

THE LAO RETURNEES

in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme from Thailand

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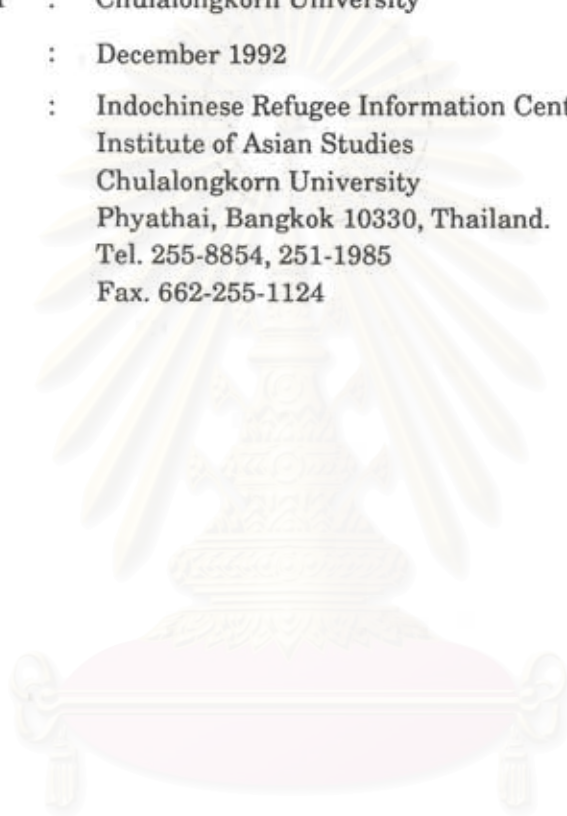
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FOREWORD

In this age of repatriation as a durable solution to the Indochinese refugee issue, the Tripartite Agreement of 1989 among UNHCR, RTG and LPDR marked an important turning point in the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme and ultimately, the safe return of tens of thousands of Lao refugees from the Thai camps to their homeland.

The present study focuses on the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme at two levels, namely, at the level of the Lao refugees and at the level of the four policy-makers. In this way, an appreciation of both the refugees' needs as well as the level of the policy-makers' assistance can be ascertained from which recommendations can be put forward. In addition, special attention has been given to the vulnerable group of Hmong refugees whose uncertain future has aroused great interest and concern.

I would like to thank everyone who has sacrificed their time and energy for this work. However, a special thank you must be attributed to Dr. Supang Chantavanich who with great dedication, initiated and coordinated this research project.

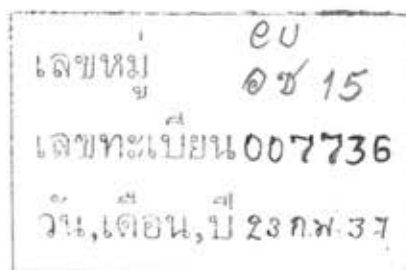
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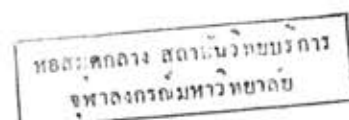
The suggestions of Mr. Thomas Conroy from the Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA Thailand) greatly assisted the survey in Laos. In addition, many NGOs in Thailand and Laos were most cooperative in answering the interviews.

The Thai Embassy in Vientiane facilitated the data collection. Mr. Somporn Klinpongsa, the former Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Thai Ministry of Interior and Mr. Sanan Thaneerat, governor of Nong Khai Province were indispensable, without whom the field work in Laos would not have taken place. Mr. Prapakorn Smiti, the Director of the Foreign Affairs Division (MOI) also gave valuable information. All the above mentioned names are with their actual titles when the research was in progress.

The UNHCR officials and MOI officials in Ban Napho, Ban Vinai and Chieng Kham camps proved to be of great assistance throughout the course of the survey. The Lowland Lao and Hmong refugees in these camps and the returnees in Vientiane Province were extremely cooperative in the interviews.

Dr. Wathana Wongsekiarttirat from the Chulalongkorn University Social Research Institute conducted the computer work for the data analysis.

We are also thankful to Professor William Klausner and Mr. Dhavec Choosup who read the draft of the research report and gave useful suggestions and comments.



Abbreviations

ADRA	-	Adventist Development and Relief Agency
AFSC	-	American Friends Service Committee
CAMA	-	CAMA Services, Inc.
CCSDPT	-	Committee for the Co-ordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand
CCT	-	The Church of Christ in Thailand
CIA	-	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDSE	-	Bahai Development Committee, International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity
COERR	-	Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugee
CPA	-	Comprehensive Plan of Action
EED	-	Enfants et Developpement
ESF	-	Ecoles Sans Frontieres
FAO	-	Food and Agriculture Organization
HI	-	Handicap International
IA	-	International Aid
ILO	-	International Labour Organization
IRC	-	International Rescue Committee
JSRC	-	Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee
JVA	-	Joint Volunteer Agency
LPDR	-	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LPRP	-	Laotian People's Revolutionary Party
MOI	-	Ministry of Interior (Thailand)
MOU	-	Memorandum of Understanding
MSF	-	Medicins Sans Frontieres
NGOs	-	Non-governmental Organizations
PPAT	-	Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand
RTG	-	Royal Thai Government
SCF	-	The Save the Children Fund
SNC	-	Supreme National Council (Cambodia)
SRV	-	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
TCRS	-	Thai-Chinese Refugee Service
TOV	-	The Ockenden Venture
UNDP	-	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	-	United Nations Educational, Cultural, Scientific Organization
UNHCR	-	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Volags	-	Voluntary Agencies
Volrep	-	Voluntary Repatriation
WHO	-	World Health Organization
YMCA	-	Young Women Christian Association
ZOA	-	Refugee Care Netherlands

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Introduction



The Voluntary Repatriation Programme

It has been accepted that voluntary repatriation is the most desirable solution to any given refugee situation. The emphasis is placed on the right of an individual to return voluntarily to his country of origin. The presupposition is that the causes of fear of danger which had led refugees to the departure from their country must be eliminated. Also, the country of origin must be willing to readmit its national and to cooperate with involving countries and agencies in arranging for the refugees' safe return. The political situation in the country of origin must be eased and not threatening to returnees. It is evident that voluntary repatriation concerns greatly on refugee protection, the safe and dignified return as well as the successful reintegration of returnees in their homeland.

At the 36th Executive Committee (Ex. Com.) Session held in 1985, the significance of the 1980 Ex. Com. conclusions on voluntary repatriation which included the voluntary return, the absolute safety, the removal of the causes of plight, the cooperation of all parties concerned, and the humanitarian assistance, was reaffirmed.

In terms of the operational framework for voluntary repatriation, four categories of activities were planned to ensure a well organized repatriation operation:

1. Pre-departure activities including information dissemination, organization of processing and transit facilities as well as necessary skills training programmes
2. Activities related to organization of movements to country of origin
3. Reception activities including organization of onward transfer to places of origin or destination areas
4. Reintegration/rehabilitation assistance at places of origin or destination areas

Geographically, activities of the first two categories take place in a country of asylum and those of the latter two in a country of origin. However, all activities are complimentary.

Experience in Voluntary Repatriation

The UNHCR voluntary repatriation operations have been carried out in many countries since the initiation of the UNHCR Volrep Programme in 1980, notably, in Afghanistan, Africa, Central America and Sri Lanka. In Central America, 13,000 refugees from Nicaragua, Guatemala and

Salvador were sent back home voluntarily in 1988. In Africa, 80,000 Ugandan refugees returned from Sudan; 55,000 refugees from Burundi returned from Rwanda; 69,000 Mozambicans have returned voluntarily from Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Additionally, 3,300 refugees in Botswana returned to Zimbabwe, 7,000 Ethiopians returned from Dfibouti, and 1,800 Chaddians returned from Sudan and the Central African Republic.

The Namibian exiles in Luzaka returned home in great numbers (41,000) in 1989 and participated in the electoral registration process in that year. UN Transitional Assistance Group (UNTAG) was established to cooperate in this repatriation. The Namibian repatriation is unique in the history of the UN because it was successful in spite of numerous obstacles and political and logistical complexities. In addition, it was executed in a very short period of time.

In Southeast Asia, the adoption of a Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) at the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees held in Geneva in June 1989, is expected to give momentum to UNHCR's efforts towards the promotion of voluntary repatriation to the Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). On the one hand, the Paris Conference held in Paris in October 1991 and the Tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Royal Government of Thailand (RTG) and the Supreme National Council of Cambodia (SNC) in Phnom Penh in November 1991 are also expected to actualize the repatriation of the Khmer displaced persons on the Thai-Cambodian border to Cambodia.

Operationally, arrangements for the voluntary repatriation of respective caseloads from Thailand to LPDR, SRV and Cambodia substantially differ in terms of scope, magnitude, requirements and constraints due to the different characteristics of target groups and the historical, political and social environments surrounding the operations.

Possible Problems Occurring upon Return

Once returned to their homeland, returnees will be sent to their places of origin or new destination areas. The final step of the repatriation process is the reintegration and rehabilitation of repatriates into their society and the existing social order. Although there will be many obstacles emerging during the initial activities of the repatriation process, these obstacles will be mostly technical and can be solved to a certain extent. The reintegration activities seem to be the most delicate and complicated step in this process. In South Africa, reintegration was challenged by numerous obstacles, namely, ambiguity arising from distrust of the government and misinformation from the government controlled media, emotional disturbances originating from the sense of alienation, family problems due to newly acquired different social values in exile from families' values, and finally, economic and employment problems.¹

Background of Study

Since 1980, UNHCR in close cooperation with the governments of Laos and Thailand, has supported a programme of voluntary repatriation for Lao refugees in Thai camps. As of April 1992, a total of 8,787 persons have returned home under this programme (compared with 282,180 Lao who have been resettled abroad and 66,094 still in refugee camps). However, the repatriation number only started to steadily increase after 1988, with 1,698 refugees returning in 1989 alone. The growing appeal of the programme has been commonly attributed to various factors, namely, the refugees' greater familiarity with and trust in the programme after a decade, the increased political cooperation

1. Refugee Participating Network 11, 1991 : 4-6.

between Thailand and Laos, and, of course, better economic conditions within Laos. Nevertheless, 1990 has seen an unexplained slight dip in the number of returnees, particularly, among the Lowland Lao.

Voluntary repatriation is the best durable solution to the refugee problem. UNHCR as well as concerned governments prefer this solution to others provided refugees can return safely and with dignity. In the case of refugees, some significant questions arise: why was the programme not successful at its commencement? Why have Highland Lao been hesitant in applying for repatriation? What is the destiny of returnees who repatriate to the political regime that once drove them to flee? What is the level of returnees' reintegration within Laos? Further from these questions, if repatriation is successful among the Lao group, how can this be applied to the Khmer and the Vietnamese refugees? What lessons can be learnt from the Lao case which can provide improvements to the massive Cambodian repatriation programme?

Research Objectives and Methodology

Objectives

1. To describe and examine the process of repatriation for Lao refugees
2. To study the policies and programmes adopted by governmental, non-governmental and international agencies regarding the return of refugees
3. To assess the extent to which returnees are integrated into local society and are satisfied with their "new lives"

Research Methodology

The research was based on continuing data collection during 1990-1991. Five categories of respondents and informants were interviewed. They were:

- 126 Lao returnees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme of whom 103 were Lowland Lao and 23 were Hmong
- a group of high ranking government officials of the RTG and the LPDR who were in charge of repatriation at the policy and operational levels
- a group of UNHCR officers in the Bangkok Branch Office and in the Vientiane Branch Office
- a group of voluntary agency aid officials working for the refugees in Thailand and in Laos
- 75 local villagers in Laos who became the refugees' neighbours on the refugees' return to Laos (46 in Vientiane Municipality and 29 in Vientiane Province)

Research instruments comprised of a detailed interview schedule for the returnees and a separate interview guide for each group of informants as listed above. Therefore, there were six interview instruments for the field data collection. The research team also used the observation technique while interviewing the returnees in order to collect other unobtrusive measures and to cross check the verbal report from the interview. The objects of observation were home conditions, living conditions, relationships within the family and with neighbours, and the emotional expression of interviewees. A documentary research on UNHCR, governmental, and NGOs papers was also conducted.

Research was conducted both in Thailand and Laos. In the former, the development policies and attitudes of UNHCR and the Thai and Lao governments were focussed on the interviews on locally-based UN and NGO aid officials and the analyses of relevant documentary sources. In Laos itself, research was conducted in the Vientiane municipal area.

Research in Laos included the substantial interviewing of 126 returnees and their families as well as local people in order to examine both the degree of integration (economic, social, emotional, political) and the level of satisfaction from both the returnees' and local villagers' perspectives. This, alongside personal observation of the daily life of returnees, has enabled the success of the repatriation programme thus far to be assessed. Local infrastructure and UNHCR-organized assistance and facilities were also examined.

Given current discussions among organizations working in the refugee camps about the most suitable training and preparation for potential returnees - in the field of health, education, technical skills, etc., the research endeavoured to judge the usefulness of current training programmes in present Lao conditions.

The following field data collections were conducted between April 1989 to August 1991:

April 5-10, 1989. A trip to Nong Khai in Thailand to interview the governor of Nong Khai and to Vientiane Municipality and Pakse town to survey the possibility of conducting field work. A discussion with UNHCR in Vientiane was also conducted.

March 12-16, 1990. A trip to Ban Vinai Center in Loei province to collect data on the repatriation of the Hmong from Thailand.

October 28 - November 1, 1990. A trip to Vientiane Municipality to meet H.M. Soubanh Srithirath, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lane Phathamavong, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Welfare and War Veterans, and Daniel Bellamy, UNHCR representative, Vientiane Branch Office.

December 10-15, 1990. A trip to Ban Napho Center in Nakhon Panom Province to collect data on the Lowland Lao repatriation and to interview the governor of Nakhon Panom and the officials in charge of refugees.

June 3-8, 1991. A trip to Chieng Kham Center in Payao Province to collect data on the Highland repatriation and to interview the refugees and the officials in charge of refugees.

June 18-20, 1991. A trip to Nong Khai Province and to the Vientiane Municipality office in preparation for the field work to commence in July 1991.

The main field work in Laos was postponed from 1990 to 1991, due to the unreadiness of the Lao authorities. But this unreadiness had its justification: there were very few Lao officers who were responsible for repatriation at the Ministry of Social Welfare and War Veterans. The few that there were, had been preoccupied by their cooperation with UNHCR and the RTG in the receptions of new returnees and also by their attendance at the Tripartite Meetings for repatriation. As a result, they had been unable to provide staff to facilitate the research data collection, i.e., to prepare the list of names and addresses of returnees and to accompany the research team for interviews, until mid 1991.

The initial plan of the data collection programme was to include field work in Champasak and Bokeo Provinces. However, it was impossible to travel to these areas to conduct interviews. Coordination with provincial authorities was inevitably minimal. The research team finally decided to focus field work only in Vientiane Province, covering 10 areas and towns both inside and outside the Vientiane Municipality, namely, in Sikhotabong, Chanthaboury, Sayasetha, Saithany, Hatsaifong, Nasaithong, Sisattanak, in Vientiane Municipality, and in the towns of Phone Hong and Feuang in Vientiane Province (see Map in Annex 3 in Appendix).



Chapter One

Lao Refugees in Thailand and the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme

Migration Flows into Thailand and their Causes of Flight

After the takeover of the Communist Laotian People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP), a record number of 54,854 Laotian refugees entered Thailand in 1975 (see Table 1). The migration included both Lowland Lao as well as Lao Hilltribes, namely, the Hmong, Yao, Mien, and Htin, as well as other ethnic groups. During the first year, 44,659 Hilltribe Lao migrated to Thailand. The reason for this phenomenon was that the Hmong who constituted the majority of the Hilltribe population had worked closely with the CIA (US) in covert anti-communist military operations during the suppression. Consequently, following the Communist Party's victory, they feared for their lives and decided to leave Laos.

The flow of migration from Laos into Thailand from 1975-1991 is presented in Table 1. Supang Chantavanich¹ describes the process and causes of migration during 1975-1988 as follows.

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1. See S. Chantavanich. "Refugee Flows from Indochina: Mass Movements of People and New Challenges for the 1990s". Paper presented at the North-South Round Table on Movement of People in the 1990s: Challenges for Policy Makers, at Evian-les bains, 15-17 December 1991. (To be published by IRIC, Institute of Asian Studies, Bangkok).

Table 1 Number of Lao Asylum-Seekers Arriving in Thailand

Year	Lowland Lao	Hilltribe	Total
1975	10,195	44,659	54,854
1976	19,499	7,266	26,765
1977	18,070	3,873	21,943
1978	48,781	8,013	56,794
1979	22,045	23,943	45,988
1980	28,967	14,801	43,768
1981	16,377	4,356	20,733
1982	3,203	1,816	5,019
1983	4,571	2,920	7,491
1984	14,616	3,627	18,243
1985	12,388	623	13,011
1986	-	4,223	4,223
1987	-	-	-
1988	-	1,323	1,323
1989	-	-	-
1990	-	-	-
1991	-	-	-
1992	-	-	-
Total	198,712	121,443	320,155

Source : UNHCR, Bangkok (June 1992)

In 1976 and 1977, while the number of Hilltribe refugees decreased to 7,266 and 3,873, the Lowland Lao increased in number to 19,499 and 18,070 respectively. In 1978, however, the number of Lowland Lao increased strikingly to 48,781, which was the highest figure on record. The large increase could be explained by many factors, namely, political restrictions, economic constraints and poor harvests after 1975. Some of the old regime personnel fled the political re-education. The austere socialist policy towards development aid from foreign countries also worsened the economic situation which was already quite bad. When added by the poor harvests from natural causes, more Lao decided to leave the country. The massive migration was also affected by the political constraints in Laos which had resulted from the dispatch of Vietnamese military forces into Laos after the Treaty of Friendship and the cooperation agreement signed with Vietnam in 1977. This was followed by the dispatch of the Vietnamese advisory corps in the same year.

Having eye-witnessed the outflow of its citizens, the LPDR tried to ease its policies by reincorporating former Royal Lao Government technocrats into the government in 1979. However, the war between China and Laos' ally, Vietnam, in 1979 initiated further unrest in Vientiane. Students and members of Laos Overseas Chinese ethnic minority were detained for re-education. They were suspected of holding dissident political views or of evading military service. The situation drove another migration in 1979. The number of Hilltribe refugees increased again to 23,943 and 14,801 in 1979 and 1980. The high number of Hilltribe refugees during 1978-1980 which totaled approximately 38,000 people might have been the result of the politics of discrimination on ethnic Hmong as well as due to economic constraints. In the same period, the number of Lowland Lao refugees also increased to approximately 67,000 (1979-1981). The government discrimination policy against ethnic Chinese caused a big outflow of Lowlanders since it was estimated that there were 60,700 ethnic Chinese in Laos (1.9% of the total population) before 1975. This big minority emigrated with other Lowland Lao.

In 1979 and 1980, there were still remarkably high numbers of Lao refugees arriving in Thailand (more than forty thousand a year). However, the numbers decreased in 1981 and 1982 to 20,733 and 5,019 respectively. The halt of collectivization in 1979 with its belated effect might have been an important factor for the decline in numbers. However, in 1984 and 1985, the number of Lowland Lao who sought refuge in Thailand rose again to 14,616 and 12,388 respectively. The explanation for this last outflow was linked to the pull factor of resettlement opportunity in third countries. Due to the high amount of resettlement during 1980 - 1981, more Lowland Lao were attracted to leave the country in the hope of being resettled in the US, Canada or France. In addition, the economic situation in Laos was not favorable. In 1985, inflation was at 29%. Nevertheless, the rural unrest which receded in 1986 and the withdrawal of the Vietnamese military forces and advisory corps in 1988 marked the start of the termination of migration from Laos.

The decreasing number of the Lao refugee outflow after 1986 was affected partially by the repatriation programme which was created in 1980. In 1987, the first group of 42 Laotian illegal immigrants were screened out by the refugee status determination process. In 1989, 196 screened out Laotians were sent back to Laos. As a result, other prospective refugees in Laos saw not much hope for resettlement and thus preferred to remain in their country rather than in refugee holding centers in Thailand. In total, 320,155 Lao fled from their country during the period 1975-1988. Among this figure, 198,712 were Lowland Laotians and 121, 443 were Hilltribe.

Current Situations in Lao Refugee Camps in Thailand

The three existing Thai camps for Lao refugees in 1992 are Ban Vinai, Ban Napho and Chieng Kham Camps, excluding Phanat Nikhom camp which is a Transit Center for resettlement.

Among the three camps, Ban Vinai Camp used to have the highest number of refugees. As of April 1990, it had 15,898 refugees. Located in Loei province in Thailand, it is opposite Vientiane Province in Laos. Ban Vinai is the largest Hilltribe camp, with a 96 per cent Hmong majority. The Htin and Yao Hilltribe minorities represented 2 and 1 per cent of the population respectively. Although it was officially closed in 1983 for new arrivals, this camp has been known to be relatively open since it has been easy for groups of newcomers to slip in and stay. However, these new arrivals have never been entitled to official camp identification and thus have not been eligible for resettlement opportunity or educational and training services in the camp. The main population of the camp are "longstayers", i.e., those who have been there for as long as 10 years or more. Between 1975-1990, only 133 persons in Ban Vinai have returned to Laos under the UNHCR programme. A study conducted

by Paul Rabe in 1990² revealed that the Hmong had no intention of returning to Laos until the communist government had been ousted. The alternatives of resettlement or continued camp life are viewed by the Hmong as distinctly more preferable than a return to a "Pre-1975" Laos. This group of Hilltribe people in Ban Vinai are, therefore, the most difficult to prepare for repatriation.

