

U.S. anti-terror crackdown slams door on some Hmong

Anti-communist fighters who recently
fled Laos ineligible for asylum

A92.10

BY FREDERIC J. FROMMER

Associated Press

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Anti-terror laws aimed at keeping terrorists out of the United States have disqualified many Hmong refugees, the very people who only a few years ago received special recognition from Congress for their work as allies of U.S. troops during the Vietnam War.

Under provisions of the USA Patriot Act and the Real ID Act, the Hmong who remained to fight against Laos' communist regime in the decades after the Vietnam War are considered terrorists because of their guerrilla activities and therefore are ineligible for future asylum or green cards.

Ironically, in 2000 Congress passed a law easing the citizenship requirements for the Hmong in recognition of their efforts fighting alongside Americans during the Vietnam-era conflict in Laos, known as the "secret war."

DFL state Sen. Mee Moua, of St. Paul — where more Hmong reside than in any other U.S. city —

HMONG REFUGEES, 6A

Hmong refugees

(continued)

said the restrictions for now focus on Hmong soldiers who remained in Laos after 1975 to continue fighting but recently have begun to give up their resistance because of a government crackdown on the ethnic minority.

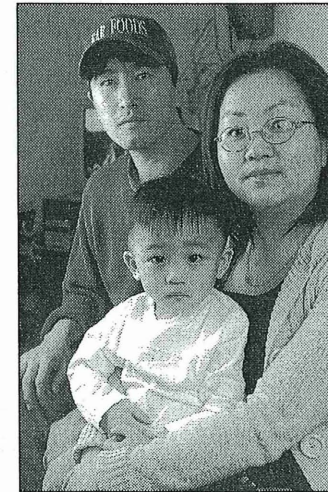
"That group is part of the collateral damage of the Bush administration's war on terror," Mee Moua said.

Melanie Nezer, an attorney for the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society who is coordinating a working group aimed at changing the laws, said: "Clearly, it's absurd that people who fought with us — people who have received special exemptions from the law precisely for that conduct — should be barred from coming to the U.S. as refugees as a result of that conduct."

Hmong refugees began arriving in the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. There were about 170,000 in the United States as of the 2000 U.S. census — including 41,800 in Minnesota, with 24,400 in St. Paul.

A later wave of 15,000 settled in the United States in 2005 — and that group was required to prove they were part of the original group that left Laos in the 1970s in order to gain U.S. entry, Mee Moua said.

The current debate appears to center on a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand's Phetchabun province. The camp houses some 6,000 Hmong refugees from Laos, who largely left the country in the years after the 1970s — par-



MIKE ROEMER, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Chou Vang, of Menasha, Wis., with his wife Xee and their 1-year-old son Yeeb Thaj Yaj. His brother, who is in a detention center in Thailand, fought alongside U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, then fled to the Laotian jungles to escape persecution.

ticularly since 2004, according to Amnesty International statistics.

"The Laos government reportedly has begun to crack down very harshly. Many of these groups are now forced, basically by starvation, to come out of jungles into the cities," Mee Moua said.

Neither Mee Moua nor state Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, said they have received any calls from local Hmong who may have overseas family members affected by the provisions.

Philip Smith, the Washington, D.C., director of Lao Veterans of America, a Hmong advocacy group, said the restrictions prevent Hmong refugees from coming to the United States. In addition, he said, the restrictions make it difficult for those

who are already here to obtain green cards, which establish permanent residency.

"Thousands of Hmong veterans and family members are threatened with potential deportation down the road," he said. "And there is a clear and present danger they cannot be naturalized in a timely manner."

Mee Moua also expressed concern over what questions might be posed to Hmong immigrants if they decide to apply for U.S. citizenship.

"Will they be asked the question (about whether they fought against the Laotian government)?" she said.

The anti-terrorism restrictions, which have ensnared other groups as well, also bar people who provided "material support" to terrorist organizations. Last month, the Bush administration announced it was granting waivers of that restriction to eight groups, but the Hmong were not among them.

In Thailand, 153 Hmong refugees have been in limbo as they await resettlement from an immigration detention center in the northern town of Nong Khai. A few weeks ago, the Thai government aborted plans to send the Hmong back to neighboring Laos, after the men in the group resisted and U.N. and U.S. officials expressed concern about the planned deportation. The Netherlands recently agreed to take 22 of the Hmong.

Xee Vang, of Menasha, Wis., said her brother-in-law, his wife and their eight children are among those at the detention center. Xee Vang said her brother-in-law, whom she declined to identify by name, had fought alongside Americans during the Vietnam War, then fled to the jungle.

"It's very emotionally drain-

ing and frightening to hear about him and his family," said Xee Vang, who spoke on behalf of herself and her husband, Chou Vang. "My husband is taking it very hard."

She said they have given up hope that their relatives will be able to come to the United States.

Paul Rosenzweig, the Department of Homeland Security's acting assistant secretary for international affairs, said most Hmong families have members who actually took up arms and so would not be eligible for the material support waiver. He said the Bush administration is working on legislation to ease the restriction on the Hmong and other groups, which it will propose to Congress.

Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, the Wisconsin Republican who was a main driving force behind both the Patriot Act of 2001 and the Real ID Act — passed four years later to set a national standard for driver's licenses — as chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, declined an interview request. Through a spokesman, he said: "The laws are fine. If the Department of Justice and other agencies are overstepping their bounds, then the courts will stop them."

Last year, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., unsuccessfully tried to get an appropriations bill amended to change the restrictions. Coleman said he would continue to seek a legislative fix.

"Hmong refugees, who dedicated their service to America during the Vietnam War, have looked to the U.S. as a place of hope and a sanctuary from persecution," he said in a statement.

Tad Vezner contributed to this report.

