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SUBJECT Hmong

BOB KUR: Among the refugees from Southeast Asia to settle in the United States are the Hmong. They fought for the U.S. in Laos, paying a heavy price. But that has been nearly forgotten now, as the Hmong struggle to adapt to a new culture in a U.S. that has become increasingly resentful of its new immigrants.

Mike Moss reports.

MIKE MOSS: These people are the Hmong from the mountains of Laos. The soil they work is in Rhode Island now. Hmong means free people, and for centuries they were farmers in Laos. In the 1960s and '70s, they were our secret allies. The CIA in Laos provided weapons and used the Hmong to destroy North Vietnamese supply lines and rescue American pilots downed in the rough terrain. Thousands of Hmong died. They had the highest casualty rate of the war. Many who survived were forced to flee because they backed the wrong side.

Nu Van Yong (?) was in the army for 13 years. He was a farmer and a village chief. Here, with his wife and eight children, he can't find a job. Nu Van Yong is homesick. But this garden that 270 Hmong families share makes him remember the good things about his homeland.

A park in downtown Providence. The Hmong clean it up, part of a workfare program in which they exchange their labor for federal aid. They receive some form of help for up to three years to get them on their feet.

From the mountains of Laos to a modern industrial society is a difficult leap. Most of the Hmong have few skills

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for the 20th Century and have trouble speaking English. In Providence, many companies have laid off workers and unemployment is more than 10 percent. Laid off twice already, with a three-generation family of nine to support, 23-year-old Paul Mua says he is desperate.

PAUL MUA: What can I do? I don't know what to do. I think about have a job all the time.

MOSS: There are success stories, people who arrived before the recession. Some, like Pao Jang (?), have jobs making components at Cable Electric, where 86 out of 300 workers are from Indochina.

MAN: They're high in production, good quality. They're here every day and they're willing to work.

MOSS: Most of the Hmong live in the same Providence neighborhood in old rundown buildings clustered in large, closely-knit families. They get letters from relatives still in refugee camps in Thailand who are eager to join their families here. This influx worries the Rhode Island refugee coordinator.

MAN: In the city of Providence, for example, one in 26 people is a refugee. In the Providence school system, one in eight. And we just cannot continue to accept refugees and do a good job.

[Clip of classroom activities]

MOSS: The first step is to learn English. To help those who cannot write their own language, the Hmong run their own school. Hmong leader Teng Yong (?) says his people must learn the new ways, but maintain their traditions. So the girls in his family still learn how to embroider, a traditional artform, and to dance.

The family is still the center of life. For dinner, the Yong family eat the vegetables from their garden.

For the young, it is easier to adjust to American ways. And the doll that this child carries, imitating her mother, has yellow hair.

The Hmong from the mountains of Laos face an uphill struggle in their new country. In the midst of hard economic times and policy changes, many refugees may be cut off from aid before they can support themselves.