Chieng Kham camp is the other main Hilltribe Laotian camp. New Hilltribe arrivals from Laos who have been screened in by UNHCR and the Thai government are accommodated here. Chieng Kham is a smaller camp than Ban Vinai. It has a population of 17,422 (as of April 1992) who are mainly Hmong. It is situated in Phayao province which is opposite Sayaboury province and not far from Bokeo province, both of which are in Laos. Movements in and out of the camp are much more strictly controlled than in Ban Vinai, and consequently, break-ins are not likely to occur there. However, at Chieng Kham, the average per capita space is below the minimum standard set by WHO (3.5 m²).

Ban Napho camp is the camp where 10,267 Lowland Lao refugees reside (as of April 1992). It is located in Nakhon Phanom province in Thailand which is opposite the Laotian town of Tha Khek in Khammouane province. This camp admits Lowland Lao refugees. It was opened in 1983 and most camp residents fled Laos after that year. Napho is a so called "human deterrent" camp, i.e., the living conditions are kept at a subsistence level in order not to attract more refugees from joining. As in all camps, refugees are not allowed to work for money. This is to prevent cash flows within the camp in order to keep it as a temporary home. But in reality, some necessary economic activities are allowed: food and grocery shops, dressmaking and food markets. Volunteers working for Volags or international organizations would be paid the equivalent of 300 baht (equivalent to 12 US\$) per month in the form of clothes, blankets, shoes, etc..

Similarly, it is the policy of Ban Vinai camp to minimize commercial dealings. However, a small market selling everyday necessities and food is allowed. Moreover, the Hmong who are very keen on fabric decoration and other handicrafts, sell their products at the Ban Vinai morning market.

Within the camps, there has been at the end of the 1980s, a revision in educational and training programmes for Lao refugees in order to cope with the relevant needs for training in Laos. In order to prepare refugees for repatriation, UNHCR was also concerned that the programmes should be geared towards a full and quick reintegration of returnees into the economic life of villages or towns. Previous training programmes in Thai camps had traditionally covered a wide range of subjects : modern skills such as car mechanics, radio repair, typing and welding, as well as traditional crafts such as sewing, weaving, pottery and basket-weaving. However, after having attended such courses, refugees had few opportunities to use these newly-acquired skills in a normal working situation. Furthermore, since some of the courses had been designed for resettlement rather than for repatriation, they were now of limited relevance to rural life in Laos.³ Consequently, voluntary agencies in charge of educational and training services for Lao refugees have held a number of workshops to modify their programmes. Also, the Tripartite Meeting's recommendations emphasized the need for special attention to be given to training activities and primary education in the Thai camps. It was proposed in the mentioned recommendations that the curriculum for primary schools in the camps should be adjusted to be compatible with the Lao curriculum.⁴

2. Paul Rabe, *Voluntary Repatriation : The Case of Hmong in Ban Vinai*. Occasional Paper Series no.002, Indochinese Refugee Information Center. (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1990), pp. 21-34.

3. Kim Bush, "Thailand : Preparing for the Future." *Refugees* (June 1990) : pp. 16-17.

4. UNHCR, *Outline of the Plan for a Phased Repatriation and Reintegration of Laotians From Thailand to Lao PDR*. Fourth Session of the Tripartite Meeting (LPDR/RTG/UNHCR), Luang Phrabang, 27-29 June 1991, p. 2, 12.

After having obtained more information about the realities of Laos, new training programmes have been designed. One agency, Ecoles Sans Frontieres (ESF) started a small engine repair class as well as a sewing machine repair class and workshop in Ban Vinai. Refugee Care Netherlands (ZOA) designed a three-month agricultural training course and also cooperated with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Ban Napho to offer a short intensive course in basic sanitation and appropriate technology.⁵

Voluntary agencies working in Lao refugee camps comprise of Handicap International (HI), Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Refugee Care Netherlands (ZOA), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR), CAMA Services, Inc. (CAMA), Ecoles Sans Frontieres (ESF), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee (JSRC), The Ockenden Venture (TOV), and Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). They offered 3 major types of programme, namely, education, health and skills training.

Assistance to Refugees in Camps

There are 2 main kinds of assistance in the camps. First, there is the basic humanitarian assistance, i.e., food, water and other materials. The second kind comprises of educational and training services to the migrants. The level of material assistance in camps is adequate. The total budget for the Lao refugee programme in 1990 was approximately US\$ 13.0 million. A UNHCR nutrition adviser in Bangkok insists that if the rations which contain sufficient proteins and calories are distributed properly, the refugees would not suffer from malnutrition. The only problem is that there is no variety in the choice of food. Those who can afford to buy additional food with their own money would do so. Those who can not afford to do so would sell their food rations or exchange them with other types of food. If refugees have work and can earn income from that source, they would have more choices in their dietary. Water supply is sometimes in shortage, especially during the hot and dry summer season. But it is sufficient in general. Housing is provided to refugees by giving new arrivals materials to build their own houses. Certainly, living space is quite limited but does not seem to be a big problem.

Regarding educational services and training programmes in the camps, the average level of education among Hilltribe refugees is far lower than those of the other ethnic groups. In the Khao-I-Dang Khmer camp, most classes are taught by Khmer; in the Lao camps, classes are not conducted by Lao teachers. Therefore, education services are limited. In addition, most refugees realize that one day they would have to return to Laos and so would prefer to spend their time earning money instead of studying.

In terms of vocational training, refugees are in favour of the agriculture training programmes, i.e., market gardening and intensive vegetable cultivation. There are some agricultural training programmes for prospective returnees, for example, at the Agricultural Development Centre, mainly for the Htin returnees. Home-scale planting is also very useful. However, a longer run planting programme is desirable by most refugees since it is realized that once back in Laos, handicrafts can not be expected to provide a stable income despite the fact that these crafts are widely sold in Vientiane's market.

At present, most training programmes for returnees last between 2-4 weeks. NGOs consider that these should be extended to be at least between 2-3 months in duration in order to ultimately prepare prospective returnees for life after repatriation.

5. Kim Bush, *ibid.*, p. 17.

In terms of credentials, the certificates which returnees received in Thai camps are not applicable to any work in Laos especially within the Laotian educational system, i.e., the primary education in Thai camps is not recognized as being on an equivalent level to the educational system in Laos. Therefore, refugee children on return, would always face difficulties in adjusting to the domestic school system in Laos.

Life and Work in Camps

Although Lao refugees reside in closed camps, they can enjoy a certain degree of freedom. In most camps, they can go outside with the permission of the camp authorities. Also, life in the camps is not considered to be too depressing. Therefore, many refugees seem to be waiting for the best option of the durable solutions to their refuge. Many, especially the Hmong, do not really want to be resettled. They prefer to stay in safety at the border and wait until there is a political settlement in Laos, i.e., no more persecution or discrimination for those who have different ideologies. One official in Chieng Kham camp even believed that the political element is not an obstacle against returning. When the Lao government representatives came to discuss with the Hmong and Mien refugee leaders, most of the discussions and questions were focused on economics and property possession (like land and houses) in Laos. Moreover, the final decision on returning is very much a personal or family matter.

Refugees earn their living in the camps by producing goods in which they possess an expertise, i.e., in the production of silverware and in handicrafts. One UNHCR staff in Chieng Kham camp reported that the Mien formerly ran a very productive silversmith business. They sent their products to their families in the US to be sold. However, recently, the US authorities started to open all mails and began taxing the articles being sent. As a result, the Mien now look for local markets in Thailand. Nevertheless, most silverware and handicrafts made in the camps can still be sent to the US through family connections. Certain refugees earn up to 2,000 Baht per month from this trade.

There is a feeling that if living conditions in the camps are tightened up, it would act as a substantial push factor for refugees to return to their country. This might be true in Ban Vinai and Ban Napho camps which both possess silversmith factories. Reportedly, 60% of the families are involved, earning approximately 3,000 Baht a month. Hence, there is no incentive to return in a hurry. Some people might think that they are using the money to prepare themselves for the return. However, others believe that these silversmiths are spending the money to finance a comfortable way of life in the camps, while at the same time, are still claiming to be dependent on UNHCR and relatives' support from abroad.

There is the question of who is behind this business, the existence of which is contrary to the official policy. Some people, however, have suggested that the 'factory' in Thai camps be transplanted into Laos while keeping existing marketing channels. Laotian authorities are very interested in the idea. UNHCR is also keen to show the Laotian government how returnees can be converted to become an economic asset rather than acting as a burden. Currently, silver production in Laos exists only in an unorganized form. However, in early 1991, UNHCR had a plan to promote the silverware business among returnees in Laos, possibly with ILO (International Labour Organization).

Resettlement Opportunity

Since 30 September, 1990, resettlement processing has been closed by the Royal Thai government in Ban Napho Camp. No submission for resettlement has been made since then, except for vulnerable cases, protecting cases and cases with immediate links (especially spouses) in third

countries. Ban Napho Refugee Camp has been re-designated as Ban Napho Repatriation Centre. The delegations of the four main resettlement countries (Australia, Canada, France and the USA) have given their full support to the closure of the camp to resettlement processing. They have also encouraged Lowland Lao refugees to apply for voluntary repatriation, advising that they could be processed under the migration programme in order to be reunited with their families, by the embassies/consular offices concerned in Vientiane, Laos. There is only one group of Lowland Lao still eligible for resettlement according to the RTG policy, namely, the newly screened in who had been transferred directly from the Nong Saeng Screening Centre to the Panat Nikhom Centre. According to the RTG policy, they are allowed to remain in Panat Nikhom for a maximum of 3 years to seek a resettlement offer.

Resettlement processing is still open to the Hilltribe people particularly under the United States programme. The 1992 quota for the United States would probably stand at 10,000 persons, for Australia 120 persons, for Canada 20 persons, and for France 80-100 persons. Some Hilltribe people who are interested in repatriation are awaiting for their leaders to decide. Only a few who had not been involved in local politics before 1975 are now starting to return to Laos. Many, however, will only return after the first thousand have already gone back.

The Lao Voluntary Repatriation from Thailand : Characteristics and Procedures

The UNHCR Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme was established at the end of 1980 when the first group of 193 people voluntarily returned home. Since the commencement of the programme, 8,787 people have returned under the UNHCR auspices (see Table 2). Since 1980, 25 projects have been implemented in 12 different provinces in Laos, at a total cost of some US\$ 3.6 million. Approximately 2,262 people have returned to Laos under this programme between 1980-1983. During that time, the Lowland Lao believed that they would be subjected to severe discrimination following their return, and thus they preferred the rigors and austerity of camp life (with the exception of 1982, when repatriates returned to Sayabury Province). The UNHCR representatives in Laos admitted that in 1983 the programme had been delayed by political events because the very idea of voluntary repatriation was at first neither familiar to the refugees nor perceived as a real possibility. The number of returnees had sharply dropped in 1984 due to the new waves of influx to Thailand and the active resettlement processing in camps as well as the deterioration of the bilateral relationship between Laos and Thailand. An average of 200 people per year returned from 1984 to 1988. In July 1985, there was an agreement between the Lao government and UNHCR on the introduction of a screening procedure to separate the illegal immigrants from the refugees. In terms of assistance and follow-up, neither the Lao government nor UNHCR distinguished between the voluntary repatriate and the "screened out". Hence, since October 1987, UNHCR has assisted with the return of 765 "screened-out" Laotians.

Table 2 Number of Lao Refugees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme

Year	Lowland	Hilltribe	Total
1980	193	-	193
1981	279	261	540
1982	791	278	1,069
1983	515	80	595
1984	200	3	203
1985	101	134	235
1986	134	97	231
1987	33	37	70
1988	160	107	267
1989	1,424	274	1,698
1990	529	948	1,477
1991	539	882	1,421
1992	476	312	788
Total	5,374	3,413	8,787

Source : UNHCR, Bangkok (June 1992)

The return flows of Lao refugees as shown in Table 2 illustrate an interesting contrast between the Lowland Lao and the Hilltribe returnees. Hilltribe refugees were not enthusiastic to apply for repatriation in the early years for fear that they would be discriminated or persecuted on their return. The first batches of Hilltribe returnees were non-Hmong. Not until 1990 was there the significantly high number of 948 Hilltribe repatriates. This trend continued in 1991. As regards the Lowland Lao, more refugees have applied for repatriation. In 1982 and 1983, the numbers increased to 791 and 515 returnees respectively. After 1983, the return rate dropped again due to the deteriorating political relations between Laos and Thailand. As a result, the number of returnees decreased to 200, 101, 134, 33 and 160 in 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987 and 1988 respectively. The improving political relations between the two countries and the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) and the Tripartite Agreement in 1989 resulted in the remarkably high number of Lowland returnees (1524 persons) since 1989.

In 1989, the number of applicants for voluntary repatriation started to increase steadily and simultaneously with the improvement in both the bilateral relationship of the two countries and the general situation in Laos. There were 1,698 Laotian refugees who voluntarily returned to their homeland in that same year. Responding to refugees' growing interest in returning home, a series of dialogues among the two governments and UNHCR have been held. The first Tripartite Meeting was

held in Udorn Thani, Thailand in May 1989. The second Tripartite Meeting was held in Luang Prabang in June 1991. The main results of these meetings were as follow:

1. changes were made to simplify and accelerate the procedure for repatriation, (at the first meeting, it was agreed that the returnee/monthly rate would be 150, but this was revised at the second meeting to a ceiling of 300 per month). In this way, refugees who applied for the programme could return home within two months, often within a few weeks.
2. all parties agreed to outline actions which could be taken within a definite time frame towards obtaining durable solutions for all Lao refugees.
3. it was agreed that, given the current reception capacity on the Lao side, repatriation would be organized every month. The Lao government agreed to receive monthly, 500-1,000 Lao returnees and agreed to receive all 60,000 Laotian refugees by the 1994 time frame. The first batch of 5,000-6,000 families would start leaving in May 1992 and the last batch of 6,000 families would start to leave in June 1993 with the last family having left by the end of 1994.
4. Laotian authorities have agreed to arrange housing facilities and land allocation for the returnees in Xieng Khouang, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Sayaboury and Bokeo for resettlement.

The repatriation programme is now firmly established. Besides the 7,668 Lao who returned from the camps in Thailand, there are 339 Lao who have returned to Laos from other countries (i.e. US, France, Australia, Japan, China, Switzerland, and India). In addition to the repatriates who returned under the auspices of the UNHCR programme, it is estimated that 20,000-25,000 immigrants or "free livers" who stayed on the border have spontaneously returned to Laos. Although it is difficult to identify the number of spontaneous returnees, this group of repatriates should be taken into account when assistance projects for returnees are planned.

In the Thai camps, UNHCR organizes active promotion activities through audio-visual materials. An encouraging sign has been the move to start applying for group repatriation such as those by a group of mainly Yao Hilltribesmen. Lao officials from the ministries have also visited the camps in Thailand. The subsequent discussions between the Lao officials and refugees have allowed the latter the opportunity to raise questions to clarify any ambiguities.

There is an impression that refugees would be prepared to return home and reintegrate if proper assistance was provided and the policy of amnesty restated. During the last three years, refugees seemed to be more receptive to the idea of repatriation, encouraged by the increasing repatriation trends and the improvements both of socio economic conditions in Laos and bilateral relationships between the two countries. Refugees do not object, in principle, to returning and resettling in areas proposed by the Government in rural areas and engaging in more permanent agricultural practices.⁶

In Laos, LPDR also encourages repatriation through various means. Returnees are re-registered as full citizens. Personal safety is guaranteed for all returning refugees, even for old soldiers, except those who join the resistance upon return.⁷

6. UNHCR, *ibid.*, p. 2.

7. Paul Rabe, *ibid.*, p. 26.

The steadily increasing number of Lao returnees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme has led to the review of the programme to fit with newly emerging needs upon return. A review mission conducted by UNHCR representatives from Geneva, Bangkok and Vientiane, and LPDR government officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Social Welfare and War Veterans, and Agriculture, went to Laos and Thailand in November 1990 for discussions with the line ministries, UN agencies, NGOs and donor agencies. They also made a field trip to the provinces of Xieng Khouang, Vientiane, Luang Prabang, Sayaboury and Bokeo, provinces which are potential areas for return in the north of Laos.

The Process of Voluntary Repatriation

In reality, the process of return starts with the decision made by the person himself or herself. The UNHCR counsellors who are present in the camps would provide the refugee with information on the procedures to follow and on conditions in Laos. This would help the person who has shown interest in voluntary repatriation to make an informed decision. Once the refugee has made a decision to return, the name list of volunteered returnees would be sent to the UNHCR office in Vientiane for approval. All the expenses of the repatriation process are financed by UNHCR. A date for the actual return and a crossing point would then jointly be agreed upon among the two governments and UNHCR on both sides. There are currently six crossing points for the voluntary repatriation of the Laotian refugees. The six crossing points, the nomination of which depended on the returnees' final destination areas, are as follows:

Thailand Crossing Point		Laos Crossing Point
Chongmek	to hand over in	Phonethon
Mukdaharn	to hand over in	Suwannakhet
Nongkai	to hand over in	Thadeua
Chiangkhong	to hand over in	Huaysai
Nakorn Panom	to hand over in	Thakhek
Thapaekananyon	to hand over in	Thanalang (VT)

Prior to the journey back to Laos, the returnee would be provided with a certain amount of money by UNHCR from which useful items for starting a new life in Laos could be bought. The returnee would be allowed to bring most of his or her belongings in the camp back to Laos. The day before the return, a "Baci" ceremony, a Laotian custom to bring returnees good luck, would be organized by UNHCR.

On the day of the movement, the Thai officials and the UNHCR staff members would accompany the returnee to the crossing point to be received by the Laotian officials and the UNHCR Vientiane staff members. Once on Lao soil, the returnee would be recognized as a "Lao citizen" by the government and would be accorded full rights and responsibilities. The Lao government has assigned the responsibility for receiving and assisting returnees to the Ministry of Social Affairs and War Veterans which acts as UNHCR's counterpart at both the central and provincial levels. UNHCR also works closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior. Upon arrival, a short ceremony would be held on the Laotian side of the border and friendly speeches exchanged by the representatives and UNHCR on both sides. The ceremony would then conclude with the exchange of gifts and a toast. Thereafter, the returnee would reside in the transit center near the crossing point (there are currently seven throughout the country) for 7 days where he or she would be registered as

a Lao citizen by the Laotian authorities and briefed on the current economic and political situations. During this time, he or she would be fed and cared for, and any necessary medical care, provided. To help with the initial period of reintegration, UNHCR would provide immediate assistance to all repatriates in the form of a 1000 Baht cash donation per person from UNHCR Thailand (with large families, this comes to a sizeable amount), and a further cash donation of the equivalent of 400 Baht from UNHCR Laos as well as rice for up to one year (100 kgs of rice per family member). It is at this time that the travel arrangements for the final leg of the trip home would be made. The returnee would normally return to his or her village of origin, and the final trip might involve travelling by any combination of plane, helicopter, boat, truck and cart, and certainly on foot. UNHCR is in charge of the cost of running and maintaining the transit centers, as well as the transportation costs from the border crossing points to the transit center and then to the villages of origin where they are presented to the local authorities. It is at this juncture that the returnee can finally start a new life. If required, the provinces would provide the returnee with land on which to build a house or for cultivation. Many provinces would also exempt the returnee from paying taxes and serving in the militia for the first few years after repatriation.



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Summary

Since 1975, a total of 320,155 Lao refugees have fled their country into neighbouring Thailand. The roller-coasting trend of the migratory flows of both Lowland Lao and Hilltribe people into Thailand was caused by both push and pull factors. From 1975, political restrictions, economic constraints and natural causes in the form of bad harvests, pushed the Lao out of their homeland. By 1979, the dispatch of Vietnamese military forces and advisory corps into Laos as well as the politics of discrimination of ethnic groups such as on the Chinese and the Hmong, drove thousands more out of Laos. However, although the belated effect of the halt of collectivization reduced the scale of the outflow in the early 1980s, by 1984, due to the pull factor of the resettlement opportunity in third countries, notably, in the US, Canada, Australia and France, the number of refugees arriving in Thailand began to rise again. Nevertheless, the effect of the pull factor was short-lived for with the withdrawal of the Vietnamese military presence and the improved relations between Laos and Thailand the migratory flows declined in size and frequency and eventually ceased in 1988.

Meanwhile, in the three Thai camps which housed Lao refugees at Ban Vinai, Ban Napho and Chieng Kham, it became apparent that with the changing policy towards the refugee issue from one which had been geared towards resettlement to one which has been geared to repatriation, a revision in educational and training programmes was required. Subsequently, the voluntary agencies' programmes have been modified to be of more relevance to rural life in Laos as well as to provide an educational system, compatible to the Lao curriculum. In terms of vocational training, the agriculture training programmes have been highly favoured by prospective returnees. However, concerning most training programmes, NGOs have considered the duration of 2-4 weeks to be insufficient and instead, recommend that these programmes ought to be at least 2-3 months in duration in order to adequately prepare returnees for life after repatriation. Another type of assistance to refugees in the camps has been in the form of the basic humanitarian assistance, such as food, water and housing. In general, the level of assistance has been considered to be sufficient.

The day-to-day activities of camp life illustrate a relative degree of freedom. In fact, many refugees especially among the Hmong have preferred to remain in the camps not only for political reasons but also because of economic motives, such as property possession in Laos. Moreover, contrary to camp policy, economic activities, notably, the productive silversmith business, have been flourishing within the camps.

Regarding the resettlement opportunity into third countries which has acted as both a magnet in attracting refugees to the Thai camps as well as a disincentive to repatriation, following the Tripartite Meetings among the LPDR, the RTG, and UNHCR in 1989 and 1991, actions have been taken to make resettlement a less viable option. For instance, in Ban Napho Camp, the resettlement processing centre has been closed to most Lowland Lao although it has continued to remain open to the Hilltribe people under the US programme.