Hmong hopes for Laos fall to pieces

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Vang Pao charges
halt refugees' quest
to return to home

BY LAURA YUEN, JOHN
BREWER and TIM NELSON

Pioneer Press

6-6-07

Even as the dream grew more distant with each passing decade, many of Vang Pao's aging followers clung to the hope of returning to their native Laos.

But federal charges accusing the Hmong leader and nine other



**Gen. Vang
Pao**

California men of trying to realize that dream through violence is crushing long-held aspirations.

A group of first-generation Hmong refugees still yearns for a democratic Laos, even though the Southeast Asian nation has been a bastion of communism ever since Vang Pao fled the mountains there 30 years ago.

The U.S. government's prosecution of the Hmong-American leader, who has been behind bars in a Sacramento, Calif., jail since Monday, "is the end of a chapter," said Doug Hartwick, a former U.S. ambassador to Laos.

Regardless of Vang Pao's guilt or innocence, "it's tragic, it's sad, it's the end of a story for people from Laos who suffered a lot," Hartwick said. "But (a violent coup) is simply not acceptable."

Gen. Vang Pao, 77, was among 10 men charged this week with plotting to overthrow the government in Laos. The former Royal Lao Army commander made his initial appearance in federal court Tuesday.

Vang Pao

(continued)

Private defense attorney John Balazs of Sacramento was appointed by the court to represent the general.

"He's 77 years old, he's had a heart attack, he's diabetic — I think he's doing as well as he can under the circumstances," Balazs said. "But the jail's not a good place for someone who's elderly and in poor health."

A detention hearing is scheduled for Monday, Balazs said.

In Minnesota, former U.S. Attorney Tom Heffelfinger, now in private practice, said that Steve Young — former Hamline University law school dean and longtime adviser to Vang Pao — approached him on behalf of the state's Hmong community to weigh Vang Pao's legal options.

"I was asked to assist them in making certain that Vang Pao gets a lawyer of his choice," said Heffelfinger, who added that he does not personally know the general. "These are very serious charges he is facing."

Heffelfinger also would not discuss whether he might ultimately represent Vang Pao.

"Right, now, at this point, that would be just speculation," Heffelfinger said.

Balazs released a statement about the general Tuesday that highlighted Vang Pao's contributions to the Hmong community in the United States as well as his contributions to U.S. efforts in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam War era.

"It is well-documented that, with his leadership, Hmong forces rescued downed U.S. pilots and provided crucial support for the U.S. military in its war in Vietnam," the statement read. "In short, he stands for peace — not violence."

A LONG STRUGGLE

Vang Pao, who splits his time between homes in the Twin Cities and Southern California, was in St. Paul as recently as two weekends ago to watch a veterans' soccer tournament, said Chu Wu, a community activist leading efforts to build a

Hmong war memorial near the state Capitol.

Despite reports suggesting the general is frail, Chu Wu described Vang Pao as appearing "normal" but quiet. The two met to discuss updates on the memorial project.

News of the U.S. government's charges against Vang Pao will sadden Hmong elders, especially war veterans who assisted Americans in the fight against communists in Southeast Asia, Chu Wu said.

"A lot of the elders, I always heard that was their Number 1 request — to go home," Chu Wu said. "Now, many of them will continue living in this country, probably until they die."

In the opening decade of the Cold War, the ethnic minority Hmong fought to defend their adopted homes in the Laotian highlands, eventually battling the dominant Communist Pathet Lao forces and their North Vietnamese allies. Aided by the CIA and other U.S. agents in the early 1960s, Vang Pao and his Hmong army fought a "secret war" that in some respects came to rival the armed struggle in neighboring Vietnam.

Hmong resistance in Laos collapsed in 1975 when the United States ended its military involvement in the region. Vang Pao fled Laos with many of his followers, who eventually resettled in the United States. Their settlement was a gesture of American appreciation for their efforts.

Maykao Fredericks, 32, of Eden Prairie, sympathizes with the Hmong in this country who hold out hope of returning to their homeland. Some elders never assimilated to American culture, having arriving in this country traumatized by war and believing they were too old to find good jobs or earn college degrees.

"We're talking about a generation lost in history," said Fredericks, a Hmong-American woman who arrived in the United States at age 1.

Some supported Vang Pao's cause with their pocketbooks. Leaders within his Neo Hom resistance group sought money from Hmong-American refugee families, many of them impoverished and "desperately lost in

this new place," said Hartwick, the former ambassador.

"You tend to look at the old clan and military leaders. When they tell you to do things, you just do it," Hartwick said. "Over the years, that network started to break down. Maybe the father or the mother tended to donate, and when it came to the son, he would say, 'Why would I do that? I don't have money to do that.' The communities got smarter."

Federal prosecutors declined to comment on whether any of the money for the alleged \$9.8 million plan to purchase weapons and take over the Lao government came from Minnesota. Hartwick said he would be "very surprised" if it were not the case, given the Twin Cities' large and long-standing Hmong-American population.

The general's waning credibility, as well as legal concerns about money raised for organizations associated with him, gave Hartwick hope that the violent insurgency would eventually peter out.

When he met with Vang Pao a few years ago, the general professed that he had no desire to topple the Lao government. As ambassador from 2001 to 2004, Hartwick warned Hmong-American communities not to support violent efforts here and abroad to undermine the government of Laos.

"In the post-9/11 world, it was something very akin to terrorism," Hartwick said.

Ellen Endrizzi, an assistant U.S. attorney working on the Vang Pao case, said a fellow prosecutor's statements Monday about "thousands of co-conspirators" was likely in reference to the thousands of insurgents mentioned by defendants in the criminal complaint as well as donors involved in the planned coup.

"If you're giving money for the purchase of weapons, then you're a co-conspirator in the sense that that's illegal," she said. "Are we going to indict 1,000 people? Of course not."

