Approved For Release 2007/12/18 : CIA-RDP85M00364R002204200005-0

VOL. CCI NO. 33 ★★

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

2/16/83

Troubled Refugees

Many Hmong, Puzzled By Life in U.S., Yearn For Old Days in Laos

Major Finds Part-Time Job, Still Depends on Family; Providence Isn't Paradise

Did 34 Die of Culture Shock?

By STEPHEN P. MORIN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

PROVIDENCE, R.I.—A dozen black-haired girls, dressed in colorful costumes sprinkled with silver coins, are playing *pov pob*, or catch, with boys wearing sneakers and jeans.

The youngsters take turns singing traditional love songs over a screechy microphone. The performances are restrained and subtle, and the older spectators smile. Hours later, a group of shaggy-haired teen-agers plug in electric guitars and the girls begin to dance frenetically, their silver coins jangling like tambourines against the handmade dresses. The older folks wince.

The scene is a New Year's celebration at a community center in South Providence—a hellhole of ramshackle tenements, charred buildings and abandoned cars—and the people are Hmong (pronounced Mung), some of America's newest refugees. They are from the mountains of Laos, where they farmed with hand tools and water buffalo, believed in spirits, and had no written language until 20 years ago. They were perhaps America's most tenacious and loyal ally in Southeast Asia, losing 50,000 people, or 10% of their population, by the time the United States' "secret war" in Laos ended in 1975.

The Mists of Time

Amounting to just 8% of the 625,000 Indochinese who have come to the U.S. since 1975, the 51,000 Hmong refugees are "emerging from the mists of time," says John Finck, a Hmong specialist for the Rhode Island Office of Refugee Resettlement. "Whether they make it or not is anybody's guess."

Federal officials say that no refugee group is having more difficulty adjusting to the U.S. They warn that seeds are being sown for prolonged dependence on welfare and continued isolation from society. Some 75% of the Hmong are believed to be on welfare, the largest percentage of any refugee group. Many have yet to find their first job and most can't speak English.

"Nobody knows inside our hearts and minds how much we hurt," says Pheng Vang, a former lieutenant in the Laotian air force who directed U.S. bombing attacks in Laos and now works as a social-worker aide in Providence. Like the girls at the New Year's party, he feels torn between the new and the old. Some Hmong are bitter, but more [illegible]

Accustomed to free land, no taxes and little government, the Hmong are overwhelmed by the U.S.'s rules and paper work. They have a saying: "If you think it's easy, you don't know America."

A Better Feeling

It is no wonder that one of the most popular songs in the Hmong community is the bittersweet "Remember Long Cheng." Long Cheng was their military stronghold in Laos, and many of them yearn for the feeling of unity and purpose they had then. Pheng Vang is one of those who yearn. Though he wears tan cowboy boots and jeans, he keeps his jungle-green military uniform in his closet.

A return to Laos, however, is unlikely. Hmong and U.S. officials say that up to 70,000 Hmong in Laos have been killed by revenge-seeking Communists since the war ended—including, they say, thousands of victims of the lethal mycotoxin "yellow rain."

All told, there are an estimated two million Hmong in the world. Many live in China, Burma and Vietnam. Between 150,000 and 200,000 are thought to be in Laos, and some 52,000 other Hmong from Laos are in refugee camps in Thailand. The U.S. is the most likely country to accept them, but many refuse to leave the camps because of relatives' stories about the difficulties of adjusting to American life.

Hmong who have come to the U.S. have received not only welfare but also special help finding jobs and learning English. These days, though, they feel pressure to get off public assistance. The Reagan administration says that it wants refugees to start pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.

Mysterious Ailment

For some Hmong, all the problems of life in a new land may be simply too much. Thirty-four have died from unknown causes in recent years, prompting speculation that they succumbed to severe culture shock. The federal Centers for Disease Control is looking into the mysterious deaths, most of which occur during sleep. The agency says it hasn't ruled out "emotional triggers" caused by stress.