Although it was only since 1989 that the repatriation programme has been firmly established with 5,384 refugees having returned to Laos, a UNHCR Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme has been in existence since the end of 1980. However, prior to 1989, the repatriation programme had not been very successful and with the exception of 1987 when there were 1,069 returnees, the annual number of returnees during the period 1980-1988 had been less than 300. It was not until the improvement of both the bilateral relations between Laos and Thailand and the general situation in Laos which permitted the implementation of the CPA and the Tripartite Meetings that repatriation has taken place on a significant scale. Measures have been taken on all sides in order to further encourage refugees to undertake the process of voluntary repatriation which would lead the Lao returnees to a new life in Laos.

Chapter Two

Voluntary Repatriation : Policies and Operations

The UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Programme for Lao refugees was not very successful at its initial phase in 1980. Only 193 refugees returned in that year (see Table 2). However, the annual number of returnees has since fluctuated. It reached a peak in 1989 after the implementation of the CPA which required countries of origin to cooperate in taking back their rejected immigrants from first asylum countries and which also encouraged the repatriation of existing Indochinese refugees. In the same year, the Tripartite Meeting (among UNHCR, the RTG, and LPDR) was also held in Thailand. In fact, the fluctuating number of returnees in the programme varied according to the policies of the various parties involved. The roles of UNHCR, the RTG, the LPDR government as well as some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are to be examined in this chapter.

UNHCR

As the core agency of this programme, UNHCR plays a key role in encouraging and operating repatriation. The UNHCR guiding policy on Volrep is based on the "freely expressed wish of the individual concerned, in conditions of absolute safety, and with full respect for their basic human rights on both sides of the border".¹ UNHCR will seek guarantees that returnees will not be subjected to discrimination and that their human rights will be respected. In addition, unbiased information about the above mentioned conditions must be available to refugees. Potential returnees must all have true freedom of choice.² In addition, UNCHR possesses a humanitarian role of monitoring the welfare of returnees.

In promoting repatriation, UNHCR was active in the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees held in June 1989 in Geneva and pushed hard for the CPA to implement voluntary repatriation vigorously. UNHCR also organized the Tripartite Meetings with the RTG and LPDR in order to make concrete guidelines for repatriation operations and promotion in the Lao refugee camps.

1. Dennis McNamara, "Repatriation : Policy and Principles." *Refugees* (February 1990): 10-11.

2. Pierre Jambor, "Breaking a Vicious Circle" *Refugees*, (February 1990): 7-10.

Within the camps in Thailand, there are three levels of promotion : mass education, group education and individual counselling.

- a. Mass education. Information campaigns for repatriation are given at least once a week. The campaigns include slide projection and video projection. 800-1000 people attend each session. The slides and videos projections contain documentaries on Laos, specific events provided by UNHCR, messages on health and education development. Some TV games are also used for this purpose.
- b. Group education. In the Volrep centre in each camp, UNHCR uses a question-and-answer session such as Volrep "bingo" to disseminate repatriation information. Video tapes made in Vientiane on direct addresses by those who had already returned to Laos to their relatives in the camps are shown twice a week.
- c. Individual counselling. The clients are mainly relatives and close friends of those already returned. UNHCR officials would explain to them the whole situation in Laos and ask them to consider repatriation. Potential applicants can fill a form asking questions on the conditions in Laos and the implications on their cases, e.g., what happens if someone else has taken over their land and they would like to have it back?

UNHCR in Laos regularly sends documents to the refugee camps in Thailand for display and distribution. Those materials include Lao newspapers and magazines as well as photos and videos prepared by the UNHCR staff during their follow-up of repatriates and visits of UN assisted development projects. One of the UN personnel suggested that a video in Hmong version should be carefully made. Also, many Hmong returnees have made cassettes which were given to UNHCR and then passed on to their relatives and friends in the Thai camps.

UNHCR has also given a great deal of attention to the reintegration of returnees. Usually, the integration of Lowland Lao returnees is much easier than the Hilltribe's because most of the former (90 percent) have close relatives or friends in Laos who had been looking after their properties. Therefore, they can return and easily repossess their own properties. However, the Hilltribe refugees had departed with nothing left behind. Prior to 1975, many Hmong had been completely dependent on US assistance and thus did not have any means of livelihood. Those with a little working experience were skilled in opium growing or slash-and-burn agriculture. As a result, the LPDR has always been reluctant for the Hmong to return to the mountains and to continue such cultivation. Therefore, should they return, they ought to be resettled in new areas with new friends. Evidently, compared to the Lowland Lao, reintegration for the Hilltribesmen is not so easy.

By the end of 1989, the nature and magnitude of the repatriation programme began to change with Hilltribes returning (mainly Yao and Htin) or wishing to return to Laos (like the 1,000 Hmong in Chieng Kham camp who were resided in new settlement areas in the northern provinces).

In light of these new trends and given the need to strengthen the planning and implementing capacity of the partners involved, the UNHCR Review Mission of November 1990 together with the Branch Offices in Laos and Thailand concluded that the approach followed and the level of assistance provided so far would not permit a sufficiently quick and effective response to the repatriation and reintegration of an increasing number of large groups. The approach and level of assistance should therefore be re-directed. A comprehensive, coordinated and integrated plan of action, with appropriate and clear-cut planning, implementation and monitoring mechanisms, was required in order to properly cope with the eventual future increasing number of returnees and to consolidate the ongoing reintegration projects, inter-alia, in Sayaboury and Bokeo provinces.

From 1980-1989, some 30 projects with UNHCR funding have been initiated and implemented in various provinces by the Ministry of Social Welfare and its provincial departments. These represent an estimated amount of US\$ 4 million and an average unit cost ranging from US\$ 20,000 to 25,000. All these projects benefited both the repatriates and the surrounding population and consisted generally of the following components:

- direct and immediate assistance on an individual basis to repatriates, including food, domestic items, agricultural implements, etc.
- assistance to hosting areas aimed at facilitating reintegration : schools, dispensaries, water supply, etc.

Although the majority of repatriates went back to rural areas (about 85% of the overall population is engaged in subsistence agriculture), a large proportion have returned to Vientiane Municipality (20%). The most common problem encountered by urban repatriates was finding employment or acquiring training skills relevant to the rapidly changing situation in urban areas. A skills identification survey was carried out between December 1, 1990 to January 30, 1991. The survey sampling included a wide range of economic and business activities registered under both the Vientiane Municipality Administration and the Central Government in Vientiane Municipality. The purpose of this survey was to facilitate the orientation of the vocational training activities in refugee camps in Thailand in order to offer future returnees appropriate time to enable them to find employment in urban areas after their return. The results could provide valuable feedback, information and orientation for planners and policy makers for the adoption of appropriate measures in employment, training and manpower.

The results of this survey indicated a big demand for the period between 1991-1995 for textile and garment skilled labour, electricians, electronic and telecommunication technicians, restaurant-hotel-tourism skilled persons, accounting and management policy staff. These results reflect exactly the widening Government policies to open the door to market economy in order to attract foreign investment and tourism.

The Review Mission on repatriation also proposed a new plan for the Laotian phased repatriation. According to the new plan, there should be three phases of repatriation and the number of returnees in each phase should be in accordance with the development of the programme.

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| Phase One | (July 1991 - May 1992) 500 persons will return, making a total of 5,000-6,000 returnees per year. |
| Phase Two | (June 1992 - May 1993) 3,600 families will return to 5-6 key provinces, namely, Vientiane, Sayaboury, Xieng Khouang, Luang Prabang and Bokeo. Approximately, 50-60 families will repatriate per province per month. |
| Phase Three | (June 1993 - End 1994) 5,000-6,000 families will return to the same key provinces. Approximately, 70-80 families will repatriate per province per month. This will be the last phase of the programme when the last groups of refugees in the Thai camps are expected to return. |

The UNHCR Vientiane office has another significant role in repatriation, namely, to operate development projects designed to promote the reintegration of returnees. The projects include the construction and equipping of schools and dispensaries; the construction or repair of irrigation, reservoirs, canals and water-gates; the provision of tools, seeds and other inputs for agriculture; and the provision of equipment, teaching aids and scholarships for vocational training for young urban returnees. Since 1980, more than eighteen projects have been implemented in twelve provinces in

Laos such as in Saravane, Luang Nam Tha, Borikhamseay, Xieng Khouang, Bokeo, Vientiane, etc.. These multi-sectoral projects aim to improve the social and economic infrastructure for returnees and the surrounding population so that reintegration after the return becomes sustainable. They also provide the UNHCR personnel with opportunities to monitor the well being of the returnees.

Apart from UNHCR, other UN agencies who are involved in social development in LPDR which directly or indirectly affect returnees are UNDP, WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO, UNFPA, etc..

The Royal Thai Government

Discussed in this section are the policies and opinions of Thai government officials towards the Laotian Voluntary Repatriation Programme as well as, in their opinion, the main obstacles of the programme. Both documentary researches and interviews on 15 high and low ranking Thai government officials whose work involves refugees were conducted.

When hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees fled from war, communism and starvation into Thailand, it was inevitable for Thailand to accept them according to humanitarian principles. However, since the government perceives the migration of refugees as a threat to Thailand's national security, it has tried to solve the refugee problem as soon as possible. Although the government has asked third countries to help receive these refugees for resettlement, with the eventual decline in the number of refugees being accepted for resettlement, it has become evident that the best solution for the problem is voluntary repatriation.

From 1975 to June, 1990 as many as 344,647 Laotians entered Thailand. Most arrived by land at Nan, Uttaradit, Chiang Rai and Ubonrachathani provinces. The Hilltribes and the Lowland Lao were separately put into camps in the Northeast of Thailand. Presently, most have been resettled in the USA. However, those who have been left behind now pose as a much heavier burden to Thailand.

Strictly speaking, among Thai officials, these Indochinese illegal immigrants are not called "refugees" due to the fact that Thailand is not a party to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Legal Status of Refugees. This fact reflects the Thai government's policy of not wanting refugees to stay in the country for too long, instead, wishing that they would leave as soon as possible.

In most government publications on refugees as well as in some monographs written individually by Thai government officials, refugees are mentioned as a threat to national security. They classify the threat into 5 categories:³

1. Threat to the administration and governing system. A large number of refugees staying together sometimes create problems, such as, drugs and crime. And the allocation of large areas of land for refugees also causes discontent among the Thai locals who have no farmland of their own.

3. Kasit Bhirom. "Discussions on the Indochinese Refugees 1988-1990" (Thesis of National Defence College, 1990), p.2-5.



2. Political problem. Some refugees are members of the old regime who continue to fight against the present regime. Although the government does not support the opposition groups, the continuous fighting may cause misunderstanding between Thailand and Laos. Moreover, even though the government has tried its best, Thailand has always been unfairly criticized for mistreating the refugees by human rights groups.

3. Economic problem. The government has to allocate some of its personnel and budget for administering the camps. Additionally, when the government has to buy large quantities of supplies from the local market, local people suffer from price fluctuations.

4. Social problem. Some Thai villagers are jealous that refugees are better treated and supported. This may cause severe societal conflict between locals and refugees in the future.

5. Security problem. When certain groups of refugees continue their fight against the Indochinese government, Thai villagers who live along the border are put in danger, especially as sometimes the fighting lures the Laotian army to cross the border into Thailand in order to suppress the opposition groups. Furthermore, among the refugees themselves, there have been some who have tried to arouse ill-feeling within the Laotian group against the Thai government.

It is evident that the Thai government officials' point of view is formulated on a different standpoint from that of non-government organizations' or international organizations'. The NGOs and the international organizations look at the refugees as homeless and hopeless people who require help. However, the Thai government looks at the refugees both as a threat, but also, as humans who need help. Since people react according to their perception of the situation, the government has different roles to play, namely, to facilitate the assistance from the international community, and also to protect the interests of its country and its people.

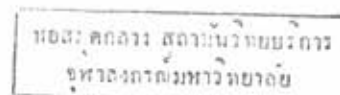
Since 1975, the government's refugee policy has changed according to changing domestic and international political situations. During the first 4 years (1975-1979), the government allowed refugees to stay in Thailand temporarily, on the condition that their presence did not pose as a threat to the people's interest. In addition, the Thai Government formulated preventative and retaliatory measures to the refugee influx. The Cabinet Decision of June 3, 1975⁴ established guidelines in which two were significant to the repatriation aspect. They were:

"Should any displaced persons attempt to enter the Kingdom, measures will be taken to send them out of the Kingdom as fast as possible. If it is not possible to repel them, they will be detained in camps."

"The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will act as coordinator with international organizations and contact the governments of Lao, Cambodia and Vietnam so as to ask them to repatriate their own nationals."

During this early period more effort was emphasized on allowing refugees to stay temporarily with certain rules and regulations. At the same time, the government tried to peacefully push them back to their countries of origin.

4. Ministry of Interior, *Indochinese Displaced Persons in Thailand*. (Bangkok: Ministry of Interior, 1980), p. 3.



A change in refugee policy was witnessed in 1979. The then Prime Minister, Gen. Kriangsak Chamanan, ordered all concerning government agencies to help the refugees. For the time, it seemed that the government had decided to temporarily accept the refugee burden while looking at resettlement as a suitable solution. The policy was steered towards encouraging more refugees to resettle in third countries. Also, the government called for more international assistance both in terms of financial assistance and also in accepting more refugees for resettlement. The policy proved to be successful since an increasing number of camps closed down due to the decreasing number of inhabitants. According to UNHCR figures, the total number of resettled Laotians was 295,682 at the end of October, 1991.

However, it appears that the global economic depression as well as domestic problems in third countries caused the reduction in the number of refugees accepted for resettlement. Moreover, the composition of most refugees who had been left behind was made up of those who had been either unable to meet third countries' criteria or had not been *bona fide* refugees. Furthermore, the Thai government changed its stand to the Humane Deterrence Policy in 1980 when Gen. Kriangsak's government fell from power. It was not until 1988 that Thailand moderated its policy to a more relaxed one, as stated by a key policy maker in 1988:

"Thailand will continue to provide assistance to refugees, in accordance with humanitarian principles and in conjunction with the preservation of our sovereignty, national interest and national security. Refugees will be allowed to seek temporary refuge in Thailand while they await resettlement in third countries or repatriation to their respective countries of origin. The Royal Thai Government does not have the policy of allowing refugees to permanently settle in Thailand."⁵

The government decided that the time was ripe for voluntary repatriation because the socio-economical situation in Laos was recovering and the Thai-Lao relationship was getting closer. When the voluntary repatriation program started in 1980, it was not successful because refugees still had hopes of being resettled. Therefore, the government began a status determination program in 1985 in order to separate the *bona fide* refugees from the non-refugees. Screening committees were thus established at the district level to conduct the screening process. The criteria for being screened in were:

- former civil servants, soldiers and policemen of the government who were employed prior to the revolution in Laos; persons who worked for embassies, international organizations or foreign private companies prior to the revolution in Laos
- persons who participated in political, administrative or social activities deemed to be antagonistic to the present Laotian Government; persons who have direct relatives in third countries, i.e., father, mother, son and daughter⁶

Refugees who failed to prove that they fell under any of these criteria were screened out for repatriation to Laos.

5. Statement of Suwit Suthanakul, Secretary General of the National Security Council at the 1988 CCSDPT Conference, Bangkok 1988.

6. The Public Affairs Foundation, *Indochinese Refugees in Thailand: Prospects for Longstayers*, (Bangkok: Innomedia Co., Ltd., 1989), p. 29.

Another problem existed, namely, that the Lao government was not ready to receive its people back. From 1985-1988, thousands of screened-out Laotians were still held in camps because they were neither eligible for resettlement nor accepted by their country. They became a heavier burden to Thailand.

At the end of 1988, following the warmer relations between Thailand and Lao PDR, refugee problems were given more attention. Voluntary repatriation was seriously implemented after UNHCR, the RTG and Lao PDR agreed to co-ordinate their efforts in the Tripartite Meetings in 1989-1990. The program has been conducted under the following conditions:⁷

1. Only Laotians who voluntarily apply for the program will be considered.
2. Applicants will be sent back only when the Lao government is ready to accept them.
3. UNHCR will be the program coordinator and will be responsible for all expenditures.

The Ministry of Interior arranged 4 checkpoints in 4 provinces for sending and receiving refugees:

1. Tha Sadet, Nongkhai Province
2. Chong Mek, Ubonrajathani Province
3. Mukdahan, Mukdahan Province
4. Chiangkhong, Chiangrai Province

According to UNHCR's figures, the number of repatriated Laotian refugees increased significantly between 1988 - 1989 (267 cases in 1988 and 1698 cases in 1989). However, these numbers have been considered to be unsatisfactory. There should have been more refugees repatriated. The Thai government is hoping for the repatriation of all Laotian refugees by 1994.

The causes of the low rate of Laotian voluntary repatriation is still unknown. Each party, Thailand, UNHCR and Laos, has its own side of the story. On the Thai side, from the interviews on the 15 government officials, the same pattern of thought was given by almost everyone. Most said that the Laotian refugees had run away from communism in their country and so they now hesitated to go back. However, when the research question referred to the hypothesis that the fear for different ideologies and political regimes were the main obstacles to repatriation, informants said that most members of the old regime had already been resettled. Those who have been left in the camps were mainly farmers. Thus, the hypothesized reason can not be valid.

Most officials said the refugees did not want to go back because they wanted to go to third countries. This may be a cause of delay in applying for repatriation. In the case of the Hilltribes, officials in Chiang Kham and Ban Vinai camps added that refugee leaders told their people not to return but to stay at the border camps.

It should be noticed that 4 high ranking Thai officials mentioned economic reasons as obstacles to repatriation. It was discovered that since most refugees who did not want to return were mainly from Hilltribes, their economic reasons against returning might possibly have been the limited employment opportunities in Laos. Only the older generations of this refugee group had

7. Ministry of Interior, *Problems of Displaced Persons and Illegal Immigrants in Thailand*, (Bangkok: Ministry of Interior, 1982), p. 12.

practiced slash-and-burn cultivation of certain cash crops on the mountain and opium growing when they had been in Laos. The younger ones (under 12 years old) who constitute 41.12 per cent of the Hilltribe refugee population in 1987⁸ knew nothing about agricultural techniques. Some had even been born in the camps. In addition, they had no employment in the camps. The employment policy in refugee camps forbade them to work for money in an attempt to prevent the flow of cash within the camps as well as to keep the camps only as a temporary home. Most skills training programmes offered in the camps ended up by lack of opportunity to practice the newly acquired skills. Consequently, the Hilltribe refugees seemed not to be suited for agricultural work nor other skilled jobs. In this way, it can be seen that concerning certain refugee groups, economic factors constituted greater obstacles to repatriation than political constraints.

One of the government officials who was well experienced in refugee issues summarized the problem of the low rate of repatriation as:

1. UNHCR could not adequately and comprehensively monitor the lives of the early returnees. Refugees did not receive information about how the early returnees were treated in Laos.
2. Refugees fled into Thailand in the hope of being resettled. Therefore, they had sold all their properties and land in Laos. Now they could not return because they had no land for farming to return to.
3. Refugees did not have confidence in the Lao government.
4. Refugees still hoped to be resettled.
5. Foreign assistance in Lao PDR did not provide sufficient aid for economic development. Refugees could not see promising means to earn their livelihood.

Officials were asked to express their opinions on the voluntary repatriation program as a durable solution. All the high ranking officials said that it was the best solution for the refugee problem. Those refugees living in third countries were not as happy as they should have been because of the different culture and climate. Besides, they are now not living in their own country. All the officials agreed that the voluntary repatriation program was successful to a certain level. The main obstacle was the delayed process on the Lao side. The Lao government took almost 6 months to consider the name list of applicants. This delay casts doubts in the refugees' minds and made them feel uncertain whether or not they would be welcome back in Laos. They thought that if the Lao government was unwilling to accept them, then they did not want to return.

Most of the Thai officials in the camps suggested that in order to promote the voluntary repatriation program, the refugees should have sufficient information about the overall situation in Laos. They might want to send their representatives to survey for farmland and the safety of life in Laos. Moreover, refugees should be encouraged to return by their leaders, families or friends both in third countries and in Laos. In terms of government policy, Thailand should exercise more measures to prevent further refugee influx from Laos and to encourage more voluntary repatriation. Suggested measures would be to stop all income generating activities in the camps and to let the third countries announce their criteria for resettlement.

8. Amara Pongsapich and Noppawan Chongwatana. "The Refugees Situation in Thailand," In *Indochinese Refugees : Asylum and Resettlement*, eds. S. Chantavanich and B. Reynolds. (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1988), p.25.

In conclusion, because refugees are considered a threat to national security, Thailand's refugee policy is part of its security policy. The government has tried to solve this problem as soon as possible. However, refugee issues are not a matter concerning Thailand alone. Hence, the solutions are varied according to different factors arising at different times. While the policies may have changed, the main objective has always been the same. That is, to allow refugees to temporarily stay in the country. For the time being, it seems that the best solution is voluntary repatriation.