GENERATIONS DIVIDED

The plot to overthrow the communist regime in Laos

was anything but a secret, said Tou Pho Lee, a former Hmong guerrilla fighter who once battled Pathet Lao forces in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

"We have talked about taking our country back for many years," Tou Pho Lee said. "Every year, General Vang Pao comes and talks about taking our country back. It's not new. We have talked about it openly."

A native of Laos who fled the country in 1980, the Minneapolis machinist said he felt the United States is betraying the Hmong after decades of encouraging them to fight the communist forces running the country.

That sense of shock and betrayal runs deep in some older circles within the Hmong-American community, said state Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul.

"If you are my father's generation, I think you will feel the irony," he said. "Thirty years ago, you guys risked your lives to save America, and 30 years later, they are going after you."

Some Hmong-American community members worry that the prosecution could signal trouble for Hmong rebel groups fighting to survive in Laos.

"This will give the Lao government more authority and power to go after the former military that served under the CIA," Chu Wu said.

To the majority of Hmong-Americans, though, the goal was to stay in the United States and contribute to this country, said Maykao Hang, a director with the Ramsey County Human Services Department.

"I don't see how this will impact me and my life, quite frankly," she said. "There's always been a group of older people in the community who have had this dream of returning to Laos, but for those who have resettled into the United States, it was really to find a better life, and to go to a country where you could become somebody."

Rubén Rosario contributed to this report.

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POLITICAL

A LOOK BACK ON THE LEGISLATIVE SESSION: AN INTERVIEW WITH REPRESENTATIVE CY THAO



✓ Rep. Cy Thao

HMONG TIMES Staff Writer

The Minnesota State legislative session ended on Monday, May 21, 2007 at the last possible hour to avoid a special session. HMONG TIMES sat down with State Representative Cy Thao to discuss his reaction and thoughts on this past session.

HT: What were some of the positive outcomes from this session?

CT: During this session, we increased healthcare coverage for 30,000 uninsured low-income and working people. These are people who do not make enough money to provide their own healthcare.

We increased funding for St. Paul public schools by a little over 5%. This funding will help the district to provide programs for their students.

We allocated \$75,000 to the Center for Hmong Studies at Concordia University for archival documentation and preservation.

We granted \$6 million for after-school programs for at-risk youth. Non-profits are eligible to apply for these grants, which of course, include the Hmong non-profit agencies.

The State allocated money to fight teen prostitution by providing funds for sting operations to go after people who use young girls for prostitution.



Another bill that I passed this year was to allow people to use crossbows during the firearms season for deer hunting. Right now, you need to be handicapped and/or need a doctor's waiver to use a crossbow, but with my law, anybody can use the crossbow. If you want to use it during the archery season, which starts in September, you will have to get a doctor's permission. However, if you do not have a disability, you can use a crossbow.

HT: What were some bills that you would have liked to pass that did not pass?

CT: Well, one of the many disappointments was the lack of funding for local government aid, where a majority of the funding goes towards police and fire departments. For example, the City of St. Paul received a significant budget cut, which contributes to the City's budget deficit of \$16 million. This will have a ripple effect where the City will have to make two choices, 1) cut programs, or 2) raise property taxes to pay for programs, and to pay for police and fire. Everything that we do at the State level has a ripple effect to local government.

Also, for the new Hmong refugees, many of the kids still want to continue school. In Minnesota by the time you reach the age of 21, you cannot attend a high school anymore, so you have to go to an Adult Literacy program, whether you finish high school or not, you have to finish school there. I worked with other Representatives to increase the age to 25, so these Hmong kids

from the refugee camp can stay at the high school they are used to, and graduate with their high school diploma. This would have applied to the entire State, not just in St. Paul, but it cost a little bit too much so we were unable to pass this bill. This would have positively affected the Hmong community.

HT: What do you foresee for the next session?

CT: The next big piece is the money for the light rail transit on University Avenue, the Central Corridor. Next year, we will discuss how much and at what level the State is going to pay. The State has already put a lot of engineering money into the project, so next year we will talk about the Central Corridor.

Second, the bonding bill, because this where the State invests money to build State infrastructure, State office buildings, parks, road construction, etc. All of this will be discussed next year.

Finally, it looks like we will talk about funding for the Vikings stadium.

HT: Is there anything in particular for the Hmong community that you want to focus on?

CT: Really next year, the big project that is going to impact the Hmong community is the Central Corridor, because it comes right down University Avenue, where there are a lot of Hmong businesses. There is an interest to make sure that during the construction, the businesses will still be able to stay open, and survive during and after construction.

FORUM

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Smoking ban called a 'huge change for health'

By Don Davis

ddavis@forumcomm.com

ST. PAUL — A statewide smoking ban likely to take effect Oct. 1 is one of the biggest health advances in Minnesota history, its main sponsor said moments after representatives passed it early Saturday.

Its only rival is the original clean air act that drastically limited smoking in 1975, Rep. Tom Huntley, DFL-Duluth, said.

"This is a huge change for health in the state," he added.

The House passed the measure 81-48 at 1 a.m. after two hours of debate. Senators passed it 43-21 nearly 12 hours earlier.

The bill now goes to Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who said he expects to sign it.

It was a compromise drawn from earlier proposals the House and Senate passed. It bans smoking in nearly every public place — including bars, restaurants and bingo halls — with a few mostly minor exceptions.

Much of the House debate centered on a provision in the bill representatives earlier had passed allowing smoking rooms in bars. House and Senate negotiators dropped it over the objection of many lawmakers.

"I sure wouldn't want you to be in a fight backing me up," Rep. Tom Rukavina, DFL-Virginia, said to Huntley, the lead House negotiator.

Rep. Loren Solberg, DFL-Grand Rapids, told his col-

leagues that he doesn't have to go into a bar if it is smoky.

"I vote with my feet," Solberg said.

But Rep. Dennis Ozment, R-Rosemount, was much more emotional, calling the bill "tyranny, oppressive governmental power."