The Hmong are a simple rural people, and scores of them brought hoes and crossbows with them for their new life in America. Such tools were useless as the Hmong were thrust into urban jungles and abandoned to worn-out tenements—some without furniture, heat or hot water. They had asked to be resettled together but were spread "like a thin layer of butter throughout the country so they'd disappear," says Mr. Finck of the Rhode Island resettlement office. Longstanding family and clan ties spurred waves of secondary migration, and now there are major clusters of Hmong in St. Paul, Minn. (about 10,200), and in some half-dozen California cities (a total of about 27,000).

Providence, with 2,500, has the largest Hmong population in the East. The city was founded 16 years after the Pilgrims landed and has traditionally been a first home for many refugees and immigrants. The same clapboard three-deckers that housed Irish

Please Turn to Page 25, Column 1

Approved For Release 2007/12/18 : CIA-RDP85M00364R002204200005-0

Approved For Release 2007/12/18 : CIA-RDP85M00364R002204200005-0

Troubled Refugees: Many Hmong, Puzzled by U.S., Yearn for the Unity and Sense of Purpose They Knew

Continued From First Page

and Italian immigrants have become homes for thousands of Hispanic, Portuguese and Cambodians, and now Hmong.

The Hmong here include Teng Thao, who came to Providence seven years ago and was lucky to find a job as a machine operator making as much as $8.50 an hour. A moon-faced man with a broad smile, Teng Thao saved enough to buy a rusty Ford van. Last year, with a $1,500 grant from St. Michael's Catholic Church, he bought a $23,000 three-family house large enough for the 15 people he cares for—his wife and three children, his mother, his five young brothers and sisters, and five war orphans.

But Teng Thao was laid off several months ago, and his $153 in weekly jobless pay hasn't been enough to take care of the mortgage and the loan for his van while paying the heat bill. So he has been drawing down his savings and he worries about losing everything. A veteran of 1,500 missions as a forward air controller for U.S. pilots in Laos, Teng Thao says he has never been so frightened. His mother, Youa Chang, who lives in a second-floor apartment, says, "I'm not happy here. I'd rather be home."

Responsibility for refugees is scattered among four federal units, and Congress's General Accounting Office recently urged an end to this "fragmentation." Even Washington bureaucrats concede they have mishandled resettlement of the Hmong. "Frankly, I haven't seen any evidence that anyone really understands" the Hmong, says Phillip N. Hawkes, the director of the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. H. Eugene Douglas, the U.S. coordinator for refugee affairs, adds that it has taken officials a long time to realize the Hmong are different from other Southeast Asians. "It's very American not to think things through," he says.

Many Hmong continue to turn to Gen. Vang Pao, their military leader in Laos, for advice on how to succeed in America. A stubby, pugnacious man who pounds his desk when agitated, the general divorced five of his six wives to move to the U.S. with his 26 children. He lives on a 408-acre farm in Missoula, Mont., and travels extensively to Hmong communities around the country in an old van.

On a recent visit to Santa Ana, Calif., he was greeted by dozens of men who pressed their hands together and bowed respectfully. The general wore a crisp gray suit and advised the men, whose jacket sleeves drooped to their knuckles, to get jobs to "show Americans you really want to work."

'We Have Become Children'

Without job skills, that hasn't been easy. Maj. Wang Seng Khang, a former battalion commander who led 10,000 Hmong in a Thailand refugee camp, has been in the U.S. almost five years. Only recently did he find his first job: a part-time position as liaison between a church and the Providence Hmong community. The major, a proud man used to the prestige of leadership, feels emasculated. He depends on his wife's job at a jewelry factory to pay the rent and on his children to translate English for him. Of Hmong leaders, he says: "We have become children in this country."

Subservience is an uncomfortable feeling for Hmong, who have traditionally worked for themselves. Some were insulted when Claiborne Pell, a Democrat of Rhode Island, one of the three richest men in the U.S. Senate, noted during a meeting last October that many earlier immigrants to the U.S. had started by taking jobs as domestics. Doua Yang, who was at the meeting and whose parents and sister were killed by the Pathet Lao, says Hmong don't want to become "coolies."

