

Meo Tribesmen Face Death in Thailand

NYTimes AUG 15 1975

The following dispatch was written by Matt Franjola, an Associated Press correspondent who recently visited remote settlements in northern Thailand of Meo mountain tribesmen who fled Laos after the Communist-led Pathet Lao took control of the country.

BAN NAM LAN, Thailand (AP)—Thousands of mountain tribesmen who fled Laos in the last two months are barely subsisting in the jungles near here, weary, sick and in some cases starving.

They walked for up to four weeks over rugged terrain only to find themselves unwelcome in this country and not safe from Pathet Lao raiding parties even here, a day's march into Thailand.

They are Meos, members of an independent primitive tribe of woodsmen and black-clad, silver-bedecked women, who were on the pro-American side of the Laotian war.

Thai and Western experts estimate that 12,000 Meo refugees are living in temporary shelters in this area of northern Thailand, and Thai medical authorities say that 80 per cent of them are suffering from malnutrition, malaria and anemia. Some 18,000 more have sought refuge in northeastern Thailand.

Future Uncertain

Their future is uncertain. Their presence is an irritant to already shaky Thai-Laotian relations. And the door to America is closed to them.

"We were soldiers of Vang Pao and the Americans," said one Meo leader, referring to Gen. Vang Pao, who headed a mercenary army supported by the American Central Intelligence Agency and who has been granted asylum in the United States.

"The Pathet Lao are the enemy," the Meo leader said. "If we go back we have nothing to eat, and they will kill us or send us off to study where we will never return to our families."

The mountain people left when the Communist-led Pathet Lao began to take control of the country in May. Some came from northwestern Laos and crossed a border that to the hill people is only an invitation of the city men far away.

Many Women and Children

But nearly half made their way on foot from around Long Tieng, the former C.I.A. base in central Laos—140 miles as the crow flies but more than a three-week walk through the jungle-covered sierras. Three quarters of them were women and children.

Lao Teng, chief of a Meo refugee settlement at Pua, north of here, said that more than 135 of his people had died of malaria or lack of food during the long march.

In the Ban Nam Lan area, about five miles from the frontier, 5,700 refugees are virtually imprisoned in a jungle area bordered by Laos, a Thai Communist insurgent base and two rivers.

Thai authorities permit only half a dozen a day to leave and walk four hours to the village of Mae Cherim to buy essentials.

Thai authorities here in Nam Province have spent \$40,000 on the refugees, Gov. Sawatdi Prapanich said. Provincial refugee sources said that it would cost \$1,000 a

day to meet the basic minimum needs in rice alone.

"If they have no rice and die, that is their problem," said the Governor. "We did not ask them to come. We have poor Thais who need help."

The Government says that it has run out of funds for the refugees. For the time being those here who can afford it are buying rice brought in by Thai Army helicopter at 20 per cent more than the rate in the provincial capital, but Lao Teng says in Pua that "in two weeks we will run out of money."

Scavenging in Jungle

The Meo wear their wealth in silver jewelry, and Thai merchants are paying only 80 per cent of the regular market price for it, Meo refugees said.

At the Ban Nam Lan site about 2,000 refugees have enough money for two more weeks; the rest already are scavenging in the jungle.

They set out daily to hunt for roots, berries and other edible plants. All stands of bamboo in the area have been scoured for edible shoots, and all the palm trees have been cut down for the small heart of palm.

"If it were not for the bamboo shoots, we would have died already," said Muoi Ya, 36 years old. "We need salt. We are weak and sick. Mothers cannot nurse their babies."

Some rice and medical aid has been donated by the Y.M.C.A. and Roman Catholic groups in the north Thailand city of Chiang Mai. But these donations have been small compared with the need.

Of 100 donated sacks of rice, 23 were taken by corrupt Thai officials in the jungle camp, Meo refugees say.

No Thai official comment was available on the report. Thais and Westerners coming from the area in recent weeks have made similar reports.