"This piece of legislation turned out to be just plain mean," the normally calm Ozment said during a fiery speech.

Rep. Al Juhnke, DFL-Willmar, complained that a provision negotiators added runs counter to consistency most sought in a statewide ban.

The new provision allows — but does not require — local governments to ban smoking outside bars, restaurants and bingo halls. That returns to the present patchwork system of smoking control, Juhnke said.

Huntley said he has no plans to extend the ban to parks or other outside areas. He said he is ready to move on to the next big health issue — obesity.

Ban supporters argued since they introduced the bill early this legislative session that it was all about protecting workers from secondhand smoke.

"To say this is about workers is absolutely not true," Rukavina told supporters. "What this is about ... is your individual bias and prejudice about smoking."

However, Huntley said the measure should help reduce the 580 yearly deaths from secondhand smoke.

Rep. Bud Heidgerken, R-Freeport, argued that the

vote would hurt small bars throughout rural Minnesota.

"You are going to vote them out of business tonight," Heidgerken told fellow representatives.

He also warned that a drop in bar business will mean fewer dollars going into charitable gambling such as pull tabs, which will hurt local fire departments, ambulance services, softball teams and other nonprofit groups that benefit from such games.

"The economic impact to them is going to be immense," Heidgerken said.

Huntley said experience shows bars probably will experience a drop in business right after the ban takes effect Oct. 1, but most should rebound. However, he said, some probably will go out of business.

Once Pawlenty signs the bill, expected early this week, Minnesota will become the 20th state to have such a law.

"It gets Minnesota back to other states that are leading," Huntley said. "It will improve people's health."

When Huntley left the House chamber after the lawmakers adjourned, he was greeted by applause from health-oriented lobbyists who stayed into the wee hours of Saturday to watch debate.

Also to help Huntley celebrate, Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, gave him a cigar. It went unsmoked.



ALBERT LEA TRIBUNE

x 18

Rep. Brown endorses Al Franken

By Sarah Light
staff writer

The Al Franken for Senate campaign announced earlier this week that Minnesota's state auditor and 19 other state legislators — including District 27A Rep. Brown Brown — have endorsed Franken's candidacy.

"I think he's a very strong candidate who's been involved politically for many years," Brown said of her reason for the endorsement. "He's very well read, he thinks quick on his feet, and I just think he has a place in his heart for Minnesota. He will do a real nice job for us."

Besides being well known, the comedian and writer understands politics well, Brown said. He has watched the demographics and trends both on a state and national level for years.

In February, Franken announced his plans to run for the U.S. Senate seat against Republican Sen. Norm Coleman in the 2008 election. He will be one of the Democratic candidates vying for the position.

His legislative supporters shared their reasons for their endorsements, which included Franken's "intelligence, integrity and wit," and other characteristics such as his knowledge and conviction to make important decisions about tough issues.

"Most people know Al as a popular satirist, but I'm supporting him because he knows the issues and will be our best advocate for universal health care, renewable energy and education," said Sen. Sharon Erickson-Ropes, DFL-Winona, in a press release. "Al may be a funny guy, but the state of our nation and of our politics is no joke, and Al's the man for



Robin Brown
the job."



Al Franken

✓ Rep. Larry Haws, DFL-St. Cloud, said he is supporting Franken because he thinks the comedian has the courage "to fight the good fight."

"Al has the wisdom to guide our country in the right direction, the passion to stand up for Minnesota families and a sense of humor that will help him put up with the politics necessary to create a better America," Haws said.

Minnesota State Auditor Rebecca Otto added that after spending the last year with Franken on the campaign trail, she knows he would never be afraid to vote his convictions in Washington.

"Al will always value principle over politics," Otto said.

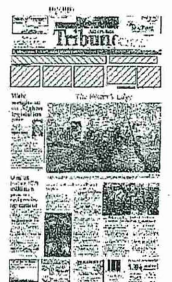
In response to the endorsements, Franken said he was thrilled to have the support, "not only because I know we'll work together to beat Norm Coleman and keep Minnesota blue in

2008, but because I'll be able to rely on their experience, their advice and their unique talents."

The list of legislative endorsements included nine members of the Minnesota Senate and 10 members of

the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Those who gave endorsements are as follows: Sen. ✓ Sandy Pappas, DFL-St. Paul; Sen. Don Betzold, DFL-Fridley; Sen. Steve ✓ Murphy, DFL-Red Wing; ✓ Sen. Jim Carlson, DFL-Eagan; Sen. John Doll, DFL-Burnsville; Sen. Sharon Erickson Ropes, DFL-Winona; Sen. Tony Lourey, DFL-Kerrick; Sen. Rick ✓ Olseen, DFL-Harris; Sen. ✓ Dan Skogen, DFL-Hewitt; ✓ Rep. Mike Jaros, DFL-Duluth; Rep. Bernie Lieder, DFL-Crookston; Rep. John ✓ Lesch, DFL-St. Paul; Rep. ✓ Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul; Rep. ✓ Larry Haws, DFL-St. Cloud; ✓ Rep. John Benson, DFL-Minnetonka; Rep. Robin Brown, DFL-Austin; Rep. ✓ Tim Faust, DFL-Mora; Rep. ✓ Scott Kranz, DFL-Blaine; ✓ and Rep. Kim Norton, DFL-Rochester





Revered Hmong leader charged in Laos plot

pp 6.5.07

Gen. Vang Pao, a legendary figure to many Hmong Minnesotans, and 8 others are accused of planning to overthrow the communist government of Laos. The general, who has strong Minnesota ties, battled for control of Laos for most of his life. The federal government says the group sought nearly \$10 million worth of military equipment for an attack they hoped would rival 9/11.



SCOTT TAKUSHI, PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

Gen. Vang Pao, longtime leader of the Hmong people, spoke at a gathering at Lao Family Community in St. Paul in May 2004. His son Cha Vang translated. Vang Pao, now 77, has close ties to Minnesota, where he has been a leading figure in the state's Hmong community.