The LPDR Government

The Lao government now has a policy which re-accepts its citizens. A high ranking authority in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who is directly in charge of refugee work insisted that there has been no discrimination on returnees; both Lowland Lao as well as Hilltribe refugees are equally welcomed to repatriate.⁹

At the Luang Prabang Workshop on Highland Lao Refugee Repatriation in October 1990, the LPDR policy towards Lao repatriation was declared to Lao provincial officials as:

What is the LPDR government policy toward refugee? Firstly, they are still Lao, so we welcome them back, even though they fled. All can come back if they do so peacefully. Those who broke the law, such as embezzlers, would have to face the courts. Most come back through UNHCR, and want to participate in the development of the country. We would like all to return with good intentions. Our policy does not discriminate Highlanders. Lao refugees in Thailand are all the same; they are all equal.¹⁰

However, the government reserves the right to treat the refugee issue as an "internal matter":

The various provinces, when dealing with refugees, must go through the ministry for guidance. All returnees have rights equal to any other Lao, but those who come back do not bring with them their rights from abroad. They become Lao again, and must follow Lao laws.¹¹

The Lao policy is to let people return to their villages of origin, provided they still have relatives there. If they do not have relatives in the chosen areas, they have to go to places where the government suggests. If repatriates want to go to sensitive areas, it is only upon the provincial authorities' permission. A suitable alternative and a new area must be proposed if returnees cannot go to their chosen place.

9. Interview with His Excellency Souban Srithirath, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs in Vientiane, 29 October 1990.

10. Maligna Xaignavong, Director of the International Organizations, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Speeches at the Luang Prabang Workshop on Highland Lao Repatriation, 24-31 October 1990.

11. Ibid.

Regarding the Highlanders who had been used to the Upland environment, the government policy which relates to the issue of deforestation, aims to resettle them in the Lowland to grow cash crops and to stop slash-and-burn agriculture, a practice which they had been accustomed to in the Upland. The policy also concerns the termination of the practices of opium growing among the Hmong. For forest preservation, each province has been required to devise a plan to help returnees make a living. The LPDR has been cooperating closely with UNHCR for the construction of the infrastructure especially in rural settlements for the returnees. However, sometimes there has been a lack of coordination. For example, in one district a school was built, but the nearest water supply was two kilometers away. Thus, the school was useless.¹²

Spontaneous repatriation is accepted as long as people do not create disturbances. Up to October 1990, there were some 12,000-13,000 spontaneous returnees who repatriated without UNHCR assistance.¹³ Group repatriation is also possible. For example, one hundred Htin families were resettled in Bokeo province. Each province, therefore, has to study all requests for group resettlement. Failure to do so could lead to problems. For instance, the government had resettled a group of Hmong returnees on land along the Luang Prabang route, 52 km outside Vientiane Municipality with the intention that they would remain there on a permanent basis. However, when the research team went to interview them, many had left for other destination areas with very few having stayed on. This phenomenon indicates that the government will have to solve the problem of relocation or second resettlement among Highland returnees and this will certainly affect all development projects designed.

As for the Highlanders who chose Vientiane City and other urban areas as their relocation preference in order to make a living and to have access to education, there is no discrimination in principle. However, if large numbers want to return to the cities, that would necessitate further consultation. New settlers will not be able to use private property in the Vientiane area, but there are public places that could be used.¹⁴ It is accepted that the biggest problem (for repatriation) is finding a place for returnees to live.¹⁵

Reclamation of property previously owned prior to departure from Laos is also another issue for policy consideration. A new law was enacted in 1990 to permit returnees to reclaim their houses and land. According to the law, there are three categories of people who left Laos with different rights to claims:

Category	Cut off Date	Rights	Date
1.	Prior to 1975	with rights to claim until	1994
2.	1975-1988	with rights to claim until	1992
3.	Post 1988	ineligible to claim	

12. Nyi Singpaseut, Vice Minister of the Ministry of Social Welfare and War Veterans. Speeches at the Luang Phabang Workshop on Highland Lao Repatriation, 24-31 October 1990.

13. Maligna, *ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. Nyi, *ibid.*

Repatriates from the first two categories, by law, must request the return of land and houses within six months after their return to Laos. If the six month deadline has lapsed the houses and land would become state property.¹⁶

It may be wondered why 1988 was introduced as the demarcation year between the "have rights to reclaim" and the "have nots". This can be explained by the political and economic situation in Laos at that time. As mentioned in Chapter One, in 1985, inflation in Laos was 29%. This was the result of the economic recession in earlier years. The practice of collectivization (during 1984-1985), the rural unrest as well as the movement of the Vietnamese military forces and the advisory corps into Laos mutually caused the flight of people. On the other hand, high expectation for resettlement in third countries and family reunification acted as a pull factor to the refugee.¹⁷ However, after 1988, the rural unrest receded; Vietnamese military forces and the advisory corps withdrew. The country has since returned to an almost normal way of life in which people seemed to have no truly justified reasons to leave.

From the interview with Lao authorities, the Lao authorities classified the migrants into two categories. First, those who had left during the 1975-1988 period were those who were mainly reactionists to the socialist regime, comprising of high ranking officials in the Royal government, businessmen, intellectuals (overseas graduates), and the insurgency members. Second, there were also those who had left after 1988 as economic migrants who fled farm collectivization, and joined their families, or as the Hmong, who ignorantly followed their compatriots. Therefore, the post 1988 migrants, in the opinion of the Lao authorities, do not deserve any reclamation rights since they had left the country at a time when it was in a peaceful state.

Concerning returnees whose former occupations were as civil servants, teachers, and police officials, the government policy has been unable to guarantee whether or not they can retain their old jobs. A high ranking official explained that:

...Their flight (from Laos) showed their difference of opinion with the present government, and since these people would want to return to positions of responsibility where they are influencing others, it may be difficult. Regarding former police officials, I think it is unlikely they could rejoin the police force.¹⁸

Former Royal Lao government officials (not previously employed in the above mentioned occupations) can return if there is no outstanding legal action to be cleared up upon their return. "If a person has broken the law he can not come back in the cloak of a refugee".¹⁹ That is why the authorities emphasize that "those who come back do not bring with them their rights from abroad." No repatriate will have any problems returning if he or she has good intentions. It was added that former civil servants were considered as individuals leaving their responsibilities and jobs²⁰

16. Maligna, *ibid.*

17. Interview with the Lao authorities in Vientiane between 30 July-1 August 1991.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

20. Singkham Chanthaluong, Representative, Ministry of Interior at Luang Phabang Workshop. Speech at the Luang Phabang Workshop on Highland Lao Repatriation, 24-31 October 1990.

(which implied that they would not return to their old jobs). However, certain places have wanted these people to return to their old occupations: "There is nothing for them to fear as long as they do not return to their old ways (of thinking)".²¹

The process of repatriation on the Lao side has been rather slow, resulting in the low repatriation rate during the first years following the implementation of the CPA. Once the government received the names of applicants from UNHCR, it checked to see if the place in which prospective repatriates wanted to reside could support them. This procedure went to the provincial and district levels and was time-consuming especially when the province could not accept the request and instead, decided that applicants ought to reside in other places. Three ministries have been involved in the process, namely, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Interior, and Social Welfare and War Veterans. The latter has been the agency directly responsible for repatriation. Unfortunately, it is a newly established ministry which separated from the Ministry of Public Health in 1989 and thus has very few staff on displaced person matters (four persons). Vientiane Municipality has also provided assistance for reorientation and resettlement issues.

When repatriates arrive in Laos, they are required to stay in the transit centers to attend a seven day reorientation programme before leaving for their final destination areas. It is at these centers that they receive their last UNHCR rations which comprise of kits, 100 kg of rice and cash. However, the 100 kg of rice is difficult to carry so cash is preferred since rice can be bought by cash when required. Therefore, little emphasis has been put on rice as an important item of UNHCR assistance. At Sailom Transit Center in Vientiane, it was observed that returnees who attended the reorientation seminar were solely men. Female returnees were preoccupied with cooking and looking after babies. The reorientation seminar was on the characteristics of the socialist regime. It also trained returnees how to behave as good citizens in such a regime. Women and children were again excluded from such information.

In order to promote repatriation, an information campaign was also conducted by the LPDR in collaboration with the RTG and UNHCR. In May 1991, the Lao authorities met refugees in the Thai camps to brief them on the Lao policy towards returnees and the Amnesty that had been granted to them upon their return. Returnees also had been given six months in which to reclaim their land. Furthermore, returnees who were part of a group repatriation project would be given permanent land titles. Refugee leaders in the camps could also visit Laos to verify the peaceful socio-economic and political conditions within the country and return to inform their followers.

The Lao government has agreed that coordination on repatriation must be further accelerated among the LPDR, UNHCR and RTG, (through information campaigns). Also, a decrease in the number of acceptances for resettlement should encourage further repatriation. Meanwhile, the construction of an infrastructure which would enable returnees a sustainable settlement requires assistance from UNHCR as well as from other donor countries because the LPDR is unable to finance it alone. Reception centers in Laos must also be expanded to receive more returnees. In 1990, the centers could only accommodate 120 people at any one time. By 1994, the deadline for the repatriation of all Lao refugees from Thailand, the centers should be able to accommodate 400-500 people per month.

21. Ibid.

NGOs

NGOs Assistance in the Lao People's Democratic Republic

Before 1975, there were a few NGOs working in Vientiane. In 1976 only the Mennonite Central Committee and the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) maintained representation. Until the early 1980s, their programs concentrated on post-war reconstruction and relief assistance in Vientiane and Xieng Khouang provinces and were limited in scope and financial support. Other NGOs based elsewhere visited the country occasionally and provided only limited assistance.

In 1983, the socialist Lao government began to broaden its scope of aid and to recognize the need for development aid to remote areas. Save the Children (UK) gradually established an office and were followed by Handicap International. With the 1987 efforts to decentralize authority, provincial authorities started to solicit openly NGO development assistance. The central planners began to realize the value of small-scale, appropriate NGO development programs, especially for the remote and underdeveloped provinces.

As more and more NGOs established representation in the Lao PDR, NGO assistance, primarily in the fields of agriculture, education and health, began to reach most provinces. Most programs have been focussed on village or district development with strong training components and income generating activities, rather than relief.

Most of the NGO development activities involve Lao organizations as the implementing partner. The criteria for the participation of NGOs in the repatriation and reintegration programmes in Laos is illustrated in Annex 2 in the Appendix. However, although presently there are a few NGOs working in Laos, none have a program specifically for returnees. Nevertheless, in collaboration with the Department of Social Welfare in Vientiane Municipality, a Vocational Training Center has been established to provide training in sewing and tailoring, electricity, radio repair and construction.

It was in cooperation with the Department of Social Welfare in Vientiane Municipality that ZOA Refugee Care had been able to add an administration skills training section to this center. The project which was started in August 1991, aims to support the reintegration of returnees by providing vocational training programmes through the UNHCR connected vocational training center which targets a minimum of 30% of returnees. The details of the training course are as follows: the one year training composes of 3 cycles of 4 months. The first cycle concentrates on a basic typing course and secretarial skills. In the second cycle, the secretarial skills training is continued while an advanced typing course is introduced. Finally in the third cycle, Lao bookkeeping and business administrations are taught. Also, a basic English typing course has been added. The students would attend the courses only for half a day. However, it has been reported that the percentage of returnees attending the courses is lower than the target level of 30% due to various factors, namely, the lower than expected repatriation rate to Vientiane, the long distance to the schools, and the need to work in order to support their families. In addition, the courses are long and returnees have been given no special allowances.²² In order to get more students, a promotion of the courses is required not only in Vientiane but also in the reception centres. They should select

22. Jan Bossers, Report on *Project ZOA Refugee Care Laos Vocational Training Program* Vientiane, (August 1992.)

students who really want to learn and give them full scholarships. Incentives should also be given to encourage returnees to attend the courses. For example, the guarantee of employment with companies on the successful completion of courses would provide returnees with set goals to aim for. In addition, ZOA also plans to introduce agricultural training courses.

There are a few NGOs presently working in Laos, namely, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Bahai Development Committee, International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity (CIDSE), CUSO, Ecoles Sans Frontieres (ESF), Enfants et Developpement (EED), Handicap International, Japan International Volunteer Center, Mediciens Sans Frontieres (MSF), Mennonite Central Committee, Save the Children Fund Australia, Save the Children Fund (UK), World Concern and ZOA Refugee Care. The details of their activities are shown in Annex 1 in the Appendix.

NGOs Assistance in Thailand

NGOs who are well experienced in refugees in the Thai camps have reported that there has been tremendous need for reliable information on repatriation. The information must not only be on the Volrep program but also on the general situation inside Laos. In the past, the information has sometimes been biased and distorted. Within the Thai camps, rumors spread very quickly. Therefore, NGOs need to be working on both sides of border in order to obtain reliable information such as on the present job market especially as no research has been conducted to determine the type of training and skills required among returnees. Presently, returnees receive information only through UNHCR and consider cross border communication to be the best channel of information.

In order to promote the Volrep among the Hilltribes, most NGOs felt that it would be a good idea to let three Hmong leaders from Chieng Kham to visit Laos. Between September 22, 1991 to October 1, 1991, it was reported by the UNHCR office in Bangkok that these refugee leaders visited many sites and spoke to many villagers, government officials and some people who had taken advantage of the amnesty to leave the resistance in Laos and who had been given land and government support. The representatives also had the opportunity to visit some villages and talked to old neighbours, relatives and friends. On their return to Thailand, all had indicated that personally they wished to repatriate. In addition, videos on information on Laos have been made available within the camps.

Training in Thai camps

Presently, there are several NGOs providing assistance to Lao refugees in Thailand, namely, International Rescue Committee (IRIC), Mediciens Sans Frontieres (MSF), Ecoles Sans Frontieres (ESF), Handicap International (HI), Planned Parenthood Association of Thailand (PPAT), Young Women Christian Association (YWCA), International Aid (IA), COERR, ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands, The Save the Children Fund (UK), Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee (JSRD), CAMA Services, The Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT), Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), and Thai-Chinese Refugee Service (TCRS).

Although the camp services have been supervised by the Ministry of Interior and UNHCR whose main aims have been to encourage people to opt for voluntary repatriation, most of the programs in the camps do not only focus specifically on returnees but on all refugees. One reason is due to the fluctuating number of returnees. One high ranking Lao officer would also like to see

the introduction of comprehensive training programs which would be useful for social and economic development activities in present day Laos. The training programs implemented since 1980 would have been more useful had concrete cooperation among Thai-Laos-UNHCR been made parallel with the repatriation plan. Nevertheless, NGOs have tried to design a repatriation program which would consist of 2-3 month courses, e.g., on motor repairs and biological control. UNHCR has also encouraged NGOs to implement repatriation-oriented programmes.

NGOs felt that not enough effort has been made to supply information to them. At present, the information from the skill identification survey which had been conducted in early 1991 is available but only for the Vientiane area. For the most likely returnees, there are 2-4 week crash courses on basic health care and sanitation. Moreover, with the likelihood of larger numbers of Lao repatriates in 1992, more attention has been focussed on training both by NGOs and by the returnees themselves. The realization that the training courses would reap benefits for repatriates on return to Laos encouraged prospective returnees to attend the courses. For instance, the Htin longstayers who had previously lacked motivation in all camp activities, on making their decision to return to Laos, suddenly showed great interest in the programmes. However, in terms of credentials, a problem exists which urgently needs to be addressed. The certificates which returnees receive in the Thai camps are not recognized by Lao employers nor within the Laotian educational system. Therefore, following repatriation to Laos, returnees have had problems in obtaining employment and their children have had difficulties in adjusting to the domestic school system in Laos.

Regarding the participants of the courses, young men made up most of the students of the different courses. The sewing class was the only course which was well attended by women with a 50% female turn-out. It should be noted that the results from the skill identification survey in Vientiane Municipality (1990-1991) showed that there was a high demand for textile and garment skilled labour manpower.

Examples of NGOs courses and their compositions which have reinforced the voluntary repatriation programme are as follows:

ESF has been in charge of the education for all refugees in the camps. It was established in 1986 to teach Hmong and Mien literacy. ESF in Laos once complained that not enough was being done for returnees in the camps. However, ESF in Thailand replied that more would be done if it was required. For example, when a group of 10 young Thai educated Htin men requested for a literacy course or primary school in Lao to be set up, a special 2-week programme in Lao was then organized and subsequently, a school was established which provided a number of courses which included a management course and an advanced teacher training programme. Furthermore, in their last 2 months in the camp, the men also set up their own classes for all returning children. This is an example of one of ESF's successes. At present, ESF is writing and printing textbooks for primary and adult education courses and is working closely with the Ministry of Education in Vientiane.

MSF used to organize a 2-week course for returnees on the use of certain medicines, first-aid, etc.. However, an evaluation of the usefulness of the course has been considered to be too difficult. Moreover, although MSF has now designed a new curriculum which is more simple, it still does not know how useful it might be. Most of the NGOs in the camps have the same problem. Even MSF which has some development work in southern Laos is unable to provide any information on the likely conditions in the north of Laos facing Hmong returnees because there is very little contact between north and south.

IRC, working in Chieng Kham Camp, reported that in October 1990, there were 3 training programs (each lasting for 2 weeks) on combining traditional medicines, sanitation and health

education. However, both IRC and UNHCR have requested for a 2-month long training programme to prepare the returnees as community health workers and provide them each with a copy of "Where there is no doctor" in Laos. Furthermore, if it is very difficult to find copies as it has proven to be, then returnees should be trained on how to use the book before they leave the camps.

In addition, the IRC opium detoxification program reveals that some refugees with drug-addiction problems entered the program with the specific intention of repatriating. However, there has been no additional screening for these Volrep applicants. Although these applicants realized that they would probably have to be rehabilitated sooner or later, they have shown little concern for the outcome of the results. Nevertheless, their health awareness has been considered as a positive step forward.

ZOA organized a 2-week repatriation course specifically for returnees. Other courses included the 3-month course in basic agriculture which used to be run by volunteer workers before their involvement in the camp's silver production business, the 3-month course in advance typing and secretarial skills, as well as courses in business and accounting. Students were generally between 15-25 years of age. It was only the first step of their education. Htin have shown the most enthusiasm and interest in agricultural training and have been more coordinated as a group than Lowland Lao.

COERR launched the Ban Vinai Information Project in February 1991 to assist refugees on decisions about their future following the Thai Government's announcement of the closure of the camp in 1992.²³ The Lao-English information bulletin and its tape edition in Hmong both of which have been distributed to all Lao camps in Thailand and not just Ban Vinai, comprised of a number of reports. Included among these reports were the Hmong community leaders' letter to UNHCR which set out the conditions to be met by the LPDR before the Hmong leadership would support the Volrep programme and an explanation of the meaning and purpose of the screening process.

View on Camp atmosphere

Refugees have remained in the camps mainly because they cannot decide where to go. Subsequently, the US annual resettlement quota is never full. Refugees consider life in the camps to be safer and better than in Laos or in some Thai villages. Some refugees have said that they will stay in the camps until they are closed down. The reasons against repatriation involve both politics and economics. Fears of political persecution and the harsh economic conditions in Laos discourage a return to Laos among refugees.

Many of the prospective returnees especially those requiring special needs or have health problems have stated that if they knew many NGOs would be working in Laos, they would be more confident about their return. Part of the trouble is that refugees have been very dependent on foreign aid for so long. Presently, there are a few foreign agencies in Laos which have been working on various development programs rather than specifically for returnees (see Annex 1 in the Appendix). However, NGOs who have been working in the camps have said that they have set up a self-reliance training programme in which the refugee supervisors are trained to be independent and self supporting. Their activities include arranging and holding meetings. It is hoped that this will spread to the community.

23. Refugee Participation Network, "Providing Information for Repatriating Laotian Refugees." Refugee Participation Network 11 (October 1991): 14-15.

The problem of the lack of information available on conditions in Laos is again cited by NGOs. For example, more details on agriculture is required in order to prevent repeating what Lao organizations might have already accomplished. In order to utilize resources efficiently in providing assistance to refugees, in-depth and specific information are needed and not vague and general news. Moreover, feedback from repatriates who have already returned to Laos would also serve as a very useful source of information. At present, not many NGOs workers in Thailand visit Laos. The few visits that have been made have been restricted to Vientiane. Access to other areas has not been possible. Occasionally, however, NGO workers from CCSDPT have held meetings and exchanged information. Nevertheless, these meetings were mainly focussed on health and education rather than on skill training.

Future cooperation

Since 1989, Volrep has become a very realistic solution for Lao refugees. The first Tripartite meeting improved the speed of the administrative process involved in obtaining approval for a return to Laos within the Lao government and raised the number of returnees per month. However, although the early plans have been working well, under the present rate of repatriation, it would still require several more years for all Lao refugees to leave the Thai camps. Previously, the delays occurred within the Lao bureaucracy but now the problem is mainly due to the absorptive capacity. Compounding the already limited capacity of the Lao PDR have been domestic and external administrative complexities. Therefore, a comprehensive plan to accelerate the repatriation and reintegration is urgently required. Such a comprehensive plan would require the cooperation of not only certain organizations but also other NGOs/IGOs, the Lao and Thai authorities as well as the major donor countries.

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Summary

The rate of flow of Lao repatriates between 1980-1992 back to their homeland has fluctuated according to the policies of the four key players. First and foremost has been the role of UNHCR, the core agency in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme. Attention has been focussed on two areas, namely, the promotion of repatriation within the Thai camps at the three levels of mass education, group education and individual counselling as well as through the distribution of correspondence to Lao refugees (such as Lao newspapers and magazines), and the reintegration of returnees into Lao society with special attention having been given to the Hilltribesmen whose social adjustment has been considered to be more difficult than the Lowland Lao's.

Between 1980-1989, there have been 30 UNHCR funded projects which aimed to provide both direct and immediate assistance on an individual basis to returnees as well as assistance to hosting areas with the specific intention of facilitation reintegration. In addition, there is a new comprehensive plan of action to cope with the increasing numbers of Lao returnees under which a new three phase plan for repatriation which would ultimately strive for the completion of repatriation by the end of 1994 is proposed.

