

# What if my parents had not escaped Laos

Amid the wilderness in the jungles of Laos, a place we might call America's heart of darkness, lie the mutilated bodies of four Hmong girls and a Hmong boy. Lao soldiers had raped, shot and stabbed the young girls, while the boy had been beaten and shot. One of the girls had been disemboweled, her intestines dangling from her lifeless body.

Amnesty International, undercover journalists and human rights groups report that hundreds of Hmong in the Lao jungles, maybe even a few thousand, live on the run in constant fear for their lives. They are hunted by the communist Laotian army simply because they were once the United States' allies.

These people had the chance to flee, and many criticize them for staying. But they made the difficult and courageous decision to remain in the jungles so they could fight for the honor of their land. They remained loyal to their cause, making a decision that many, especially younger Hmong Americans like myself, are lucky to have escaped.



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In December, the New York Times published a story about the declining situation with these Hmong. It quoted former CIA officer Colin Thompson, who lauded the Hmong recruits for their loyalty and bravery, but noted that the U.S. government need not feel responsible to help those in the jungle: "It wasn't as if we dragooned them into anything ... Their choice was to defend themselves. ... We provided the weapons and the courage."

There is no easy way to determine who is responsible for resolving this situation. But surely Washington's commitment to defend Laos was short-lived. The friendship was brief and disloyal to some degree. Washington may have assumed responsibility during the war by providing "the weapons" to defend, but it walked away when support waned.

The idea that the United States provided "courage" is appalling, as if these Hmong men were inherently cowards. Such thought reflects the domineering approach that Western governments often take in foreign affairs while perpetuating the practice of colonialism. That a country like the United States thinks itself superior enough to instill and distribute courage belittles the dignity of those men still fighting to salvage their homes.

I wonder how many of these people in the jungle feel betrayed. Even after the American government abandoned the war in 1975, picked up its things and headed home to safer shores, these men continued to put up a fight. Perhaps the motto "never leave a man behind" only applied to Americans and not allies, too.

In the Hmong culture, loyalty is powerful. Betrayal is the root of family grudges and can endure for generations. It can devour a family's integrity. Many believe if a dispute goes unsettled, it can bring doom to the offender. To settle a dispute, the offender must acknowledge the wrong and organize a

family gathering to offer reconciliation.

I had an uncle who mistreated the brother of a clan leader. The offense stayed unresolved for years, until some years ago, my uncle died in a car accident. Many relatives believe it was his doomed fate. I can't imagine what ominous fate might await those who have contributed to the offense of these Hmong in the jungles.

This tragic situation has roots dating back to the Vietnam era, when several Southeast Asian countries were thrust into the war. The CIA covertly recruited more than 40,000 Hmong to fight communism under General Vang Pao's leadership. For every one American who died in that war, 10 Hmong died. Hundreds of thousands of refugees fled Laos, but thousands of Hmong soldiers remained steadfast in the fight for a free Laos. After the U.S. departure in 1975, Lao soldiers took revenge against the Hmong men and their families by violating their human rights.

I wonder how different my life would have been had my parents chosen not to leave Laos. But like others, they fled be-

cause they feared for their lives. It does not reflect disloyalty to their part. I know they longed for their part. My mother once told me, "I was very different back then. I was very eager to flee, while others were not be convinced and would not be fighting."

Many even speculate the cause of the alleged coup by Gen. Vang Pao and his associates was an attempt to rescue these Hmong, but not to help them. Maybe it was.

Though I cannot safely go back to Laos, I can deliver food, clothing, medical supplies, I can be there thousands of miles away. It is here in the United States to continue the struggle. I hope others on this issue, stay updated for continued media coverage.

To honor their struggle, I hope everyone to advocate for the Hmong in the Lao jungles completely. Perhaps a mass grave. Perhaps in time reconciliation will arrive. We no longer have to endure another day in America's heart of darkness.

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