BY TIM NELSON, LAURA YUEN,
JOHN BREWER and TAD VEZNER
Pioneer Press

The patriarch of the Hmong struggle for ethnic independence has been indicted, accused of trying to overthrow the communist government of Laos, 30 years after he fled the mountains there in defeat.

Vang Pao, 77, has close ties to Minnesota, where he has been a leading figure in the state's Hmong community, one of the largest in the world outside of Southeast Asia. One of his sons, Cha Vang, served in 1999 and 2000 as a staff member for St. Paul's then-mayor, Norm Coleman.

Vang Pao was one of nine men charged Monday in federal court with leading the plot, which allegedly included a retired California National Guard officer and thousands of co-conspirators, many in Laos, according to Assistant U.S. Attorney Bob Twiss in Sacramento, Calif. However, prosecutors said they believe all the plot's leaders are in custody.

It isn't clear what role any Minnesotans might have played in the alleged scheme, though one of the accused conspirators traveled to the Twin Cities and met with a Midwestern friend to discuss the plan, according to the 90-page criminal complaint.

The group — most of them prominent members of the Hmong community from California's Central Valley — allegedly was trying to buy up to \$9.8 million worth of military equipment, including machine guns, ammunition, grenade launchers, anti-tank rockets, Stinger anti-aircraft missiles, mines and C-4 explosives for use in an attack on the Laotian capital that would "look like the attack on the



PIONEER PRESS FILE PHOTO

ABOVE: Vang Pao, right, was interviewed in November 2003 at the Prom Center in Oakdale after declaring he was ending military efforts to reclaim Laos.



TIME LIFE PICTURES VIA GETTY

LEFT: In 1961, Vang Pao was a lieutenant colonel of Laotian troops in the Pa Dong area. From 1961 to 1973, Vang Pao led the resistance against the Laotian and Vietnamese communists in a war funded and supplied by the United States through the CIA.

THE CHARGES

Nine California men, including Hmong leader Vang Pao, are charged in U.S. District Court in Sacramento, Calif., with violating the Neutrality Act by preparing, providing money for and taking part in a military enterprise against the "foreign and sovereign nation of Laos, with which the United States is at peace."

The men allegedly were trying to buy \$9.8 million worth of military equipment, including machine guns, grenade launchers, anti-tank rockets, Stinger missiles, mines and C-4 explosives.

If convicted, the defendants face the possibility of life in prison.

PAGE 4A

Gen. Vang Pao: The longtime anti-communist soldier connected Hmong troops with U.S. weapons and supplies.

War in Laos: Fearing Laos would be the first "domino" in the spread of communism, the U.S. financed a yearslong "secret war."

ONLINE

The case: Read the accusations against Gen. Vang Pao and his alleged co-conspirators at twincities.com.

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Vang Pao

(continued)

World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001," the complaint said.

The conspirators had allegedly inspected sample weapons, including a Stinger missile, at a Hilton hotel in Sacramento. The first major shipment was reportedly due for delivery in Thailand on June 18.

The alleged mastermind of the operation, Vang Pao has battled for control of Laos for much of his life.

In the opening decade of the Cold War, the Hmong — an ethnic minority — fought to defend their adopted homes in the Laotian highlands, eventually battling the dominant Communist Pathet Lao and their North Vietnamese allies. Aided by the CIA and other U.S. agents in the early 1960s, Vang Pao and his Hmong army fought a "secret war" that in some respects came to rival the armed struggle in neighboring Vietnam.

Hmong resistance in Laos collapsed in 1975 when the United States ended its military involvement in Southeast Asia. Vang Pao fled Laos with many of his followers who eventually resettled in the United States, a gesture of American appreciation for their help trying to stem communism in the region.

Thousands of other Hmong simply melted into secret camps in the Laotian countryside or settled in refugee camps in Thailand.

But many never gave up the struggle. The Laotian government held Hmong fighters responsible for bombings in the capital, Vientiane, as recently as 2000 and for guerrilla activity in 2003. Vang Pao and his closest followers were long suspected by Laotian officials of encouraging the resistance.

But on Monday, some St. Paul Hmong leaders expressed shock at the U.S. government's allegations. State Sen. Mee Moua, DFL-St. Paul, said she never had the impression Vang Pao backed a violent overthrow of the Laotian government.

"I don't think he's alone in having publicly made the wishful statement of wanting to go home again ... but I don't think that any particular strategy was articulated," she said. "Frankly, as a young person, I always took that as a wishful yearning."

Mee Moua said she wants to hear more about the U.S. government's allegations before deciding where she stands on the issue.

"I guarantee the (Hmong) community's reaction is like mine: We want to know more," she said. "I know that this is a man with a lot of family members in Minnesota. ... Many of them still recognize him as their leader."



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The criminal complaint alleged Vang Pao and the other Hmong defendants formed a committee "to evaluate the feasibility of conducting a military expedition or enterprise to engage in the overthrow of the existing government of Laos by violent means."

The committee acted through the Lao liberation movement known as Neo Hom, led in the United States by Vang Pao. It conducted extensive fundraising, and organized a 5,000-strong force of insurgent troops within Laos, according to the complaint.

As recently as May, people acting on behalf of the committee were gathering intelligence about military installations and government buildings in Vientiane, according to prosecutors.

Retired California National Guard Lt. Col. Harrison Jack, a 1968 West Point graduate who was involved in covert operations during the Vietnam War, was described as a leader of the group and the arms broker for the effort.

The arrests came after a six-month investigation by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. An undercover agent posing as a weapons broker met with Vang Pao and others, with Jack acting as an intermediary between the Hmong community and the agent, prosecutors said.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Kimberly J. Mueller ordered the nine defendants to be held in custody Monday until separate hearings later this week. All are charged with violating the federal Neutrality Act and face the possibility of life in prison. Another suspect was arrested later Monday in California.