Unlike UNHCR, the refugee policy of the Royal Thailand Government, the second key player has not been consistent but has varied according to the changing domestic and international situations which have arisen at different times. However, one thing which has remained unchanged has been the RTG's perception of refugees as a threat to national security. During the early years, between 1975-1979, the RTG policy allowed refugees to stay in Thailand on a temporary basis, on the condition that they complied with certain rules and regulations. Preventative and retaliatory measures were also formulated during this period. However, with a change in government, in 1979, with the rise of Gen. Kriangsak Chamanan to the premiership, the refugee policy was changed to one which considered resettlement in third countries as a suitable solution. Moreover, it appeared that the RTG had decided to accept, if only temporarily, the refugee burden. Unfortunately, this favourable policy was short-lived for in 1980, the Kriangsak government fell from power. Between 1980-1988, the RTG's refugee policy was less favourable having changed its stance to the Humane Deterrence Policy in 1980. Furthermore, during the same period of time, the number of refugees accepted for resettlement declined due to the global economic depression and third countries' domestic problems.

Not until 1988, was the RTG's refugee policy moderated. It was at this juncture that with Thai-Lao relations improving, voluntary repatriation replaced resettlement as the most suitable solution to the refugee issue. Following the Tripartite Meetings in 1989-1990, among UNHCR, the RTG and LPDR, the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme was vigorously implemented. Subsequently, the number of Lao repatriates has increased significantly but unsatisfactory, in the opinion of the Thai government officials. Nevertheless, although the causes of the low rate of repatriation are uncertain, voluntary repatriation is still considered to be the best solution.

It was only recently that the LPDR, the third key player, has adopted a policy which re-accepts its citizens. Despite guarantees of no discrimination against returnees, however, it has been made clear that the refugee issue is considered by the LPDR to be an 'internal matter'. Nevertheless, in collaboration with the RTG and UNHCR, the LPDR has encouraged repatriation through the launching of an information campaign, notably, the briefings held in the Thai camps on the Lao policy towards returnees and the Amnesty for returnees.

Although the LPDR policy has permitted returnees to go back to their villages of origin, a number of conditions first have to be met. Concerning all repatriates, a return to the villages of

origin could only be possible provided the repatriates' relatives still resided there; otherwise, repatriates would be delegated areas by the LPDR in which to live. As a result, the problem of the resettlement of returnees has arisen. This has been exacerbated by the LPDR Hilltribe relocation policy. In an attempt to terminate the practices of slash-and-burn cultivation and opium growing, the LPDR has not permitted the Hilltribesmen to return to their homes in the Upland. Instead, the Hilltribesmen have been resettled in the Lowland. Other restrictions occurred in the employment of certain occupations namely, the civil service, the teaching profession, the armed forces and the police force. Returnees have been given no guarantees of a return to these former occupations which held positions of responsibility and influence.

Nevertheless, despite the rules and regulations which have to be met, the LPDR has continued to promote the repatriation of Lao refugees. Moreover, the LPDR has agreed to accelerate the rate of repatriation through changes in the time-consuming administrative procedures as well as through the expansion of reception centres. However, even with these changes, it is still uncertain whether or not these are sufficient to ensure that the 1994 dead-line for the scheduled return of the last group of Lao refugees from the Thai camps to Laos will be met.

The fourth and final key player are the NGOs whose role in assisting returnees has been divided into two levels. The first level occurs in Laos. Development assistance primarily in the spheres of agriculture, education and health have been provided by NGOs in Laos. These assistance programmes which have only taken place with the collaboration of the Lao Government have been geared towards the country at large. The assistance programmes specifically for returnees have been limited due to the LPDR policy which considers the Lao refugee issue to be an "internal matter". One of the few NGO programmes which provided assistance directly to returnees was started in August 1991 by ZOA Refugee Care in cooperation with the Department of Social Welfare in Vientiane Municipality. This assistance programme supported the reintegration of returnees through the provision of vocational training courses (i.e. in typing, secretarial skills, bookkeeping, and business administrations).

The second level of NGO assistance takes place within the Thai camps. In order to prepare prospective returnees for repatriation and reintegration into Laos, training programmes have been organized by NGOs. These programmes include the 2-3 month courses on motor repairs and biological control as well as the 2-4 week courses on basic health care and sanitation such as those run by MSF and IRC. An education course to teach Hmong and Mien has also been set up by ESF and in February 1991, an information campaign on repatriation was launched by COERR in Ban Vinai and other Lao camps in Thailand.

However, within the Thai camps, NGOs have repeatedly called for further information on the general situation in Laos. The lack of reliable and substantial information has led to difficulties in preparing relevant training for repatriation and reintegration. Undoubtedly, there is an urgent need for NGOs to be working on both sides of the border. Moreover, the knowledge that NGOs would also be working in Laos not only would reassure many prospective returnees but could also encourage others to repatriate, especially among the vulnerable groups of refugees.

Chapter Three

Lao Returnees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme

Between 1990-1991, a research project in Laos was conducted among a small group of 126 Lao returnees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme and 75 local Lao villagers who became the returnees' neighbours on their return to Laos. It was realized from the outset that the sampling size was very small. However, due to circumstances beyond the control of the research team, only a limited number of returnees were available for interviews. The findings of the research study therefore, serve only as useful and interesting indicators and do not necessarily attempt to portray an overview. Moreover, it is hoped that the findings will help to explain certain phenomena and thus provide a clearer understanding of the Lao refugee issue. Data from the interviews will be presented to cover the following topics:

1. Profiles of Returnees
2. Departure from Laos
3. Life in Thai camps
4. Repatriation
5. Life in Laos
6. Assistance on Return
7. Social Reintegration
8. Attitudes on Thailand
9. Local Villagers' Perspectives on Returnees

Profiles of Returnees

Illustrated in this section, are the profiles of 126 Lao returnees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme who were interviewed in this study. As the interviews were conducted in 1991, the base year for all data is 1991.

Table 3 Profiles of Returnee

Profiles	%	Profiles	%
Sex		Status in Household	
Male	73.0	Father	52.4
Female	27.0	Mother	23.8
	<u>100.0</u>	Son/daughter	11.1
Age		Brother/sister	2.4
21-30 yrs.	42.9	Others	<u>10.4</u>
31-40 yrs.	30.2		<u>100.0</u>
41-50 yrs.	11.1	No. of Household Members	
Others	16.0	1-3 persons	23.0
	<u>100.0</u>	4-6 persons	50.8
Residence		7-9 persons	14.3
Chanthaboury	4.8	More than 10	<u>11.9</u>
Saysetha	6.3		<u>100.0</u>
Hatsaifong	8.7	Marital Status	
Nasaithong	15.1	Single	15.9
Sisattanak	11.1	Married	71.4
Sikhotabong	17.5	Widowed	3.2
Saithany	11.9	Divorced	4.0
Phone Hong	6.3	Remarried	1.6
Feuang	11.9	Separated	1.6
Others	6.4	No answer	<u>2.4</u>
	<u>100.0</u>		<u>100.0</u>
Religion		Ethnic Group	
Buddhism	77.8	Lowland Lao	18.3
Christianity	10.3	Hmong	<u>81.7</u>
Animism	9.5		<u>100.0</u>
Others	2.4		
	<u>100.0</u>		

Illustrated in Table 3 are the profiles of the 126 returnees interviewed. The first observation is the high ratio of males to females (73% were male and 27% were female). The biggest age groups were those between the ages of 21-30 years (42.9%) and 31-40 years (30.2%). 11.1% belonged to the 41-50 age group while the remaining 16% were either under 21 or over 50.

The marital status of the majority of interviewees was married (71.4%). 15.9% still remained single, 4% had been divorced, 3.2% widowed, 1.6% remarried, 1.6% separated, and 2.4% gave no answer. Returnees originated from two ethnic groups. The majority of returnees were Lowland Lao (81.7%), while the rest were Hmong (18.3%). Buddhism was by far the most popular religion (77.8%) and was followed by Christianity (10.3%), Animism (9.5%), and other unstated religions (2.4%). The household size varied from 1 to over 10. 50.8% of interviewees had 4-6 members in their households, 23% had 1-3 members, 14.9% had 7-9 members, and 11.9% had over 10 members. The status of returnees within their households were as fathers (52.4%), mothers (23.8%), sons or daughters (11.1%), brothers or sisters (2.4%), and other unnamed status (10.4%). The places of residence which were widespread, ranged from Nasaithong (15.1%) to Sikhotabong (17.5%), Saithany (11.9%), Feuang (11.9%), Sisattanak (11.1%), Hatsaifong (8.7%), Saysetha (6.3%), Phone Hong (6.3%), Chanthaboury (4.8%), and other unstated locations (6.4%).



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Departure from Laos

To investigate returnees' previous departures from Laos, considerations have been given to the departure dates and the types of companions during their journeys away from and back to Laos. In addition, the reasons for leaving Laos, returnees' previous occupations, as well as their original and present places of residence have been examined.

Table 4 Months and Years of Departure

Month	%	Year	%
January	10.3	1975	1.6
February	5.6	1977	0.8
March	6.3	1978	1.6
April	2.4	1979	4.8
May	7.1	1980	7.1
June	15.1	1981	7.9
July	4.0	1982	1.6
August	4.8	1983	6.3
September	8.7	1984	22.2
October	2.4	1985	18.3
November	5.6	1986	8.7
December	11.9	1987	5.6
No answer	15.9	1988	7.1
Total	100.0	1989	5.6
		1990	0.8
		Total	100.0

Based on the replies of the 126 interviewees, Table 4 illustrates the monthly and yearly rates of departure between 1975-1990. Departures which took place annually (except in 1976) began in 1975 following the takeover of the LPDR. The Treaty of Friendship with Vietnam which resulted in the dispatch of the Vietnamese military forces and advisory corps into Laos and the LPDR discrimination policy against the ethnic Chinese and the Hmong in 1979 and 1980 drove further outflows of refugees. 20% of the 126 Lao interviewees fled from Laos during the period 1979-1981. Meanwhile, the resettlement of Lao refugees into third countries began to take place. However, resettlement as a solution to the Lao refugee issue had an unforeseen side-effect. The opportunity for resettlement abroad pulled further migrants towards the Lao-Thai border, particularly in 1984 (22%) and 1985 (18.3%) when the rate of inflation stood at 29%. Nevertheless, with the improvement in the socio economic conditions in Laos and with the withdrawal of the Vietnamese presence in 1988, the migratory rate never reached such levels again. Regarding the months of departure, although departures occurred throughout the year, January (10.3%) and December (11.9%) which

were the dry winter months when land movement could be easily made, witnessed high monthly departure percentages between 1975-1990. However, the high figure for June (15.1%), one of the monsoon months, cannot be explained.

Table 5 Types of Companions during Flight from and Return Journey to Laos

Companion	Flight from Laos %	Return Journey to Laos %
Parents	3.2	-
Existing family	39.7	43.2
Relatives	13.5	1.6
Friends	24.6	10.1
Solo travellers	14.3	11.1
Newly formed family	-	27.7
Others	4.8	6.4
Total	100.0	100.0

Depicted in Table 5 are the types of companions who accompanied the 126 interviewees during their journeys away from and back to Laos. Most interviewees were accompanied by their existing family during both their flight from Laos (39.7%) and their return journey home (43.7%). The number of solo travellers on the two trips also remained relatively constant with 11.3% having left Laos and 11.1% having returned. However, wide fluctuations can be observed in the figures for the remaining categories between the two trips. On the one hand, there were dramatic falls in the number of people who were accompanied by friends from 24.6% (on the journey out of Laos) to 10.3% (on the journey back to Laos), in the number of people who travelled with relatives from 13.5% to 1.6%, and in the number of travellers who journeyed with their parents from 3.2% to nil. On the other hand, 27.7% travelled back to Laos with their newly formed families, a phenomenon which implies that this group of people who had originally left Laos as unmarried persons, met their spouses in the Thai camps. As regards life in the camps and the decision to return to Laos, the family institution seems to have had a stronger influence than friends on individuals.

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Table 6 Reasons for Leaving Laos

Reason	%
Go to third countries	30.2
Go to Thailand	11.1
Accompany parents	27.0
Visit parents and relatives	4.0
Escape difficult living conditions in Laos	10.3
Flee from anarchy in Laos	8.7
Flee from legal trials	4.0
Disagree with regime	3.2
No answer	1.6
Total	100.0

The 126 Lao returnees interviewed had originally left their homeland for a variety of reasons. The desire to reside in another country was the most popular cause of departure at 41.3% (30.2% in third countries, and 11.1% in Thailand). This phenomenon is not altogether surprising since a significant proportion of the interviewees (38.5%) had departed from Laos in 1984 and 1985 when the resettlement opportunity was an attractive proposition (see Table 4). Almost one third of returnees (31%) had left Laos for family reasons (27% to accompany parents and 4% to visit relatives). Causes of flight were also due to internal economic and political reasons. The economic reason was to escape harsh living conditions (10.3%) while the political reasons which totalled 15.9%, were to flee both anarchy (8.7%) as well as the regime which they disagreed with (3.2%), and to evade legal trials (4.0%).

Since it is known that there were special groups of Laotians who were afraid of persecution on return and had justified reasons to have been screened in under the status determination procedures in Thailand, a crosstabulation between returnees' previous occupations and their reasons for leaving has been presented in Table 7.

Table 7 Reasons for Leaving Laos by Previous Occupation in Laos

Table 7 is a crosstabulation between the refugees' reasons for leaving Laos and their previous occupation in Laos. The most striking feature is the fact that most refugees from almost every occupational group, notably, agricultural workers (9.5%) and labourers (5.6%), chose as their reason for leaving Laos, the desire to go to third countries. Further findings include the high ratios of students (6.3%) and agricultural workers (9.5%) who had left Laos to accompany their parents, the large proportions of agricultural workers (11.9%) and labourers (4.0%) who had fled difficulties in Laos for one reason or another, and interestingly, the occupations of the group of refugees who had left Laos because they disagreed with the regime, namely, student, trader, and soldier/policeman. Within this last group, it is not evident whether or not students, soldiers and policemen had fled Laos because of ideological differences. Perhaps those who staunchly opposed the existing regime had already been given refugee status and had been resettled.

Table 7 Reasons for Leaving Laos by Previous Occupation in Laos

Occupation Reason	Student	Agricultural worker	Skilled worker	Trader	Labourer	Soldier/ policeman	Others	No answer	Row Total	(N) %
Go to third countries	(3) 2.4	(12) 9.5	(5) 4.0	(4) 3.2	(7) 5.6	(1) 0.8	(5) 4.0	(1) 0.8	(38) 30.2	
Go to Thailand	(5) 4.0	(3) 2.4	-	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	(3) 2.4	-	(14) 11.1	
Accompanying parents	(8) 6.3	(12) 9.5	(3) 2.4	(2) 1.6	(3) 2.4	-	(4) 3.2	(2) 1.6	(34) 27.0	
Visit parents and relatives	-	(2) 1.6	-	-	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	-	(5) 4.0	
Escape difficult living conditions	(3) 2.4	(7) 5.6	-	-	(2) 1.6	-	(1) 0.8	-	(13) 10.3	
Flee from anarchy	-	(6) 4.8	-	-	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	(11) 8.7	
Flee from legal trials	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	(5) 4.0	
Disagree with regime	(2) 1.6	-	-	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	(4) 3.2	
No answer	-	-	-	(2) 1.6	-	-	-	-	(2) 1.6	
Column (N)	(22)	(44)	(8)	(11)	(17)	(5)	(16)	(3)	(126)	
Total %	17.5	34.9	6.4	8.7	13.5	4.0	12.7	2.4	100.0	

Table 8 Town of Origin and Present Residence

Town	Origin %	Present %
Vientiane Municipality (urban)		
Chanthaboury	6.3	4.8
Saysetha	4.8	6.3
Hatsaifong	7.9	8.7
Nasaithong	9.5	15.1
Sisattanak	7.9	11.1
Sikhotabong	15.9	17.5
Saithany	12.7	11.9
Vientiane Province (rural)		
Phone Hong	10.3	6.3
Feuang	4.8	11.9
Others	14.3	4.8
No Answer	5.6	1.6
Total	100.0	100.0

Table 8 compares the town of origin and the present places of residence of the 126 Laotian returnees questioned in order to illustrate the different preferences of residential location on repatriation. Before their departure from Laos, 65% of returnees lived in urban areas (Vientiane municipality). The three main urban centres were in Saithany (12.7%), Sikhotabong (11.9%), and Nasaithong (9.5%). After their arrival back to Laos, however, 75.4% of returnees resided in towns (possibly due to better economic conditions such as employment opportunities in towns compared to the rural country). The towns with the highest returnee population increases were Nasaithong (15.1% from 9.5%) Sisattanak (11.1% from 7.9%), and Saysetha (6.3% from 4.8%). On the other hand, Chanthaboury (4.8% from 6.3%) and Saithany (11.9% from 12.7%) witnessed minor returnee population declines. In Vientiane province, however, the rural returnee population declined from 29.4% to 24.6%. Despite the dramatic returnee population rise in Feuang (11.9% from 4.8%) which was due to the over represented sampling in that town, the returnees' preferences to reside in towns certainly had an impact on the returnee population sizes in Phone Hong (6.3% from 10.3%) and other unnamed towns (6.4% from 14.3%). However, since the sampling taken was extracted only from Vientiane province, the urban preference trend illustrated in this survey, cannot be generalized for other provinces.

Life in Thai Camps

In this section, the details about the returnees' stay in the Thai camps, which include the names and sizes of camps, the types and duration of training programmes and the usefulness of training programmes with special focus on the age and sex of returnees are displayed.

Table 9 Camps of Residence in Thailand

Camp	%
Na Pho	56.3
Chieng Kham	12.7
Nong Khai - closure in 1986	6.3
Ban Vinai	2.4
Nong Saeng (Nakhon Panom) - closure in 1986	19.0
Others	<u>3.2</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>

The Laotian refugees resided in five main Thai camps. By far the largest camp was the border Lowland Lao camp of Na Pho which housed 56.3% of the returnees interviewed. The other interviewees had been housed in camps at Nong Saeng (19%), Chieng Kham (12.7%), and Nong Khai (6.3%). Ban Vinai, despite its large Hmong refugee population, only had 2.4% of returnees questioned in this survey.

Table 10 Training Services in Thai Camps

Type of Training	%	Duration	%	Training Agency	%
Mechanics	20.6	0-2 months	7.9	SCF	0.8
Health Care	6.3	2-3 months	13.5	COERR	6.3
Educational	4.8	3-6 months	7.9	CAMA	5.6
Typing	0.8	>6 months	4.0	YMCA	2.4
Agricultural	1.6	No answer	<u>66.7</u>	ZOA	0.8
Others	2.4	Total	<u>100.0</u>	SDF	1.6
No training	30.2			IRC	3.2
No answer	<u>33.3</u>			No answer	<u>79.2</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>			Total	<u>100.0</u>

Table 10 illustrates the types and duration of training programmes as well as training agencies, within Thai camps. Despite the high percentage of refugees who either received no training (30.2%) or gave no answer (33.3%), the most popular training course was on mechanics (20.6%). Health care training was the next most popular with 6.3%. The duration of the training courses varied with most lasting between 2-3 months (13.5%). The remaining courses were under 2 months (7.9%), between 3-6 months (7.9%), or over 6 months in duration. The training agency which provided the most assistance was COERR (to 6.3% of the refugee population) and was closely followed by CAMA (5.6%). The remaining agencies gave assistance to 0.8%-3.2% of the population.

Since training services in the camps were considered essential for an effective repatriation and reintegration programme, the following tables crosstabulate the usefulness of the training programmes with the returnees' sex and age as well as with the types and duration of courses.

Table 11 Usefulness of Training Programmes by Sex

Sex Usefulness	Male	Female	Row Total	(N) %
Very useful	(13) 10.3	(2) 1.6	(15) 11.9	
Useful	(4) 3.2	(1) 0.8	(5) 4.0	
Not very useful	(2) 1.6	(2) 1.6	(4) 3.2	
No use	(9) 7.1	(3) 2.4	(12) 9.5	
No answer	(64) 50.8	(26) 20.6	(90) 71.4	
Column (N)	(92)	(34)	(126)	
Total %	73.0	27.0	100.0	

It must be immediately noted that in all crosstabulations involving the usefulness of training programmes, a large percentage of interviewees (71.4%) failed to provide an answer, possibly due to the fact that many received no training (see Table 10). It is with this in mind that in Table 11 the crosstabulation between the usefulness of training programmes and sex can be analyzed. In general, 11.9% of interviewees considered the training programmes to have been very useful while 4% regarded them to have been useful. On the other hand, 3.2% and 9.5% stated that they found the courses to have been of little use or no use respectively. More males considered the training courses to have been either very useful (10.3%) or useful (3.2%), while a smaller yet significant proportion, considered them to have been of little (1.6%) or no use (7.1%). However, more females who answered, thought that the courses were of little or no use (4.0%) than of use (2.4%). Finally, it should be noticed that a higher number of males (28) compared to females (8) received training. A question ought to be raised regarding the gender ratio in training opportunities within the camps.

Table 12 Usefulness of Training Programmes by Age (Years)

Sex Usefulness	< 20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	> 70	Row (N) Total %
Very useful	(1) 0.8	(10) 7.9	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	(15) 11.9
Useful	-	(2) 1.6	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	(5) 4.0
Not very useful	-	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	(4) 3.2
No use	(1) 0.8	(4) 3.2	(5) 4.0	(2) 1.6	-	-	-	(12) 9.5
No answer	(4) 3.2	(35) 27.8	(27) 21.4	(10) 7.9	(6) 4.8	(6) 4.8	(2) 1.6	(90) 71.4
Column (N)	(6)	(54)	(38)	(14)	(6)	(6)	(2)	(126)
Total %	4.8	42.9	30.2	11.1	4.8	4.8	1.6	100.0

Table 12 is a crosstabulation between the usefulness of training programmes and the age groups of refugees. The 21-30 and 31-40 age groups which together made up over 70% of interviewees, were the group which had the most replies to the question on the usefulness of the training courses. Among the 21-30 age group, 9.5% considered the courses to be either useful (1.6%) or very useful (7.9%) as opposed to 5.5% who considered the courses to be not very useful (2.4%) or no use (3.2%). Among the 31-40 age group, the proportion of refugees who stated that the courses were of use (4.0%) to those who stated otherwise (4.8%) was almost equal.

