers in the mountainous north.

Today, the Hmong in Laos number over 450,000 people, constituting eight per cent of the population, making them the third largest ethnic group in the country after the Lao and the Khmou.

Groups of Hmong have faced persecution in Laos because they are connected with former rebel groups. These rebel groups were formed from an armed faction that fought with the US during the Vietnam War and its spill-over fighting in Laos.

### **The Lao Hmong in Thailand**

The total number of Lao Hmong seeking asylum in Thailand is unclear. Some 8,000 asylum seekers who have fled Laos live in the informal refugee settlement in Huay Nam Khao in Phetchabun province. Much smaller numbers live in other places across the country, notably in the border areas and the greater Bangkok region.

### **Related information**

- Thailand: Further information on fear of forcible return/arbitrary arrest  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA390072007>
- THAILAND 48 Lao Hmong asylum-seekers  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA390062007>  
The missing children of Laos
- <http://web.amnesty.org/pages/lao-220307-feature-eng>  
Laos: Destitute jungle-dwellers living on run from military
- <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA260042007>  
Lao People's Democratic Republic: Hiding in the jungle - Hmong under threat
- <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGASA260032007>