According to tapped telephone conversations outlined in

the complaint, one of the nine defendants — a man named Lo Cha Thao — met with a friend in the Twin Cities and talked about the plan in early May. Lo Cha Thao, of Clovis, Calif., was formerly an aide to "a former Wisconsin state senator," according to the complaint.

A man named Locha Thao was once a paid staffer for Wisconsin state Sen. Gary George, D-Milwaukee.

According to the complaint, Lo Cha Thao said the group's budget "consisted of contributions from community members through the clan leadership." By March 30, 2007, the group had allegedly gathered less than \$100,000.

The attorneys for Vang Pao and Jack had no immediate comment after Monday's court proceeding.

But an attorney for Lo Cha Thao questioned whether undercover federal agents prodded the defendants along.

"We have to make sure this isn't a case of government informants being proactive and pushing people from thoughts to action," said the attorney, Mark Reichel.

Chi Vang, Gen. Vang Pao's 22-year-old son, said his father's arrest shocked their family and members of the Hmong community, who had been calling the family's home in suburban Los Angeles all day.

"The community already knows the truth about him — this is just an accusation," said Chi Vang, who was trying to find a lawyer for his father.

Although the general in the Royal Army of Laos declared at a 2003 conference in Oakdale that he was ending military efforts to reclaim Laos, the prospect of leaving their adopted homes in the United States and returning to Laos, under any circumstance, has long been a matter of concern to the Hmong in America.

Many older Hmong revere Vang Pao, but their children and grandchildren often puzzle over the power he holds, said Va-Megn Thoj, a Hmong activist who now works for St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman, but spoke only on his own behalf. "(Vang Pao) was sort of untouchable. He could pretty much do whatever he wanted."

That authority, however, has been waning, said Va-Megn Thoj.

"The younger generation is

ambivalent about Vang Pao. It would be their parents or grandparents who would give money. The younger generation would say, 'Why would you give money to someone who can't do anything for you?'"

Steve Schofield, a civilian medic in Laos from 1969 to 1975, also has worked closely with the Hmong during the past 15 years in Sheboygan, Wis. He said that he's had plenty of conversations about Vang Pao and his impact on the Hmong community.

"When he first came over here, he told his people not to learn English, don't buy a house, because we're going back to Laos," he said. "I think that's a terrible thing, because it set the Hmong back so many years."

Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, expressed shock at the allegations.

"My impression was that people are moving on, and if there was to be an overthrow of the government, it was going to be a peaceful one. Not in my wildest dreams would I think it would get to this point," he said.

"Even if it's true, no one really knows where they stand with the U.S. government. One day you're their friend, and the next day you're not," he added.

Cy Thao made his observations about the Vang Pao case in light of recent changes in immigration law.

Under the USA Patriot Act and the REAL ID Act, Hmong who stayed behind to fight against Laos' communist government after the Vietnam War are now considered terrorists because of their guerrilla activities, and thus are prevented from receiving asylum or green cards in the United States.

Yet, in 2000, Congress passed a law easing citizenship requirements for Hmong refugees because many fought alongside U.S. operatives in Laos.

"It's the same kind of policy, where they say, 'OK, 30 years ago we need you to fight for us,' and now, 30 years later, 'We don't need you,'" Cy Thao said.

The Associated Press, San Jose Mercury News and Los Angeles Times contributed to this report.

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COMMUNITY

AN INTERVIEW WITH MINNESOTA STATE REPRESENTATIVE CY THAO ON THE SMOKING BAN

By Pong Xiong

In the interest of the health of the Hmong community, Pong Xiong discussed with Rep. Cy Thao, the problem of smoking and the possible legislative action to curtail the use of tobacco.

Pong Xiong: For the record which area do you represent and for how long have you represented that area?

Representative Cy Thao: This is my 3rd term, my 5th year. I represent 65A, house district 65A. We have the North End Neighborhood, Frogtown, Summit and University Avenue neighborhood.

Xiong: Besides working at the legislature, what else do you do?

Thao: My wife and I, we have a small healthcare business. We have several assisted living facilities. I build them, and then my wife runs them.

Xiong: What do you guys do?

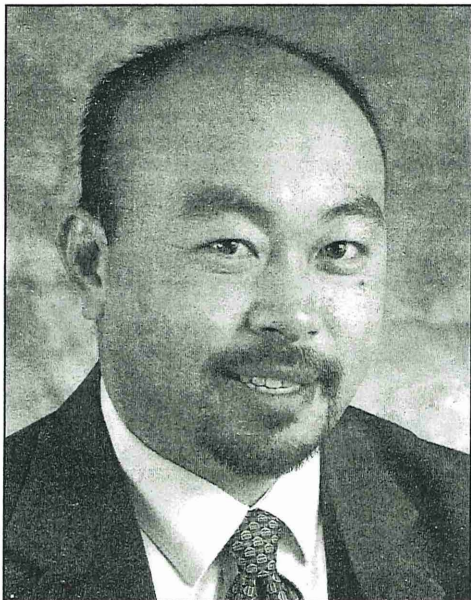
Thao: We take care of elderly individuals that really have no where else to go.

Xiong: You were born in Laos and a refugee to the United States, how has this experienced shaped you as a House Representative?

Thao: I sit on the Health Human Service Committee for a reason. When we came here both my parents had to relearn everything, and they used a lot of programs that go through the Health and Human Service Committee; welfare, work/job training or the ABE (Adult Basic Education) to name a few. They went through all those programs, and now because of that, they are able to find decent jobs, and get healthcare through Minnesota Care. I was the guy who applied for the family get healthcare while my parents went to work. So I specifically got on the Health and Human Service Committee to work on these issues because I saw the importance of making sure that we have a system in place to help the those who are poor and are working hard to feed their family. To make sure that there are programs to help them get out of poverty.