Little is known about the Hmong, except that they began migrating to mountainous areas of Southeast Asia from China some 150 years ago. The Indochinese called them Meo, or barbarians, although the word Hmong in the Hmong language means free. They lived peaceably in tiny thatched-hut villages outside the mainstreams of their host countries and were sustained by the spirits they believed in, by their clans and by opium, which they grew prodigiously.

In the 1950s, Communist insurgents began attacking their villages in Laos. By the early 1960s, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency was supplying and financing Gen. Vang Pao's 30,000-man Hmong army. During the war, entire Hmong villages were wiped out. Men and boys were drafted by Gen. Vang Pao—plucked from primitive tribal villages and transported to a life of radios, jets and mortars. Some Hmong rode in helicopter gunships before they had ever seen cars or electric lights. Pheng Vang became a soldier at age 13½ and stayed until the end of the war—nine years. "I still have nightmares," he says.

Trek to Thailand

When the war ended, Pheng Vang and more than 100,000 Hmong walked hundreds of miles to the border, braving currents and Communist bullets to cross the Mekong River into Thailand. Many died trying to escape. Those who survived spent months or years in remote camps surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by Thai police. At the time, the refugee stream into the U.S. was swollen with Vietnamese. It wasn't until the late 1970s that most Hmong began arriving in this country.

They arrived with little preparation. Some used furniture polish for cooking oil, washed their hair with Lestoil and tried to heat their apartments with charcoal grills. Volunteer agencies were supposed to find housing and provide counseling, but a government study found that nearly one-third of the agencies never saw refugees after their first month.

Pheng Vang arrived in February 1976—the first Hmong in Providence. On his first morning he saw his first snow: a cottony sheet that covered the garbage-strewn streets of South Providence and reminded him of a warning of his grandfather's: "Snow means death." He stayed inside the first day, sometimes startled by the clanging radiators in his third-floor walkup and worrying about things he had never before encountered: rent, heating bills, gas bills, electricity bills.

Brothers Xoua and Xiong Thao recall being referred to a South Providence apartment that had no heat, hot water, refrigerator, stove, beds or furniture. Even the windows were broken, they say. City officials say that more than 60% of the housing in South Providence—where many Hmong live—doesn't meet minimum codes.

Victims of Crimes

Dozens of Hmong have had their apartments burglarized and cars stolen, and some Hmong children have been beaten walking home from school. They seldom complain to police because they still feel like "guests" in America. Few understand such criminal behavior. Providence police say they can't recall a single Hmong being arrested for a crime.

Just as fear has driven many Hmong deep inside their apartments, need has sent others to ghetto churches. Few Hmong believe that Christ is more than another supernatural being that might help them in America. Tia Kha, the director of Providence's Hmong-Lao Community Association, says he joined the Calvary Baptist Church to get free or cheap secondhand clothing. The Rev. William Tanguay of St. Michael's suggests that Hmong join "because they want American friends."

Younger Hmong are adapting better than older ones. Teachers at St. Michael's elementary school say that Hmong children show strong academic and artistic abilities. Xoua Thao spoke little English when he came to Providence six years ago. Now he is a junior pre-med student at Brown University here and hopes to become the first Hmong doctor in America.

Overall, however, the Hmong transition remains painfully slow. Mr. Finck recalls taking a group of older Hmong from Providence to Plimoth Plantation—a reconstruction of a 17th-century Pilgrim village. The Hmong examined the chickens and the pigs, took samples of the herbs and affectionately rubbed the thatched-roof houses—not unlike the ones they left behind.

When they were about to leave, Soua Xai Thao, a small man with gray bristles poking from his leathery chin, leaned on his cane and asked Mr. Finck through an interpreter: "Can we move here and make this our home?"

WALL ST. JOURNAL
2/16/83
Page Two

Approved For Release 2007/12/18 : CIA-RDP85M00364R002204200005-0