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Table 13 Usefulness of Training Programmes by Types of Training Programmes in Thai Camps

Programme Usefulness	Vocational	Health Care	Educational	Typing training	Agricultural	Others	No training	No answer	Row (N) Total	(N) %
Very useful	(6) 4.8	(3) 2.4	(2) 1.6	-	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8	(15)	11.9
Useful	(4) 3.2	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	(5)	4.0
Not very useful	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	(4)	3.2
No use	(8) 6.3	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	(12)	9.5
No answer	(5) 4.0	(2) 1.6	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8	(38) 30.2	(41) 32.5	(90)	71.4
Column (N)	(26)	(8)	(6)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(38)	(42)	(126)	
Total %	20.6	6.3	4.8	0.8	1.6	2.4	30.2	33.3	100.0	

As a result of the crosstabulation between the usefulness of the training programmes and the types of training programmes in Thai camps (Table 13), a number of interesting observations can be made. First, refugees who undertook the vocational training programmes and who answered the question, were of mixed opinion with 7.9% considering the vocational courses to be useful while 8.7% considering them to be of little or no use. Second, the health care courses appear to have been more successful. There were eight participants who attended these courses, half of whom stated that they were either very useful (2.4%) or useful (0.8%) compared to those who stated that they were not very useful (0.8%) or no use (0.8%). Third, although vocational courses accounted for six of the fifteen very useful replies (4.8%) and four of the five useful replies (3.2%), nevertheless, they also received eight of the twelve no use answers (6.3%). Finally, it can be seen that a large proportion (30.2%) who gave no answer replies to the question on the usefulness of the training programmes, in fact, had not attended the courses. Nevertheless, there still remains 32.5% of refugees who neither stated the usefulness of the courses nor specified the courses which they had attended.

Table 14 Usefulness of Training Programmes by Course Duration (Months)

Course Duration Usefulness	0-2	2-3	3-6	> 6	No answer	Row Tota (N) %
Very useful	(2) 1.6	(6) 4.8	(3) 2.4	(4) 3.2	-	(15) 11.9
Useful	(2) 1.6	(2) 1.6	-	(1) 0.8	-	(5) 4.0
Not very useful	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	-	(1) 0.8	(4) 3.2
No use	(3) 2.4	(4) 3.2	(5) 4.0	-	-	(12) 9.5
No answer	(2) 1.6	(3) 2.4	(2) 1.6	-	(83) 65.9	(90) 71.4
Column (N)	(10)	(17)	(10)	(5)	(84)	(126)
Total %	7.9	13.5	7.9	4.0	66.7	100.0

Illustrated in Table 14 is the crosstabulation between the usefulness of training programmes and the duration of training courses. Leaving aside the high proportion of no answer replies, the findings which stand out most are the 2-3 month courses and the over 6 month courses which are considered very useful (4.8% and 3.2% respectively), and the 2-3 month courses and the 3-6 month courses which are considered to be of no use (3.2% and 3.2% respectively).

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Repatriation

Before repatriation could take place, all returnees were required to undergo various procedures such as in the process of receiving and checking information and decision making. Therefore, the study on this topic investigates the sources of information on the voluntary repatriation programme in the camps as well as analyzes information sources on home news through crosstabulations with the sex and previous occupations of prospective returnees. Furthermore, the study has also retrieved data and information on repatriation dates, the first destination areas following repatriation, as well as revealed returnees' reasons for repatriation (which have been broken down by sex, age, and previous occupation) and their reasons for a delayed return.

Table 15 Sources of Information on Voluntary Repatriation Programme in Camps

Source	%	Media	%
Relatives	1.6	Camp radio	4.8
Friends	7.9	UNHCR video	26.2
UNHCR	61.1	Thai MOI announcement	0.8
NGOs	1.6	Posters	7.1
Thai MOI	4.8	Others	34.9
Others	9.5	No answer	26.2
No information	5.6	Total	100.0
No answer	7.9		
Total	100.0		

Information on voluntary repatriation originated from two sources, namely, through organizations and through people. The organization which supplied news on voluntary repatriation to the most number of people interviewed was UNHCR (61.3%). Friends were the group of people who played the most significant role in disseminating information (7.9%). The UNHCR video was an effective method of disseminating news on voluntary repatriation, informing 26.2% of the Laotian interviewees. Posters (7.1%) and camp radio news broadcasts (4.8%) were other less effective methods. Other unstated methods of dissemination totalled 34.9% while 26.2% gave no answers. However, the impact of the voluntary repatriation news had mixed success. On further questioning, it was revealed that 40.5% of the interviewed returnees sought for more information while 42.1% showed no further interest.

Table 16 Sources of Information on Situation in Laos by Sex

Sex Source	Male	Female	Row Total	(N) %
Parents	(5) 4.0	(5) 4.0	(10) 7.9	
Friends	(6) 4.8	-	(6) 4.8	
Relatives	(8) 6.3	(3) 2.4	(11) 8.7	
UNHCR	(15) 11.9	(4) 3.2	(19) 15.1	
NGOs	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8	
Others	(14) 11.1	(2) 1.6	(16) 12.7	
No Information	(43) 34.1	(20) 15.9	(63) 50.0	
Column (N)	(92)	(34)	(126)	
Total %	73.0	27.0	100.0	

It can be seen in the crosstabulation between the sources of information on news of the situation in Laos and sex (Table 16) that large proportions of both males (34.1%) and females (15.9%) received no information. Nevertheless, the source which supplied news to most men was UNHCR (11.9%) and the source which informed most women were parents (4.0%). Other unstated sources also provided news to a number of men (11.1%), while UNHCR was also a supplier of information to women (3.2%). Friends and relatives were sources which gave information predominantly to men (4.8% and 6.3% respectively). However, this is to be expected considering the high male to female ratio.

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Table 17 Sources of Information on Situation in Laos by Previous Occupation in Laos

Previous Occupation	Student	Agricultural worker	Skilled worker	Trader	Labourer	Military/ police personnel	Others	No answer	Row (N) Total %
Parents	(2) 1.6	(5) 4.0	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	-	-	-	(10) 7.9
Friends	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	(1) 0.8	-	(6) 4.8
Relatives	(4) 3.2	(2) 1.6	-	-	(3) 2.4	-	(2) 1.6	-	(11) 8.7
UNHCR	(2) 1.6	(4) 3.2	-	(2) 1.6	(7) 5.6	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	(19) 15.1
NGOs	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	(1) 0.8
Others	(2) 1.6	(5) 4.0	-	-	(3) 2.4	(3) 2.4	(3) 2.4	-	(16) 12.7
No information	(8) 6.3	(27) 21.4	(7) 5.6	(6) 4.8	(4) 3.2	(1) 0.8	(8) 6.3	(2) 1.6	(63) 50.0
Column (N)	(22)	(44)	(8)	(11)	(17)	(5)	(16)	(3)	(126)
Total %	17.5	34.9	6.3	8.7	13.5	4.0	12.7	2.4	100.0

The crosstabulation in Table 17 displays a number of interesting revelations. The occupational categories which had large proportions of members who received no news were the agricultural worker category (21.4%), the skilled worker category (5.6%), and the student category (6.3%). The labourer occupational category had the most members who had received news from one source (5.6%), namely, from UNHCR. The source which provided news to the most number of students were relatives (3.2%), while the named source which informed most agricultural workers were parents (4.0%). Finally, the source which supplied information to most interviewees was UNHCR (15.1%).

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Table 18 Years of Repatriation

Year	%
1981	0.8
1982	3.2
1983	3.2
1985	0.8
1987	0.8
1988	2.4
1989	39.7
1990	22.2
1991 (ending July)	27.0
Total	100.0

Table 18 illustrates the scale of repatriation among the 126 interviewees in each year between 1981-1991 (except in 1984 and 1986 when there were no returnees). Before 1989, the scale of repatriation was minimal, totalling 11.2%. Fears of persecution and discrimination on return to Laos as well as the unfamiliarity of the repatriation programme dissuaded Lao refugees from returning home. Furthermore, in the mid-1980s, the resettlement opportunity to third countries acted as a disincentive to repatriation. However, since 1989, following the improvement in the general situation in Laos as well as the implementation of the CPA and the Tripartite Agreement among Laos, Thailand and UNHCR to return the screened out and repatriation volunteers to Laos, repatriation has occurred in greater numbers, with 39.7% having departed from the Thai camps in 1989, 22.2% in 1990, and 27% in 1991. It is hoped that under this agreement, all Lao refugees will have returned to Laos by 1994.

Table 19 First Destination Areas after Repatriation

Destination area	%
Hometown	19.8
Residence of husband/wife	1.6
Parents' residence	2.4
Relatives' residence	0.8
Others	11.1
Transit centre	58.7
No answer	5.6
Total	100.0

Unfortunately, in Table 19, the repatriated returnees' first destination areas following their compulsory stay in the transit centres can not be comprehensively illustrated due to a misunderstanding of the questionnaire by the majority of interviewees (58.7%) who gave "transit centres" as their replies. Nevertheless, a high proportion of returnees (almost 25% of all returnees)

who answered the question correctly, repatriated either to their hometown or to their family's residence.

Table 20 Reasons for Repatriation

Reason	%
Better prospects in homeland	11.1
Guarantees of no persecution	2.4
Selection failure for resettlement to third countries	42.1
Homesickness	27.8
Family reunion	7.1
Others	8.7
No answer	0.8
Total	100.0

Returnees volunteered for repatriation for both positive and negative reasons. Following the improvement in the socio economic conditions in Laos and the grant of Amnesty to returnees by the LPDR, 11.1% of volunteers returned because of better prospects in Laos, while 2.4% went back because they had been assured that there would be no persecution. However, 42.1% volunteered only after their selection failure for resettlement in third countries. With the introduction of the screening procedure in July 1987, genuine refugees were segregated from illegal immigrants, the latter having since been screened out and returned to Laos. Moreover, in order to accelerate the rate of repatriation, preventative measures such as the closure of the resettlement processing centre at Ban Napho in 1990, have been adopted. The other reasons for a return to Laos were homesickness (27.8%) and family reunion (7.1%).

In order to obtain a clearer understanding of the rationale of returnees in making their decisions to return to Laos, an examination of the breakdown of the reasons for repatriation according to the returnees' age, sex, and previous occupations will be presented.

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Table 21 Reasons for Repatriation by Sex

Sex Reason	Male	Female	Row (N) Total %
Better prospects in homeland	(10) 7.9	(4) 3.2	(14) 11.1
Guarantees of no persecution	(3) 2.4	-	(3) 2.4
Selection failure for resettlement in third countries	(36) 28.6	(17) 13.5	(53) 42.1
Homesickness	(29) 23.0	(6) 4.8	(35) 27.8
Family reunion	(4) 3.2	(5) 4.0	(9) 7.1
Others	(9) 7.1	(2) 1.6	(11) 8.7
No answer	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8
Column (N) Total %	(92) 73.0	(34) 27.0	(126) 100.0

In the crosstabulation between the returnees' reasons for repatriation and their sex, displayed in Table 21, the statistics which are most noticeable are the proportions of males (28.6%) and females (13.%) who gave as their reason for repatriation, their selection failure for resettlement to third countries. Other statistics which have been highlighted as a result of the crosstabulation are the high proportion of men who wished to return to their towns due to homesickness (23.0%), and the relatively high proportion of women in the combined homesickness/family reunion categories (8.8%).

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Table 22 Reasons for Repatriation by Age (Years)

Age Groups Reason	< 20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	> 70	Row Total	(N) %
Better prospects in homeland	(2) 1.6	(7) 5.6	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	-	-	(14) 11.1	
Guarantees of no persecution	-	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	-	-	(1) 0.8	-	(3) 2.4	
Selection failure for resettlement in third countries	(2) 1.6	(20) 15.9	(22) 17.5	(5) 4.0	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	(53) 42.1	
Homesickness	(1) 0.8	(16) 12.7	(7) 5.6	(4) 3.2	(3) 2.4	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	(35) 27.8	
Family reunion	-	(6) 4.8	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	-	-	(9) 7.1	
Others	(1) 0.8	(3) 2.4	(4) 3.2	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	-	-	(11) 8.7	
No answer	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	-	(1) 0.8	
Column (N)	(6)	(54)	(38)	(14)	(6)	(6)	(2)	(126)	
Total %	4.8	42.9	30.2	11.1	4.8	4.8	1.6	100.0	

The findings from the crosstabulation between the returnees' reasons for repatriation and their age groups, illustrated in Table 22, are as follows: First, selection failure for resettlement in third countries was the most popular reason for repatriation among returnees between 21-30 in age (37%) and between 31-40 in age (17.5%). Second, among the 21-30 age group, another popular cause for return was homesickness (12.7%). Third, the 21-30 age group constituted a high proportion of returnees in the good job prospects in homeland category (5.6%), and in the family reunion category (4.8%). Finally, it should be noted that the family reunion reason accounted for no returnees under the age of 20 or over the age of 50, while homesickness was an important reason for returning for young to middle-aged returnees (between 20-40 years in age).

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Table 23 Reasons for Repatriation by Previous Occupation in Laos

Previous Occupation	Student	Agricultural worker	Skilled worker	Trader	Labourer	Military/ police personnel	Others	No answer	Row Total	(N) %
Better prospects in homeland	(5) 4.0	(4) 3.2	(1) 0.8	-	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	-	(14) 11.1	
Guarantees of no persecution	(2) 1.6	-	-	-	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	(3) 2.4	
Selection failure for resettlement in third countries	(8) 6.3	(21) 16.7	(4) 3.2	(3) 2.4	(9) 7.1	(2) 1.6	(4) 3.2	(2) 1.6	(53) 42.1	
Homesickness	(5) 4.0	(11) 8.7	(1) 0.8	(3) 2.4	(5) 4.0	(1) 0.8	(8) 6.3	(1) 0.8	(35) 27.8	
Family reunion	(1) 0.8	(5) 4.0	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	-	-	-	-	(9) 7.1	
Others	(1) 0.8	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	(3) 2.4	(1) 0.8	-	(3) 2.4	-	(11) 8.7	
No answer	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	-	-	(1) 0.8	
Column (N)	(22)	(44)	(8)	(11)	(17)	(5)	(16)	(3)	(126)	
Total %	17.5	34.9	6.3	8.7	13.5	4.0	12.7	2.4	100.0	

In the crosstabulation between the returnees' reasons for repatriation and their previous occupation (Table 23), high proportions of students (6.3%), skilled workers (32%), agricultural workers (16.7%), and labourers (7.1%) gave as their reason for return, their selection failure for resettlement in third countries. Interestingly, significantly large representations of the two latter groups, namely, agricultural workers and labourers, whose occupations by their very nature had very little to gain from resettlement in third countries, still originally chose to resettle in third countries. Other popular causes for return among students were good job prospects in homeland (4.0%) and homesickness (4.0%). Finally, it is interesting to note that students made up two thirds and military/police personnel, one third of returnees who gave as their reason for repatriation, guarantees of no persecution.

Table 24 Reasons for Delayed Return

Reason	%
Hopes for better life for children	5.6
Preference for life in camps	3.2
Opportunities for resettlement in third countries	42.9
Fears of anarchy under existing regime in Laos	19.0
No desire to return (for unstated reasons)	7.9
Others	15.1
No answer	6.3
Total	100.0

Illustrated in Table 24 are the 126 interviewees' reasons for delaying their return to Laos. 42.9% of interviewees delayed their return to Laos in the hope of resettlement into third countries. As in Table 20, the high figure for the resettlement opportunity category is not unexpected for a significant proportion of interviewees had departed from Laos in 1984 and 1985, at a time when resettlement opportunity as a pulling agent, was most effective. These migrants would appear to have been more motivated by economics than politics. Therefore, following the implementation of the CPA and the Tripartite Agreement, delaying a return to Laos further was no longer possible for the economic migrants who unlike legitimate refugees were screened out and returned to Laos. Nevertheless, among the group of 126 interviewees, there were genuine refugees who fled political persecution and who prolonged their return due to fears of anarchy under the existing regime in Laos (19%). Other reasons for a delayed return included hopes for better prospects for the children (5.6%) and the preference of camp life (3.2%).



Life in Laos

In order to determine the returnees' way of life in Laos after repatriation, a survey was conducted on the returnees' satisfaction of Laotian living standards, their incomes, occupations and perceptions of major obstacles on return to Laos. The findings of this survey are presented in this section.

Table 25 Returnees' Satisfaction of Laotian Living Standards

Standard of living	%	Debts	%
Sufficient	56.3	Yes	30.2
Insufficient	39.7	No	49.2
No answer	<u>4.0</u>	No answer	<u>20.6</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>	Total	<u>100.0</u>

Among the 126 returnees interviewed after repatriation, 56.3% considered the standard of living in their new places of residence to be sufficient, 39.7% thought it to be insufficient, and 4% gave no replies. In an attempt to find out a possible cause of returnees' satisfaction or dissatisfaction, the same group of returnees were asked whether or not they were in debt after repatriation. The findings showed a similar trend : 49.2% had no debts, 30.2% had debts, 20.4% gave no answers. This would indicate that indebtedness at least contributed to if not determined the returnees' level of satisfaction of living standards in Laos after repatriation.

Table 26 Returnees' Occupations, Past and Present, as well as in Thai Camps

Occupation	Previous %	In Thai camps %	Present %
Agricultural worker	34.9	-	43.7
Trader	8.7	16.7	9.5
Labourer	13.5	8.7	23.0
Skilled worker	6.3	17.4	6.3
Student	17.5	-	-
Military/police personnel	4.0	-	-
Teacher	-	2.4	-
Voluntary agency worker	-	11.1	-
No occupation	-	35.8	7.9
Others	12.7	7.9	6.4
No answer	<u>2.4</u>	<u>-</u>	<u>3.2</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>	<u>100.0</u>

For comparative purposes, listed in Table 26 are the interviewees' occupations prior to their departure from Laos, during their stay in the Thai camps, and since their return to Laos after repatriation. Presently, 43.7% of returnees are involved in agriculture as a form of employment, an increase of nearly 10% from previous agricultural employment figures (34.9%). A similar increase has been witnessed in manual (labour) work with 23% of returnees currently employed in this sector as opposed to 13.5% previously and 8.7% in the Thai camps. However, the number of unemployed has also risen to the present figure of 7.9%.

The occupations which experienced little or no change in number between the period prior to departure and the period after repatriation, but which catered for larger numbers in the Thai camps were trade and skilled work (which included occupations such as silversmith, mechanic, and carpenter). Among the 126 interviewees, 8.7% had originally been traders and 6.3%, skilled workers. During their stay in the Thai camps, these figures had increased to 16.7% as traders, and 17.4%, as skilled workers. However, since repatriation, only 9.5% have continued as traders and 6.3% as skilled workers. Furthermore, it can be seen that after repatriation, no refugee went back to continue to work as a teacher or a student or as a military/police personnel. This was a direct consequence of the LPDR's employment policy towards returnees which prohibited returnees from obtaining employment in sensitive occupations which held positions of influence and power.

It must also be noted that over one third of interviewees had no occupation in the Thai camps (34.9%) due to the camp employment policy to stop the circulation of cash. The no answer replies for the period before departure (2.4%) and the period after repatriation (3.2%) accounted for only small percentages. Considering occupations in the Thai camps, had better employment opportunities been provided, certain competent returnees would have had jobs as skilled workers, teachers or as development workers. It should also be noted that most returnees did not enter into skilled employment once they repatriated. This might have been due to the lack of employment opportunities in Laos.

Finally, the tables on living standards in Laos (see Table 25) and on present occupations have been crosstabulated in order to attempt to ascertain the occupational groups among the Lao returnees with the highest living standards. Not unexpectedly, it was discovered that three quarters of both the skilled worker and trader groups considered living standards to be sufficient while over two fifths of both the agricultural worker and labourer groups expressed their dissatisfaction with Laotian living standards.

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Table 27 Present Occupation by Sex

Sex Occupation	Male	Female	Row (N) Total %
Agricultural worker	(40) 31.7	(15) 11.9	(55) 43.7
Trader	(6) 4.8	(6) 4.8	(12) 9.5
Labourer	(26) 20.6	(3) 2.4	(29) 23.0
Skilled worker	(7) 5.6	(1) 0.8	(8) 6.3
No occupation	(7) 5.6	(3) 2.4	(10) 7.9
Others	(6) 4.8	(2) 1.6	(8) 6.3
No answer	-	(4) 3.2	(4) 3.2
Column (N) Total %	(92) 73.0	(34) 27.0	(126) 100.0

Table 27 is a crosstabulation between the returnees' present occupation and their sex. Among the 92 men interviewed, 40 have been involved in agriculture since repatriation (31.7%) while 26, have become labourers (20.6%). Among the 34 women questioned, the only main occupation has been as agricultural workers (11.9%). Other significant findings include the balanced ratio of men to women as traders, the predominantly male labour force of skilled (5.6%) and unskilled (20.6%) workers, and the fact that out of the ten persons who had no employment, seven were men (5.6%).