Xiong: As a leader in the Hmong community, how do you think the Hmong community deals with tobacco and exposure?

Thao: It's frowned upon to smoke. But the last several years, there's seems to be an increase in the young people picking up smoking. At the same time smoking is frowned upon in our community, we use tobacco



Official Photo on Cy Thao's Website

Minnesota Representative Cy Thao

in the wedding ceremony. It's more of a gesture, than really saying that we endorse people smoking. But overall, I think that there are less people in our community smoking.

Xiong: Do you think that tobacco is more of a problem now, then back in the 'old' country?

Thao: I think it's more of a problem now because people have money. And they're willing to use that extra money to buy cigarettes. The tobacco that they used back in the old country, was just tobacco that didn't have any nicotine in it. The tobacco in this country is full of chemicals, especially nicotine. A drug that is used to get people addicted, so it's hard to get people to quit because they are addicted to the nicotine.

Xiong: Do you feel the tobacco industry has targeted the Hmong community, and if so what can we do about it?

Thao: I don't think they have targeted any racial group, I haven't seen any report on that. But I know that for a long time they have targeted young people by using cartoons and icons that young people gravitate towards. It makes sense for them to hook people early so that they'll be hooked for the rest of their lives. It's important that [health advocates] continue to do [their] work to let people know and understand the health risk in tobacco. It costs the state tremendous amounts of dollars for lung cancer and what have you. It's important to let people know there are other alternatives; you don't have to spend 15 minutes smoking. You can spend 15 minutes getting to know a friend or

hang out with somebody. I think it's important that all of us, not just [health advocates], do our work in educating the youth about the dangers of tobacco use

Xiong: Currently there's a smoke-free bill that if passed would ban smoking in all work places in Minnesota. What was your initial reaction to that and how has that changed?

Thao: Last night the full smoking ban in bars and restaurants was passed in the Senate. This proposal in the house is still going through the committee process. I know that eventually there will be a smoking ban in all restaurants and bars. I think the question is when. So as a policy maker, you have to see that. I know that some of us, including myself, wanted to exempt the bars. As I look at it, because eventually there will be a total ban in bars and restaurants, is it fair to ask our bars, especially the small bars to build ventilation and invest money? And then two years later come back and ban all that. That has to be worked out, hopefully a smoking ban whether it has bar exemption or not, will come to the floor and on that day I will vote for a smoking ban.

Xiong: What was the reason why you wanted to exempt bars in the beginning?

Thao: Myself, I don't go to a lot of bars. But no one likes being told what to do. I have friends who go to the bar, usually when they go, they go to smoke. It's probably the last place that they're going to have a chance to smoke indoors. So I figured at least allow them that opportunity. [When I switched] I was thinking about the bar owners. Is it fair for them to

put a ventilation system in place, and then in two years come back to have a total ban? I'd rather we just bite the bullet, eventually we're going to have a total ban, might as well do it now.

Xiong: Some of the opponents of the bill have questioned the validity of the Surgeon General's Report, from actual health effects to effectiveness of ventilation. How do you feel about the Surgeon General's Report?

Thao: We know for sure that smoking, firsthand or secondhand, is bad for a person's health. You could almost do any two studies on any one topic and get different results. It all depends on what your try to look at, you're going to find a rat if you try to look for a rat in this office. There are more studies to confirm whether that smoking,

whether you are doing the smoking or you're around smoking, has an effect on your health. I don't think that's disputable. I think even if you have a ventilation system it will probably be able to take away some of the smoke, [the smoke] will still be there, and if it's there people will be able to be in contact with it which will cause problems.

Xiong: Studies and research has shown that when you ban smoking in workplaces, it reduces the number of smokers among workers. Do you think that this ban will have similar effects for residents in Minnesota?

Thao: I think if you have less places, less avenues for anyone to smoke, that will change their behavior. Maybe making it inconvenient for people to smoke will force them not to smoke because it's an inconvenience. At the same time, those who want to smoke will find a way to smoke. They'll stand outside in the middle of winter to smoke because they need to smoke. That's one of the big questions, do we want to do social engineering and use the law to change people's behaviors? In a way, that's what this smoking ban is about as well. It's not just to keep people healthy, it's also a way to make it inconvenient for smokers and force them to stop smoking. We can't get away from that argument. I don't know what direction we're going into, but there is a lot of support for taking smoke away from workplaces. We started out with offices and hospitals, and now we're getting to publicly used buildings. I don't know what the next step might be after that.

Xiong: As a policy maker, how do you feel about social engineering?

Thao: Personally I don't like people telling me what to do. As Americans, we all have that independence. We don't want anyone telling us what to do. When you talk about the health issue, it makes sense not to smoke. But at the same time, we're using policies to change behaviors in individuals and that's hard for me to be willing to do. I like people to have the opportunity to have free decisions based on the knowledge they have. So, I'm still conflicted with using policies to do social engineering.

Xiong: Currently there are several local ordinances, how do you feel about smoking bans at the local level?

Thao: If we were to do one, I would prefer it to be statewide. The same uniform ban or exemption for the whole state. A lot of the bars in St. Paul do lose their business to cities right next to Saint Paul which do not have a [smoking] ban on bars. I know [some] people choose to go to certain bars outside of St. Paul because they still allow smoking. If we were to do a ban, I would like it to be uniform throughout the state. If we can, I would like to see a nationwide ban. For our business, we want a level playing field. It's up to the local cities, if they want to go further. If a city wants to ban smoking completely in all public places, on the

sidewalks, in the city it's up to them. Potentially they could lose a lot of residents. It's up to the City Council members; I want to allow them the opportunity to make that choice.

Xiong: What is your advice to Hmong youth who are smoking or thinking about smoking?

