persecution of Hmong

The Hmong are a minority ethnic group scattered throughout Southeast Asia, where about 2 million Hmong live; another 10 million are found in China. The Hmong have experienced almost 30 years of persecution in Communist Laos for their role in assisting the United States during the Vietnam War. The CIA trained and armed Hmong hill tribes, which mainly eked out livings as slash-and-burn farmers, to fight a covert war in Laos against the North Vietnamese and Pathet Lao armies from 1962 to 1975. They were given two principal missions: to slow the advance of the North Vietnamese army along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and disrupt their supply lines through Laos. The Hmong saved downed American pilots and facilitated the ability of the CIA to set up radars, which allowed U.S. warplanes to carry out more accurate strikes against North Vietnamese targets. Approximately 70,000 North Vietnamese troops moved into Laos to crush the Hmong. Some experts credit the Hmong with actually extending the United States' ability to continue their prosecution of the war for years longer than it could have without their help. According to the Lawyer's Committee for Human Rights, as many as 30,000 Hmong were killed in the war, and possibly as many as 100,000 may have been killed by Laotian security forces over the next five years.

With the end of the war in 1975, the Hmong were placed at particular risk. Considered traitors by the Laotian Communist regime, the Hmong took refuge in mountainous jungles, where they remain. Before 1974, 350,000 Hmong were living in Laos, but their numbers have fallen drastically. According to the BBC, there are now only about 200,000 left, including 12,000 former CIA-trained soldiers and their families. (Some estimates of the pre-1975 Hmong population in Laos are as high as 500,000.) It is unlikely that the Hmong insurgents will ever pose much of a threat to the government since they are armed only with AK-47s and U.S. rifles left over from the war. Ammunition is at a premium; a BBC report said that the rebels had only five bullets apiece.

In an attempt to aid its former allies, Washington orchestrated a resettlement program for thousands of Hmong. (The last major contingent of Hmong Refugees living in Thai refugee camps were resettled in the United States in 2004.) Approximately 127,000 Hmong now reside in the United States, where they are concentrated largely in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California. Thousands of Hmong also fled to neighboring Thailand, where they were housed in refugee camps. In the early 1990s, however, when threatened with forced repatriation to Laos, an estimated 35,000 Hmong refugees escaped from the camps. International relief agencies have expressed alarm at the fate of these displaced peoples, many of whom no longer enjoy the protective status of refugees and lack the resources to meet their basic needs. Thousands of refugees who have been forced to return to Laos have been arrested in violation of international laws governing the treatment of refugees. Because of the country's isolation and the inaccessibility of the Hmong themselves, it is difficult to verify what is actually happening in the jungles. However, repeated reports of atrocities and human rights abuses by Laotian forces, which have included the use of assault helicopters, ground troops, and systematic shelling and spraying of Chemical Weapons near Hmong settlements, appear to confirm that the Hmong are in grave danger. Some reports of massacres have been documented in a 1997 White Paper by Dr. Vang Pobzeb for the Laotian Human Rights Council, which estimated that some 25,000 Hmong have been arrested, imprisoned or killed in the preceding seven years. The White Paper cites informed sources who report that between "November 1994 and April 1995, the Communist Lao government sent many thousands of soldiers to massacre, torture, arrest, and kill about 5,000 Hmong men, women and children, including innocent civilians of the general public . . . in northern Laos." The same White Paper states that many of the Hmong (as well as dissident Laotians), including political prisoners, were killed through "medical injections" and "food poisoning."

Further Information
