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Aid agency pledges to serve Hmong in Laos

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BANGKOK -- The Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) has pledged to continue to help more than 4,000 ethnic Hmong asylum-seekers who were recently repatriated from northern Thailand to Laos.

COERR, the only aid group assisting the asylum-seekers, was refused access to Huay Nam Khao camp in Phetchabun province as the Thai army deported them on Dec. 28.

?We don?t have any capacity to stop the (forcible repatriation) as it?s the right of the government,? said Bishop Joseph Phibul Visitnonthachai of Nakhon Sawan, COERR executive director.

Nevertheless, COERR is ?discussing with UNICEF about getting permission to go to Laos and work with (the deportees) for some time to ensure that they are safe, able to live there and treated humanely,? he told UCA News.

The Hmong had claimed they would be victimized by the Laos regime if they were returned. Thailand has said it has assurances from the Laotian authorities that they would not be mistreated.

The UN has urged the Thai authorities to detail those assurances.

Bishop Phibul said COERR is also coordinating efforts with Medecins Sans Frontieres(Doctors without Borders) to see if the Hmong had encountered problems during the move.

Medecins Sans Frontieres was taking care of this group until COERR took over this role last June, according to Siwa Boonlert, a COERR field worker.

?COERR has provided health care and food for the 4,000 Hmong in the camp,? he said. Around 10 percent of them already had refugee status with the UNHCR.

Whatever their status, ?we have to provide humanitarian support,? Siwa said. The Thai government considered everyone in the Hmong camp as ?illegal immigrants,? he added.

Bishop Phibul said the Thai government has tried to repatriate the Hmong for a long time using psychological methods.

The government told the Hmong the Thai people did not accept them, and the Thai people that the Hmong were the cause of crimes and infectious diseases, he said.

Since 2005, Thailand has repatriated 17 groups of Hmong to Laos.

Many Laotian Hmong who had fought for the US during the Vietnam War fled in 1975 when the communist Pathet Lao took over the country. Thousands have been resettled in the United States.

A Lao government spokesperson told international media that the concerns for the Hmong?s welfare were ?groundless.? They would be housed in resettlement villages, he said.

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