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Table 28 Present Occupation by Age (Years)

Age Groups Occupation	< 20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	> 70	Row Total	(N) %
Agricultural worker	(3) 2.4	(20) 15.9	(15) 11.9	(9) 7.1	(5) 4.0	(3) 2.4	-	(55) 43.7	
Trader	-	(5) 4.0	(4) 3.2	(3) 2.4	-	-	-	(12) 9.5	
Labourer	(2) 1.6	(13) 10.3	(11) 8.7	(1) 0.8	-	(1) 0.8	(1) 0.8	(29) 23.0	
Skilled worker	-	(5) 4.0	(2) 1.6	-	(1) 0.8	-	-	(8) 6.3	
No occupation	(1) 0.8	(8) 6.3	(1) 0.8	-	-	-	-	(10) 7.9	
Others	-	(3) 2.4	(3) 2.4	-	-	(2) 1.6	-	(8) 6.3	
No answer	-	-	(2) 1.6	(1) 0.8	-	-	(1) 0.8	(4) 3.2	
Column Total	(6) 4.8	(54) 42.9	(38) 30.2	(14) 11.1	(6) 4.8	(6) 4.8	(2) 1.6	(126) 100.0	

In the crosstabulation between the returnees' present occupation and their age groups, shown in Table 28, agricultural employment has been a popular occupation among all age groups, notably, the 21-30 age group (15.9%), the 31-40 age group (11.5%), and the 41-50 age group (7.1%). Unskilled work has also been a common occupation among those between 21-30 in age (24.1%) and those between 31-40 in age (28.9%). Other interesting findings can be found in the 21-30 age group which represents five out of the eight returnees in the skilled work occupation and eight out of the ten unemployed returnees. By referring to Table 12, it can be seen that most participants of the training programmes in Thai camps came from the 21-30 and the 31-40 age groups. If many of these participants, since repatriation, have obtained skilled work employment, then the training programmes would appear to have been of some success. However, if these participants were among the unemployed, despite at the time, being in the most productive years of age, then this could be interpreted as either the inadequacy of training services or possibly as the lack of job opportunities in Laos following repatriation. The latter would appear less likely since returnees over the age of 40 who answered, all have employment.

Table 29 Present Occupation by Status in Household

Status Occupation	Father	Mother	Son/ daughter	Brother/ sister	Others	Row (N) Total %
Agricultural worker	(31) 24.6	(16) 12.7	(4) 3.2	-	(4) 3.2	(55) 43.7
Trader	(5) 4.0	(5) 4.0	(2) 1.6	-	-	(12) 9.5
Labourer	(17) 13.5	(2) 1.6	(3) 2.4	(3) 2.4	(4) 3.2	(29) 23.0
Skilled worker	(4) 3.2	(1) 0.8	-	-	(3) 2.4	(8) 6.3
No occupation	(5) 4.0	(3) 2.4	(2) 1.6	-	-	(10) 7.9
Others	(4) 3.2	(1) 0.8	(3) 2.4	-	-	(8) 6.3
No answer	-	(2) 1.6	-	-	(2) 1.6	(4) 3.2
Column (N) Total %	(66) 52.4	(30) 23.8	(14) 11.1	(3) 2.4	(13) 10.3	(126) 100.0

Displayed in Table 29 is the crosstabulation between the returnees' present occupation and their household status since repatriation. Within agricultural employment, there are high percentages of returnees who are fathers (24.6%) and mothers (12.7%). Unskilled work has also been well represented by returnees who are fathers (13.5%) and fully represented by returnees who are brothers/sisters (2.4%). Furthermore, half of the skilled work force derive from the father household status category which also make up half the number of unemployed returnees (4.0%).

Table 30 Major Obstacles on Return to Laos

Obstacle	%
Lack of money	27.0
Lack of shelter	25.4
Lack of jobs	10.3
Health problems	3.2
Lack of educational opportunities	2.4
Adjustment problems	0.8
Others	7.9
No answer	23.0
Total	100.0

From a choice of seven, interviewees were asked what was the biggest obstacle which faced them on their arrival in Laos. Despite the financial assistance awarded to returnees by UNHCR Thailand (see Table 32) and UNHCR Laos (see Table 35), lack of money as a major obstacle on return still accounted for 27% of interviewees. A similar proportion of interviewees (25.4%) considered lack of shelter to be a major obstacle, a fact which highlights the problem of land shortage for resettlement and which indicates the difficulties of the LPDR's resettlement policy. Lack of employment opportunities was stated as an obstacle by 10.3%, a figure which is slightly greater than the present unemployment percentage figure (see Table 26). Health problems (3.2%), shortage of educational opportunities (2.4%), and adjustment problems (0.8%), however, were only minor hindrances. Other unstated reasons totalled 7.9% and no answer replies accounted for 23%, an inexplicably high figure.

Table 31 Reasons for and against Returning to Live in Laos

Reason for	%	Reason against	%
Homesickness-family reunion	40.5	Unavailability of land/ houses	4.8
Personal freedom	23.0	Lack of money	4.8
Good job prospects	15.1	Indebtedness	1.6
Opportunities for self- ownership of property	4.8	More comfortable life style in camps	1.5
Democracy under new regime	0.8	Others	0.8
Others	3.2	No complaints	86.5
No answer	12.7	Total	100.0
Total	100.0		

Displayed in Table 31 are the returnees reasons for and against returning to live in Laos. Asked to provide one reason for returning and one against returning, 87.3% of returnees were able to put forward their main reason for returning while only 13.5% managed to submit their complaints against returning to live in Laos. Homesickness was the most popular cause for going back (40.5%). Other reasons for return included personal freedom (23%) and good job prospects (15.1%) which both reflected the improvement in the general conditions in Laos. Surprisingly, representation of the democracy under new regime category was very low (0.8%). This could indicate one of two possibilities, either that the majority of the 126 interviewees were not politically motivated or that since their original departure from Laos, there had been little or no improvement under the new regime regarding democracy. For simplicity's sake, the no answer category in this table which totalled 12.7%, has been interpreted as the category which opposed a return to Laos.

The two main reasons against returning to Laos and which both only accounted for 4.8%, were the unavailability of land and houses and lack of money. Two factors which affected the availability of land and houses were the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy and the 1990 property reclamation law which stated that repatriates who left Laos after 1988 were economic migrants who therefore do not deserve any reclamation rights to land or property. Other reasons for not returning included indebtedness (1.6%), and the more comfortable life style in the camps (1.5%). However, 86.5% of returnees, when asked to provide a reason against returning, had no complaints. This table, therefore, clearly illustrates the overwhelming majority of returnees' desire to return home.

Assistance on Return

On return to Laos, assistance was given to returnees from UNHCR Thailand and UNHCR Laos. In this section, returnees were asked to express their opinions towards the assistance they received on return, their preferences, appreciation and ideas of the adequacy of assistance. In addition, there is a list of current development projects to further assist returnees.

Table 32 Usefulness and Adequacy of 1000 Baht Cash Provision by UNHCR Thailand

Usefulness	%	Adequacy	%
No money received	39.7	Adequate	21.4
Useful	23.8	Inadequate	20.6
No use	1.6	No answer	<u>58.0</u>
Others	12.7	Total	<u>100.0</u>
No answer	<u>22.2</u>		
Total	<u>100.0</u>		

On arrival in Laos, returnees were given 1000 Baht in cash as an immediate form of assistance by UNHCR. A survey was thus carried out to find out both the usefulness of this form of assistance and whether or not returnees considered the amount to have been adequate. However, it was noticeable that a sizeable proportion of returnees (39.7%) had not received the 1000 Baht cash handouts. A possible explanation for this might be due to a misunderstanding among the interviewees who had exchanged the cash handouts for other forms of assistance. Moreover, the survey was not assisted by the high percentage of no answer replies. Nevertheless, the majority of returnees (23.8%) who received assistance and who gave a reply, considered the cash donation to have been useful. Only 1.6% of returnees stated that the cash donation was not useful while 12.7% gave other unstated replies. As regards the adequacy of the 1000 Baht cash donation, again no answer replies represented the majority of returnees (58%). The remaining replies were of mixed opinions with 21.4% considering the amount to have been adequate whilst 20.6% regarded it as inadequate.

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Table 33 Returnees' Preference on Items of UNHCR Assistance

Item of Assistance	%
Rice	19.0
Equipment	18.3
Money/cash	13.5
Agricultural tools	4.8
Clothes	1.6
Housing	0.8
No answer	<u>42.1</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>

Illustrated in Table 33 are the findings of a survey which questioned what item of UNHCR assistance returnees considered to be most helpful on return to Laos. Rice (19%) and equipment (18.3%) were the two most popular items. However, only 13.5% of returnees considered money to be the item of most help, a figure which appears to be low and inconsistent (see Table and 38). In light of the promotion of agricultural self-sufficiency by UNHCR, the low placing of agricultural tools (4.8%) in the list of preferences is disappointing and concerning. The remaining items were clothes (1.6%) and housing (0.8%). Finally, it must again be pointed out that there is an inexplicably high figure for the no answer replies.

Table 34 Appreciation of UNHCR's Services on Arrival in Laos

Appreciation	%
Yes	46.8
No	11.9
Do not know (no encounter with UNHCR officials)	25.4
No answer	<u>15.9</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>

The returnees' appreciation of UNHCR's services on arrival in Laos is shown in Table 34. 46.8% of returnees showed their appreciation as opposed to only 11.9% who stated that they did not appreciate UNHCR's services. However, 25.4% never encountered UNHCR officials nor their services, while 15.9% gave no answer.

Table 35 Adequacy of Rations from UNHCR Laos

Adequacy	%
Yes	51.6
No	31.7
No ration received	3.2
No answer	13.5
	<u>100.0</u>

Presented in Table 35 are the returnees' opinions on the adequacy of UNHCR's rations which amounted to 15,000 kips (the equivalent of 30 US \$) and a twelve month supply of rice per returnee. Just over half of the returnees interviewed (51.6%) considered the rations to be adequate while nearly a third (31.7%) complained of the inadequacy of UNHCR's rations. A possible explanation for this complaint could have been the fact that some returnees were obliged to donate a proportion of their rations to their relatives in Laos. The other returnees either gave no answer (13.5%) or stated that they never received any rations (3.2%).

Table 36 External Remittances

Amount	%
30-50 US\$	8.7
51-100 US\$	15.9
101-300 US\$	4.8
No remittance	70.6
Total	<u>100.0</u>

Besides the financial assistance provided by UNHCR Thailand (see Table 32) and UNHCR Laos (see Table 35), certain returnees also received external remittances from families and relatives in third countries, notably, the US and France. Revealed in Table 35 are the proportion of returnees who received such remittances and the amount of the remittances themselves. Clearly, the majority of returnees had received no external remittances (70.6%). The fortunate few (29.6%), were given 30-300 US\$ either on a regularly basis (the monthly average of which was 25 US\$), or as a lump sum (the average amount of which was 105 US\$).

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Table 37 Development Projects for Returnees

Project	Objectives
Settlement Facilities (UNHCR)	- to make available land for house construction - to allocate housing
Education Programme (UNHCR)	- to provide educational opportunities for children - to render adults teaching opportunities
Volrep Programme (UNHCR)	- to provide assistance for return to Laos - to supply food and equipment
Youth Training Programme	- to create unity and friendship among trainees
Radio Repairing Training (COERR)	- to enhance employment prospects
Skill Training (COERR)	- to grant certificate awards
Vientiane Plain Project (Lao-Japanese cooperation)	- to allocate one acre of farmland (but with no right of sale)

Displayed in Table 37 are the various projects which had been organized by UNHCR, other UN agencies as well as NGOs, following repatriation to help the readjustment of returnees to the way of life in Laos. Also presented are the objectives of each project.

Table 38 Returnees' Short Term and Long Term Preferences on Items of UNHCR Assistance

Assistance	% Short Term	% Long Term
Cash	40.5	41.3
Housing	31.8	-
Tools for craft and trade	4.0	-
Agricultural tools	5.6	-
Consumable goods	4.8	-
Land for cultivation	3.2	-
Guarantees of safety	1.6	-
Educational services	-	9.5
Vocational training/job	-	21.5
Others	4.5	17.5
No answer	4.0	10.2
Total	100.0	100.0

Indicated in Table 38 are the returnees' preferences on items of UNHCR assistance in both the short and long terms. Besides cash-aid which was considered to be the most important item of UNHCR assistance by many returnees in both the short term (40.5%) and the long term (41.3%), preferences on other specified items did not overlap between the two time periods. In the short term, housing (31.8%) was another item which was sought after by a large proportion of returnees. However, agricultural tools (5.6%) and land for cultivation (3.2%) were only considered important by very few returnees, despite UNHCR's encouragement to promote agricultural self-sufficiency. Other short term preferences were for tools for craft and trade (4%) and guarantees of safety (1.6%). In the long run, on the other hand, returnees' preferences were for vocational training (21.5%) and educational services (9.5%). Other unstated items totalled 17.5%, a figure

much higher than the short term figure (4.5%) and similarly, no answer replies in the long term were higher (10.2%) than in the short term (4%).

In depth interviews on details of preferred items of assistance were conducted in order to obtain more detailed answers for the improvement of the Voluntary Repatriation Programme. Under the housing category, cement, zinc for roofs and other construction materials were stated. Consumable goods covered blankets, mosquito nets, kitchenware, clothes, rice and food, and medicine. Tools for craft and trade included rice thrashing machines, bicycle-motorcycle and auto repair equipment, sewing machines, carpenter tools, electrical tools, construction equipment, silversmith tools, blacksmith tools, refrigerators for shops, and equipment for beauty salons. Regarding training, returnees indicated that they would like to be trained in mechanics, agriculture, motor electronics, dressmaking and hairdressing. Educational services were stated as being required most for returnees' children. Finally, concerning cash, it was stressed that this was required for both trade investment as well as capital for new businesses.



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Social Reintegration

Although the UNHCR Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme was established to promote the repatriation of Lao refugees from Thailand to Laos, it also strove to ensure that Lao returnees were reintegrated into Lao society. In order to assess the level of reintegration, the 126 Lao returnees were questioned on the perceptions of their social acceptance within the community. In this section, the following topics will be discussed: the returnee/local villager relationships, the level of social contact among returnees, the returnees' travel movements, and membership of social groups.

Table 39 Types of Relationships among Villagers, Kinsmen, People in Community/Village

Relationship	%
Good acquaintances with reciprocal assistance	5.6
Good acquaintance with most neighbours	49.2
Good acquaintance with few neighbours	4.0
No trust among neighbours	2.4
No relationship	2.4
Others	18.3
No answer	18.3
Total	100.0

Following repatriation, the types of relationship among villagers in the community varied between two extremes, from one of mutual assistance among acquaintances (5.6%), to one where no relationship existed (2.4%). In between, there was a large proportion of returnees interviewed whose relationship with most villagers extended as far but no further than as neighbours (49.2%). A smaller proportion of people were well acquainted with only a few neighbours (4%). Fewer still, there existed a group of suspicious villagers whose inter-relationship was based on no trust (2.4%). Other unstated types of relationships totalled 18.3% and no answer replies comprised of 18.3% of villagers interviewed, a high figure which could possibly imply indirectly that no relationship existed.

Table 40 Communication among Returnees

Continued Contact	%
Yes	57.1
No	34.9
No answer	8.0
Total	100.0

Unfortunately, the results of the study which asked whether or not returnees have remained in contact with one another since repatriation, displayed in Table 40, are vague and inconclusive. Although the majority of replies were positive, it is unclear, however, whether this was

thanks to freedom of communication in Laos, the fact that returnees have only been able to keep in touch with those who live nearby, or the returnees' inability to integrate in a new society. Similarly, there are more than one interpretation to the negative replies. Although the obvious interpretation is lack of freedom of communication, the fact that 34.9% of returnees have not continued to communicate among each other could also possibly be out of their own choice, maybe to have a fresh start to life.

Table 41 Membership of Social Groups in Lao

Group	%
Administrative Unit Members	12.7
Rice Cooperative Members	0.8
Security Guard Group Members	2.4
Men Group Members	14.3
Women Group Members	4.0
Leader and Old Age Group Members	0.8
Others	13.5
Non Members	<u>51.6</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>

Table 41 illustrates the membership of social groups in Laos. Despite the high percentage of non members (51.6%) among interviewees, the two most popular social groups were the men group (14.3%) and the administrative unit group (12.7%). The remaining four named social groups were much smaller in size with a total of only 8% while the sum of the other unnamed social groups added up to 13.5%.

Table 42 Travel Movements among Returnees

Travel Movements	%
Yes	27.0
No	38.9
No answer	<u>34.1</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>

Table 42 shows the returnees' responses to the question which asked whether or not they had already made any journeys since repatriation. Among the returnees interviewed, 27% indicated that they had already travelled within Laos for reasons such as to visit relatives or for business. However, although 38.9% stated that they had yet to make a journey, the reasons for their non-movement are uncertain and could possible include travel restrictions, shortage of money, and lack of time due to the busy rice growing season. The final figure which represents the no answer replies is an astonishing 34.1% and can not be explained.

Attitudes towards Thailand

As a first asylum country, Thailand has offered sanctuary to thousands of Lao refugees. In this section, returnees were asked on their opinions of the treatment they received in Thailand as refugees which very much reflected camp conditions, and their reactions to rejection from resettlement in Thailand.

Table 43 Opinions on Thailand as a First Asylum Country (from Thai Camp Experience)

Opinion	%
Favourable	73.0
Warm hospitality	33.3
Good welfare services	24.6
Safe and comfortable life style	1.6
Well disciplined society and good set of laws and regulations	0.8
Favourable (without explanation)	12.7
Impartial	8.8
Adequate life style	3.2
Impartial (without explanation)	5.6
Unfavourable	16.6
Uncomfortable accommodation, job dissatisfaction	3.2
No freedom of travel	0.8
Ill-treatment from camp volunteers	4.8
Unfavourable (without explanation)	4.8
Others	3.0
No answer	1.6
Total	100.0

Opinions on Thailand as a first asylum country, which were based on the Laotian refugees' experiences in Thai camps, were divided into three main categories. The opinion of the majority of interviewees was favourable (73%). This was due to a variety of reasons, namely, the warm Thai hospitality (33.3%), the good Thai welfare services, the safe and comfortable life style (1.6%), the well disciplined society (0.8%), and other unstated reasons (12.7%). All these favourable reasons very much reflect the relative degree of freedom within the Thai camps which the Lao returnees, as refugees had enjoyed. Under a tenth of interviewees held an impartial opinion (8.8%), 3.2% of whom gave as their stated reason, the adequate Thai life style while 5.6% did not elaborate. Finally, 13.6% of interviewees held an unfavourable opinion on Thailand as a first asylum country. Ill treatment from local, non-official camp volunteers (4.8%), the uncomfortable accommodation and job dissatisfaction (3.2%), no freedom of travel (0.8%), and other unspecified reasons (4.8%) were the causes of discontent. Discontent may have also generated from the RTG's human deterrence policy which

made the camp living conditions less comfortable in an attempt to accelerate the repatriation rate. In addition, there were other unstated opinions on Thailand as a first asylum country (3%) and no answer replies (1.6%).

Table 44 Returnees' Reactions to Rejection from Resettlement in Thailand

Reaction	%
Positive	6.4
Great home expectations	3.2
Acceptance with understanding of Thailand's refusal	3.2
Neutral	82.6
No idea/opinion	68.3
Preference for resettlement in third countries	14.3
Negative	5.6
Opposition to involuntary repatriation	3.2
Resentment of loss of business investment	0.8
Preference for permanent camp life	0.8
No financial resources for new start to life	0.8
No answer	5.4
Total	100.0

The reactions of returnees to their rejection from resettlement in Thailand have been categorized into three groups. First, there was the positive reaction which was held by only 6.4% of returnees for two reasons, namely, due to their great expectations for a return home (3.2%), and their acceptance and understanding of Thailand's refusal. Second, there was the neutral reaction which represented the majority of returnees (82.6%), most of whom having held no opinion on the matter (68.3%), while the rest preferred resettlement in third countries (14.3%). Finally, there was the negative reaction which constituted for only 5.6% of returnees. The reasons which motivated this reaction were their opposition to involuntary repatriation (3.2%), resentment of loss of business investment (0.8%), preference for a permanent camp life (0.8%) and lack of resources to finance a new start to life (0.8%). In addition, there were no answer replies which accounted for 5.4% of returnees.

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Local Villagers' Perspectives on Returnees

In order to examine the reintegration of returnees in their community, 75 local villagers whose houses were located near the returnees' places of residence, were interviewed. Among the 75 interviewees, 46 were from Vientiane Municipality and 29 from Vientiane Province. The questions raised in the interviews cover the types of relationships between villagers and returnees and the villagers' attitudes towards LPDR's assistance to and treatment of returnees.

Table 45 Types of Relationships between Villagers and Returnees

Relationship	%
Good acquaintance	20.0
Regular contact but no relationship	37.3
No relationship	<u>42.7</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>

Indicated in Table 45 are the three types of relationships between villagers and returnees. 20% of villagers interviewed stated that they had established close relationships with the returnees. However, the majority of villagers (80%) had no relationship with returnees, even despite the fact that 37.3% had made regular contact with returnees. Therefore, from these findings, it would appear that the returnees had not fully reintegrated into Lao society. Moreover, it is interesting to note that these findings are contrary to the findings of the survey on the returnees' perceptions of their relationships with local villagers (see Table 39).

