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Thailand Said to Use Force To Rebuff Laotian Refugees

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 18 — A United States Senator and refugee experts here expressed concern today over what appears to be a Thai Government decision to use force to turn back Laotian refugees — including many who once fought in the C.I.A.'s "secret army."

Reports in the Thai press in recent weeks have said that the Thai Government, in an effort to stem a rise in Laotian refugees, had refused since the beginning of the year to permit the Laotians to continue crossing the Mekong River into Thailand. There have been reports that Thai border troops have killed some of the Laotians.

Of prime concern to Senator Mark O. Hatfield, Republican of Oregon, and refugee specialists is the fate of the Hmong hill people, who were part of the clandestine army that fought the North Vietnamese for many years before the Central Intelligence Agency cut off funds between 1973 and 1975.

State Department officials said that there had been very little reporting from the embassy in Thailand on the situation on the Laotian border but that no officials questioned the accuracy of the Thai press reports.

'Grave Concern' Expressed

Senator Hatfield sent a letter to Secretary of State George P. Shultz today expressing "grave concern" after saying he was not satisfied with an earlier confidential exchange with the United States Ambassador to Thailand.

A similar view was expressed by Roger P. Winter, director of the United States Committee for Refugees, a non-governmental group, who said in an interview that since the beginning of January, "Thai officials have implemented comprehensive patrolling along the Mekong River to interdict newly arriving Lao."

Mr. Hatfield said in his letter: "For 10 years, under three U.S. administrations, we have been largely successful in insuring that there is refuge for fleeing Indochinese. And now the door seems to be quietly swinging shut on refugees from Laos."

Mr. Hatfield has had a particular interest in the plight of the Hmong, many of whom live in Oregon as refugees.

Thais Worried by Influx

The Thai Government has denied that it has instituted a policy of turning back all Laotian refugees, but has indicated that it is concerned about a large increase in the number of Laotians, including Hmong, who made their way in boats and rafts across the Mekong last year, State Department officials said. Last year, Thailand said nearly 20,000 Laotians, of whom about 25 percent were believed to be Hmong, arrived in Thailand, the officials said. The two-year total for 1982 and 1983 was about 4,000.

Thai newspapers, however, have reported that a basic policy shift was taken, Mr. Winter said.

He cited, for instance, a report in the Feb. 2 issue of The Bangkok Post. The article, datelined Nong Khai, a town on the Mekong River, said, "Hundreds of Hmong tribesmen fled across the Mekong River from Laos yesterday but were barred from landing by security forces stationed at Bung Kan District."

The article said that more than 300 of the hill people had been refused permission to land by the Thai border troops, and had returned to the Laotian side north of the Pakading River in the Paksane district of Vientiane, the Laotian capital.

Statement by Governor

"Governor Sakda Ophong told reporters at the scene that it was the Government's policy not to accept any more Laotian refugees," the paper said.

Another report, in The Bangkok World on Jan. 7, said that a meeting involving Prason Sunsiri, secretary general of the Thai National Security Council was held in early January and it was decided "to take stern action over the influx of Laotian refugees."

Mr. Hatfield said that "the apparent erosion of first asylum for refugees from Laos is a grave concern."

He said he had sent a telegram to John Gunther Dean, the United States Ambassador in Bangkok, and received a response on Jan. 21 that the United States would be working with Thai authorities "to insure that newly arriving refugees from Laos will have access to screening and that refugees in potential jeopardy will not be returned."

But he said that despite these assurances, reports of Laotians' being turned back persisted.

"I urgently request your intervention," Mr. Hatfield said to Mr. Shultz, "in obtaining from the embassy in Bangkok timely and accurate reporting on this life-threatening problem and what the United States is doing to moderate Thai policy."

Procedures Set for Refugees

Under long-established procedures, Thailand is supposed to accept all those seeking asylum, pending screening to determine if those crossing the borders are legitimate refugees fleeing persecution or retribution, or are simply migrants looking for better opportunities. If they fall into the refugee category, they would be eligible for emigration to the United States, while if migrants, they could be returned to Laos.

A problem, State Department officials said, is to determine who carries out the screening. The officials said they had asked the Thais to permit representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to carry out the interviewing, and that agency has expressed some interest in doing so.

A State Department official with long experience in refugee affairs said the Thais had voiced concern that the United States might close down its resettlement program, leaving Thailand with thousands of Indochinese — Vietnamese and Cambodians as well as Laotians — with no place to go.

This official said that although it was the official Administration policy to continue to admit about 50,000 Indochinese a year, the Coordinator for Refugee Affairs, H. Eugene Douglas, had reportedly told Thai officials that Washington's goal was to reduce the flow of refugees.

The problem of the Hmong is more complicated than those of the other refugees, State Department officials said. Because of difficulties encountered by many Hmong in adapting to American life — there are now about 60,000 Hmong in the United States — many of the Hmong in Laos have asked to stay in Thailand rather than emigrate here.

Of the 50,000 Laotians now in Thailand, some 30,000 are Hmong.