Thao: I think it's better not to start. But if you have started, it's never too late to quit. My own philosophy is I hate being addicted to anything. I don't even drink coffee because I don't want to be addicted to it. I think the less addiction you have in your life, the healthier you are down the road. Smoking really comes down to a health issue. The question you want to ask yourself is: do you want to have all these chronic problems in you 50's and 60's? It's not like you smoke and you reach 60 and fall over and die. You're going to have many years of chronic problems and you'll be hospitalized for many years before you die. So is that the choice you want, the choice to smoke or not? As a young person, you think you're invincible. You think you're going to live forever and nothing can touch you. I can tell you, as age starts to creep on you, a lot of the stuff you used to be able to do will be impossible for you. So, you need to start thinking about long term health impacts about the choices you make today.



CONGRATS

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Activist wins health coverage without a fight

● The insurance industry has agreed to pay for a special formula for people with a rare digestive disorder and severe food allergies.

By MAURA LERNER
mlerner@startribune.com
STAR TRIBUNE APR 30 '07

Jeffrey Levine knows it's hard to believe. But for three years he stopped eating food.

Instead of meals, Levine, who has a rare digestive disorder, drank a special formula made of powder and water.

The toughest part wasn't passing up breakfast, lunch and dinner for the foul-tasting liquid. It was, he said, battling to get his health insurance to pay for the formula — about \$1,500 a month.

"It's almost like you go to trial," said Levine, 49, a writer who lives in Minnetonka. Inevitably, he said, the insurer would refuse, and he'd have to fight. "I thought, this is nuts."

Now those clashes may be a thing of the past, thanks to Nona Narvaez, a St. Paul activist who runs an advocacy group for families with food allergies.

Food continues on A8 ▶

Activist wins insurance coverage without a fight

◀ FOOD FROM A1

Narvaez set out to change state law to force health insurers to pay for the special formula, which is mainly used by young children with severe food allergies or digestive abnormalities.

This spring, her campaign took a surprising turn.

The insurance industry asked to meet with her and her allies, and agreed to start covering the formula voluntarily.

"This is really unprecedented," said Sen. Patricia Torres Ray, DFL-Minneapolis, who had introduced legislation to mandate the coverage.

Coverage for all

In return for Torres Ray dropping the bill, the insurance companies agreed to offer the coverage to virtually all Minnesotans, including those in self-insured plans who would not have been affected by a law.

Almost everyone agrees it never would have happened without Narvaez.

"Really, all the credit is due to her," said Jason Eberstein, who runs a national group, Children's Magic, dedicated to getting insurance coverage for dietary formula. "She's a one-woman show."

Even insurance executives sing her praises. "She did a very effective job," said Stephanie Frost, a senior policy man-



RENÉE JONES SCHNEIDER • reneejones@startribune.com

Nona Narvaez held her son Robby, 4, as she met with Sen. Patricia Torres Ray at the State Capitol on Friday. Narvaez is credited with getting insurance coverage of formulas known as elemental formulas.

ager for HealthPartners, who helped hammer out the agreement. "I was very impressed."

For Narvaez, 45, a former legislative aide, the issue is personal. Her sons Max, 8, and Robby, 4, have food allergies. And she's made it her mission to try to make the world safer for them.

"It's the squeaky wheel thing," Narvaez said of her success.

She and her husband founded an organization, the Anaphylaxis and Food Allergy

Association of Minnesota. In 2002, she helped push through state legislation requiring ambulances to carry epinephrine shots, which can treat life-threatening allergic reactions.

Neither of her sons needed the dietary formula, she said. But she decided to take up the cause after hearing how other people were battling their insurance companies.

One parent, Bart Hays of Minneapolis, remembers telling Narvaez about his youngest son, Mosely, who was put

on the special formula at 8 months old. He was born with a condition called eosinophilic disorder, which meant his body couldn't process protein.

The formula, which costs hundreds of dollars a month, eventually cured Mosely, his father said. And now, at age 2, he no longer needs it. But his insurance company balked at paying, even when doctors said it was medically necessary.

For Narvaez, those were fighting words. She rounded up other families, and with her

COVERAGE FOR FORMULA

• Information about food allergies and issues about insurance coverage for special formulas is at www.childrensmagic.org.

• The Minnesota-based group involved in the issue is at www.minnesotafoodallergy.org.

own kids in tow, descended on the State Capitol in January.

"I promised these families that I would try to do what I could to get coverage," she said. "So I wrote a bill."

So far, only six states — Arizona, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey and New York — require coverage for the special formula, according to Children's Magic, which was started by one of the product's manufacturers.

Agreement helps hundreds

Typically, insurance companies rule out coverage for dietary formulas, which they consider nutrients or supplements rather than medicine. In most cases, they would cover formulas only if patients were on feeding tubes.

Yet advocates say that only a tiny percentage of the population has such severe food allergies or conditions that they would need the specialized formulas, known as elemental or amino-acid formulas.

In a state like Minnesota, the

number who would qualify is probably in the hundreds, estimated Dr. Allan Stillerman, a Twin Cities allergist who serves as an adviser to Narvaez's organization.

And most are children, who usually outgrow their food sensitivities by age 5, he said.

Bill in hand, Narvaez got Torres Ray to sign on as one chief sponsor and Rep. Cy Thao, DFL-St. Paul, as the other. They held hearings in March.

In the meantime, the Minnesota Council of Health Plans offered peace talks. Narvaez and Stillerman met with the insurers and worked out a deal.

"It's much more satisfying and much more effective in the long run than a strictly adversarial fighting type of approach," said Dr. Pat Courneya, associate medical director of HealthPartners.

Some, like Hays, were surprised by the agreement. "We didn't expect that. You expect fighting all the way," he said. Still, he said he's a bit skeptical of an informal agreement, because players can change, or change their minds.

Narvaez says there are still unresolved questions, but that she's encouraged. "They kept their word. They have held up their end of the bargain, and we've been very impressed."

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