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Table 46 Villagers' Attitudes towards Government Assistance to and Treatment of Returnees

Attitude	%
Favourable	84.0
Government safety guarantees	1.3
No trials, arrests, punishment, or persecution	12.0
No government discrimination	12.0
Warm reception and provision of facilities by government	18.7
Availability of government assistance, provision of materials, and monitoring service	22.7
Return of property previously confiscated by government	2.7
Government provision of land for cultivation	8.0
Occasional allocation of additional privileges	1.3
Good government treatment as means to promote population growth among returnees	5.3
Impartial	4.0
Availability of government assistance but:	
Presence of government surveillance team	2.7
Slow time-consuming administrative procedures	1.3
Unfavourable	4.0
Lack of government assistance	1.3
Incomplete government provision of certain materials	1.3
No government assistance except unwanted government surveillance	1.3
No answer	8.0
Unwillingness to provide answer due to government officials' presence at interview	1.3
No replies	6.7
Total	100.0

The majority of villagers' attitudes towards government assistance to and treatment of returnees was favourable (84%). The main reasons behind their favourable attitude were the warm reception and provision of facilities by the government (18.7%), the availability of government assistance, provision of materials and monitoring service (22.7%), and the absence of trials, arrests, punishment, or persecution (12.0%). The other favourable attitude explanations included the returnees' enjoyment from no government discrimination (5.3%), and the government provision of land for cultivation (8.0%). Only 4% of opinions were unfavourable. Lack of government assistance (1.3%), the incomplete provision of certain materials by the government (1.3%), and the presence of a government surveillance team which scrutinized returnees (1.3%) were explanations behind their unfavourable opinion. Similarly, 4% held an impartial opinion. Although government assistance was available, the fact that returnees were subjected to continuous government surveillance (2.7%) and the slow administrative procedures, for instance, in processing household registrations and in issuing identity cards, were reasons for holding a mixed opinion. The remaining 8% of replies were no answer, which included 1.3% of interviewees who asserted that they had been unwilling to provide a reply due to the presence of government officials at the interview.

Summary



From the analysis of the above tables, an attempt has been made to provide further insight into the experiences (which include attitudes, opinions, and values) of the 126 Laotian returnees interviewed in this survey. Although the tables have been presented under nine topics, it would be better to categorize the tables into three transitional periods in order to ascertain an overview of progression and change.

The way of life in Laos prior to departure for Thailand is not altogether clear from the tables. Nevertheless, background information on returnees has been well documented through their profiles, their previous occupations and their original places of residence. Regarding the returnees' profiles, the most striking observations include the high male to female ratio, the significant numbers of returnees in the 21-30 and 31-40 age groups, the considerable proportion of Buddhists and the sizeable percentage of Lowland Lao. Concerning the returnees' previous occupations, the most noticeable employment sector was in agriculture which employed over a third of returnees. As regards the returnees' original places of residence, the most populated places were Sikhotabong and Saithany in Vientiane Municipality and Phone Hong in Vientiane Province. Family values, during this period are not too clear although the fact that the majority of interviewees had departed from Laos together with members of their family implies that the family was a closely-knitted social unit. However, what is more apparent was the good attitude towards work held by returnees. Nearly all interviewees who gave replies to the question of their previous occupation had employment. Furthermore, the returnees' reasons for leaving Laos indicate their opinions on the way of life in Laos. Interestingly, only just over a quarter of interviewees stated that they had left Laos as a result of economic and political difficulties. Most of the other interviewees either claimed to have left Laos to accompany their parents or voiced their desire to reside in another country without explaining why they chose to do so. Departures from Laos had commenced in 1975 and continued up to 1988 (Table 2).

The Laotian returnees in this study, resided in five main Thai camps. The largest camp was the Lowland Lao camp at Na Pho which housed 56.3% of returnees. During their stay in the camps, certain attitudes and values appear to have changed. Most prominently was the returnees' working situation. Only 36.5% definitely attended the camps' training courses while over a third failed to obtain employment during this period due to the camp employment policy which prohibited income generating activities. Out of those who attended the training programmes, most were men from the 21-30 and 31-40 age groups who attended the mechanics training course. The duration of the courses varied from under 2 months to over 6 months but most lasted between 2-3 months.

Opinions on the day-to-day life in the camps were most favourable (since opinions on Thailand as a first asylum country were based on the returnees' camp experiences, these opinions must themselves reflect the returnees' opinions of camp life). The explanations for the favourable opinion upheld by a high proportion of returnees were largely due to the warm camp hospitality and the good welfare services. Regarding repatriation, although Lao refugees began to return to Laos from as early as 1981 (see Table 18), it was only since 1989, following the implementation of the Tripartite Agreement signed by the LPDR, the RTG and UNHCR, that significant numbers of returnees began to leave the Thai camps for Laos. However, a sizeable proportion only returned to Laos as a direct consequence of their selection failure for resettlement to third countries. Moreover,

a similar proportion of returnees stated the identical reason as their explanation for deliberately delaying their return to Laos. Therefore, it would seem that since a large number of returnees volunteered for repatriation for the wrong reason, having been left with no alternatives following their rejection from resettlement, certain opinions and attitudes may not have changed.

The sources of information on the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme in the Thai camps originated from 2 sources, namely, through organizations and through people. UNHCR was the organization which supplied news to the majority of returnees while friends were the group of people who disseminated information (though on a much smaller scale).

However, once back in Laos, attitudes appear to have moderated. The majority of returnees considered living standards in Laos to be sufficient. Through UNHCR Thailand and UNHCR Laos, financial support was given to all returnees. In addition, some returnees also received external remittances from friends and relatives living abroad, the amount of which was at a monthly average of US \$ 25. As regards the dissatisfied returnees, there seems to have been a close correlation between them and returnees with debts. Moreover, when asked to provide one reason for returning to Laos and one reason against returning, 87.3% were able to put forward a reason for returning, against only 13.5% who managed to submit a reason against going back to Laos. Similarly, attitudes towards work also improved following repatriation. Despite such problems as social adjustment and reintegration which faced returnees when they first arrived back, nearly 90% of returnees were able to obtain employment.

Nevertheless, a large proportion of returnees were still very dependent on UNHCR assistance in the running of their day-to-day lives. On arrival in Laos, returnees were awarded 1,000 Baht cash handouts from UNHCR Thailand as an immediate form of assistance. However, it must be noted that a significant proportion of returnees did not receive the cash. Moreover, the returnees were then given further assistance from UNHCR Laos which amounted up to 15,000 kips and a 12 month supply of rice per returnee. A number of UNHCR funded reintegration projects and programmes to further assist returnees are currently being implemented (see Table 36). Of further concern for the future has been the disappointing response of returnees to UNHCR's promotion of agricultural self-sufficiency. Instead of listing agricultural tools or land for cultivation as their first preference on items of UNHCR assistance, a sizeable proportion of returnees chose cash in both the short and long terms.

Finally, there is the reintegration of returnees into Laotian society which has remained unclear. On the one hand, nearly 60% of the 126 returnees interviewed, considered themselves to have established some degree of friendship with the local villagers; yet, on the other hand, 80% of the 75 local villagers questioned stated that they had no relationship with the returnees. Nevertheless, the majority of villagers did express favourable opinions on the return of the Lao refugees. Moreover, although freedom of travel among returnees appears to be limited, 57% returnees were able to continue to remain in contact with one another. However, it is unclear whether or not this was due to the fact that returnees have only been able to keep in touch with other returnees who live nearby or due to the returnees' inability to reintegrate into Lao society. Similarly, it is not certain whether the high percentage of non members among social groups in Laos was as a result of the returnees' social adjustment difficulties or because they simply preferred not to join. Nevertheless, whatever the role and influence of the LPDR on the Lao returnees, it must be noted that when asked on their opinions on the LPDR's policy towards returnees, 84% of local villagers replied that they considered the LPDR to have assisted and treated returnees favourably.

Chapter Four

Hmong Returnees in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme



The Hmong refugees in the Thai camps represent a unique case among the different ethnic groups of Indochinese refugees. Contented with camp life, this refugee group has rejected the resettlement offer into third countries, an offer which other refugee groups would not have hesitated to accept. At the same time, the Hmong refugee group has shown great opposition to repatriation to Laos. As of April 1992, over 45,000 Hmong refugees still resided in the Thai camps. With the imposition of the 1994 deadline for the return of all Lao refugees from Thailand to Laos, the Hmong refugee group has emerged as an important issue which needs to be urgently addressed.

The main reason for the Hmong's rejection of the resettlement offer has simply been put forward as their preference for an eventual return to Laos under safe and suitable conditions. The explanation for the Hmong's stubborn refusal to repatriate to Laos is more complicated, involving a number of factors. Notable among these factors have been fears of political persecution and discrimination, economic constraints, and the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy into the Lowlands and its subsequent social adjustment problems. Consequently, special attention has been focussed on the Hmong under the UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Programme. UNHCR has two objectives: first, the promotion of repatriation within the Thai camps; and second, the reintegration of returnees into Lao society.

In this chapter, the returnees questioned were from the same group of 126 Lao interviewees in the Volrep of whom 23 were Hmong and 103, non-Hmong. In addition, a group of 75 local Lao villagers were also interviewed. The objective of the research is to ascertain the possible explanations for the repatriation of certain Hmong returnees at a time when other Hmong have refused outright, a return to their homeland. However, it must be emphasized that due to certain restrictions concerning the accessibility of returnees, a limited number of Hmong returnees were available for interviewing. The findings from the small sampling size of interviewees particularly among the Hmong, therefore, are indicators for speculation and conjecture. An in depth analysis of this vulnerable refugee group will be presented under the following topics:

1. Departure from Laos
2. Life in Thai Camps
3. Repatriation
4. Life in Laos
5. Assistance on Return
6. Social Reintegration

Departure from Laos

Table 47 Years of Departure: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Year	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
1975	-		1.6 (2)
1976	-		-
1977	-		0.8 (1)
1978	-		1.6 (2)
1979	-		4.8 (6)
1980	-		7.1 (9)
1981	-		7.9 (10)
1982	0.8 (1)		0.8 (1)
1983	0.8 (1)		5.6 (7)
1984	1.6 (2)		20.6 (26)
1985	1.6 (2)		16.7 (21)
1986	0.8 (1)		7.9 (10)
1987	2.4 (3)		3.2 (4)
1988	6.3 (8)		0.8 (1)
1989	4.0 (5)		1.6 (2)
1990	-		0.8 (1)
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>

Illustrated in Table 47 are the years of departure of the 23 Hmong and 103 non-Hmong returnees interviewed. Although the post 1975 period and the 1978-1980 period were years when the Hmong ethnic group had been victims of political persecution and economic constraints which resulted in mass migration of Hmong refugees from Laos into Thailand (see Table 1), among the group of 23 Hmong returnees, not one had departed from Laos before 1982. The absence of pre-1982 migrants among the Hmong returnees could be due to two factors. First, a considerable proportion of the early outflows of Hmong refugees had already been resettled into third countries. Second, those who had rejected resettlement have chosen to remain in the Thai camps for fear of persecution on return to Laos. Instead, departures from Laos among the interviewed Hmong returnees were most popular in the late 1980s when the political situation in Laos had improved. Therefore, the Hmong returnees' primary motive for leaving Laos may not have been related to politics. The opportunity to resettle into economically prosperous countries may have greatly influenced the Hmong returnees to migrate. Concerning the non-Hmong returnees, although departures started from 1975, it was not until after 1979 that the departure rate among the non-Hmong returnees increased significantly, peaking in 1984 (20.6%) and 1985 (16.7%) at a time when resettlement abroad was a highly attractive proposition.

Table 48 Reasons for Leaving Laos: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Reason	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Go to third countries	7.1 (9)		23.0 (29)
Go to Thailand	2.4 (3)		8.7 (11)
Accompany parents	6.4 (8)		20.6 (26)
Visit parents and relatives	-		4.0 (5)
Escape difficult living conditions in Laos	1.6 (2)		8.7 (11)
Flee from anarchy in Laos	0.8 (1)		7.9 (10)
Flee from legal trials	-		4.0 (5)
Disagree with regime	-		3.2 (4)
No answer	-		1.6 (2)
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>

Like the general trend (see Table 6), Table 48 reveals that the two most popular reasons for departure among Hmong interviewees were to reside in third countries (7.1%) and to accompany parents (6.4%). The popularity of resettlement into third countries is not unexpected considering departures from Laos occurred after 1981 when resettlement was the adopted durable solution to the Lao refugee issue (see Table 47). The high ratio of Hmong returnees who had left Laos to accompany their parents is also not surprising as it reflects the close-knitted nature of the Hmong family structure. Only a small proportion of Hmong interviewees indicated economic and political factors as causes of their flight from Laos with 1.6% and 0.8% having stated that they had left Laos in order to escape difficult living conditions and to flee from anarchy, respectively. Moreover, none of the interviewed Hmong returnees proclaimed that they had departed from Laos to flee legal trials or because they disagreed with the regime. The explanation for the surprisingly low proportions again could be due to the resettlement opportunity. The reasons for departure from Laos among the non-Hmong returnees, however, are more evenly distributed between economic and political factors. Likewise, the resettlement opportunity also had a considerable impact on the non-Hmong.

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Life in Thai Camps

Table 49 Training Services in Thai Camps: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Type of Training	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Mechanics	2.4 (3)		18.3 (23)
Health Care	-		6.3 (8)
Educational	0.8 (1)		4.0 (5)
Typing	-		0.8 (1)
Agricultural	0.8 (1)		0.8 (1)
Others	-		2.4 (3)
No training	4.0 (5)		26.2 (33)
No answer	<u>10.3 (13)</u>		<u>23.0 (29)</u>
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>

Among the Hmong returnees, 4% (5 out of 23) definitely had attended the training services within the Thai camps. An inexplicably high proportion of Hmong returnees of 10.3% (13 out of 23) gave no answers whilst 4% (5 out of 23) specifically stated that they had received no training. Three types of training courses had been attended by the Hmong returnees, namely, in mechanics, education and agriculture. Although the mechanics course was the most popularly attended, compared to the high non-Hmong mechanics percentage, the proportion of Hmong people on the mechanics course was low. This can be explained by the fact that the Hmong ethnic group, by tradition, had always been cultivators and less educated. Therefore, a better educated non-Hmong refugee would have been more suited to a training course on a skilled occupation like mechanics. A greater cause for concern was the low turn-out of Hmong interviewees among the agricultural training courses especially as one of UNHCR's objectives has been to encourage and promote agricultural self-sufficiency among returnees following repatriation. Furthermore, since the repatriation of Hmong returnees took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see Table 51) when resettlement had been replaced by repatriation as the adopted durable solution to the Lao refugee issue and when training courses geared towards repatriation and reintegration had been introduced in the Thai camps, the training programmes would have been available to the majority of returnees. Yet, the total attendance figure of training programmes by Hmong refugees stood at a disappointingly low 4% (5 out of 23).

Repatriation

Table 50 Sources of Information on Voluntary Repatriation Programme in Camps: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Source	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Relatives	-		1.6 (2)
Friends	-		7.9 (10)
UNHCR	12.7 (16)		48.4 (61)
NGOs	-		1.6 (2)
Thai MOI	1.6 (2)		3.2 (4)
Others	2.4 (3)		7.1 (9)
No information	0.8 (1)		4.8 (6)
No answer	<u>0.8 (1)</u>		<u>7.1 (9)</u>
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>

It can clearly be seen in Table 50 on the sources of information on the Voluntary Repatriation Programme in the Thai camps that UNHCR was the most successful organization or group of people in disseminating news on Volrep among the 126 Lao returnees interviewed, including the group of 23 Hmong. The majority of the Hmong interviewees (16 out of 23) received information on Volrep from this source. This significant observation confirms that UNHCR has at least partially achieved one of its set objectives of promoting and encouraging repatriation among Lao returnees within the Thai camps. Another interesting observation is the relatively insignificant contribution of the other sources of Volrep information, particularly, the NGOs who themselves have launched information campaigns on repatriation within the Thai camps.

Table 51 Years of Repatriation: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Year	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
1981	-		0.8 (1)
1982	-		3.2 (4)
1983	-		3.2 (4)
1985	-		0.8 (1)
1987	-		0.8 (1)
1988	-		2.4 (3)
1989	3.2 (4)		36.5 (46)
1990	3.2 (4)		19.0 (24)
1991 (ending July)	<u>11.9 (15)</u>		<u>15.1 (19)</u>
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>

Presented in Table 51 are the years of repatriation among the Lao returnees. Although repatriation commenced in 1981, the Hmong unlike the non-Hmong interviewees did not begin to

return to Laos until 1989, following the implementation of the CPA and the Tripartite Agreement. Prior to 1989, the repatriation programme was unfamiliar to Hmong refugees. Moreover, fears of persecution and discrimination on return to Laos convinced Lao refugees either to resettle abroad or to remain in the Thai camps until the general situation improved. Besides, prior to the Tripartite Agreement, the LPDR had no policy which re-accepted the citizens who had deserted their country. Nevertheless, the introduction of the CPA's screening procedure which identified political refugees from economic migrants, accelerated the rate of repatriation. Between 1989 and mid-1991, almost 90% of the 126 Lao interviewees repatriated to Laos. Although in 1989 and 1990, the majority of returnees were non-Hmong, an encouraging sign for the repatriation of Hmong refugees currently in Thailand is the high ratio of Hmong returnees in the first seven months of 1991.

Table 52 Reasons for Repatriation : Hmong - Non-Hmong

Reason	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Better prospects in homeland	0.8 (1)		10.3 (13)
Guarantees of no persecution	-		2.4 (3)
Selection failure for resettlement to third countries	9.5 (12)		32.6 (41)
Homesickness	2.4 (3)		25.4 (32)
Family reunion	1.6 (2)		5.5 (7)
Others	3.2 (4)		5.5 (7)
No answer	0.8 (1)		-
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

Displayed in Table 52 are the returnees' reasons for their decision to opt for repatriation as opposed to resettlement or a continued stay in the Thai camps. The majority of Hmong interviewees (12 out of 23) repatriated to Laos following their failure for resettlement selection into third countries. This high ratio is very similar to the general trend where 42.1% (53 out of 126) of the Lao interviewees stated the same reason of resettlement rejection for their return to Laos (see Table 20). However, disparity exists in the homesickness category between Hmong and the non-Hmong. This is not at all surprising since with the LPDR's prohibition of a return to the Highlands, the Hmong had no homeland to return to. Similarly, as the Hmong had fled Laos together with most of their relatives, not many Hmong interviewees gave the family reunion reason for returning to Laos. Another interesting observation is the lack of Hmong interviewees who gave as their reason for repatriation, guarantees of no persecution. In an attempt to encourage repatriation, the LPDR has launched an information campaign which aims to reassure returnees of all ethnic groups of amnesty and no persecution. From the findings of this survey, it appears that this campaign may not have been very successful.

Table 53 Reasons for Delayed Return: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Reason	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Hopes for better life for children	-		5.6 (7)
Preference for life in camps	-		3.2 (4)
Opportunities for resettlement in third countries	7.1 (9)		35.7 (45)
Fears of anarchy under existing regime in Laos	1.6 (2)		17.5 (22)
No desire to return (without explanation)	1.6 (2)		6.3 (8)
No personal judgment (dependent on others)	1.6 (2)		-
On brink of leaving Thailand	0.8 (1)		-
Others	4.0 (5)		8.7 (11)
No answer	1.6 (1)		4.7 (6)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

Like in Table 52 on reasons for repatriation, the most popular cause among the Hmong and non-Hmong interviewees for delaying their return to Laos was the resettlement opportunity into third countries. However, the introduction of preventative measures such as the refugee status determination process and the closure of the resettlement processing centre in Ban Napho Camp in 1991 made both resettlement abroad and a prolonged stay in the Thai camps no longer possible for many returnees. Other reasons among the Hmong for the delayed return included fears of anarchy under the existing regime in Laos (1.6%), no desire to return without elaborating (1.6%), and their dependency on others, usually their leaders, to make the decision for repatriation to Laos (1.6%). Surprisingly, there were no Hmong interviewees who gave as their reason for delaying their return, hopes for a better life for their children and the preference for camp life in Thailand. The latter is all the more surprising since the day-to-day camp life has generally been considered by Lao refugees, particularly the Hmong refugees, to be comfortable, possessing a relative degree of freedom under which economy activities have flourished (see Table 43).

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Life in Laos

Table 54 Returnees' Satisfaction of Laotian Living Standards : Hmong - Non-Hmong

Standard of living	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Sufficient	9.5 (12)		46.8 (59)
Insufficient	7.1 (9)		32.5 (41)
No answer	1.6 (2)		2.4 (3)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

Following their return to Laos, the 126 Lao interviewees were asked about their satisfaction of Laotian living standards. Among both the Hmong and the non-Hmong refugees, over half the number of interviewees of both categories considered living standards in Laos to be sufficient. However, since the reintegration of Hmong returnees into Lao society has been more difficult, the ratio of satisfied returnees among the non-Hmong returnees is slightly higher than the ratio among the Hmong returnees. Similarly, the Hmong's greater social adjustment difficulties are the causes of the higher ratio of Hmong returnees who considered the standard of living in Laos to be insufficient compared to the dissatisfied non-Hmong ratio.


Table 55 Present Occupations: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Occupation	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Agricultural worker	13.5 (17)		30.1 (38)
Skilled worker	-		6.3 (8)
Labourer	0.8 (1)		22.2 (28)
Trader	0.8 (1)		8.7 (11)
Others	-		6.3 (8)
No occupation	2.4 (3)		5.6 (7)
No answer	0.8 (1)		2.4 (3)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

Table 55 illustrates the present occupations of both the Hmong and non-Hmong ethnic groups. Unlike the wide range of occupations among the non-Hmong returnees from agricultural work to skilled employment, the overwhelming majority of Hmong interviewees, following repatriation, obtained employment in agriculture (17 out of 23). The high proportion of agricultural workers among the Hmong returnees is not unexpected. As a less educated group of people compared to the better educated Lowland Lao, and whose customs and traditions had been based on the cultivation of land, the Hmong interviewees, on return to Laos, had limited employment opportunities. Working on the land offered the Hmong returnees the best opportunity for employment, especially since only a small proportion of the Hmong interviewees had definitely attended the training courses within

the Thai camps (see Table 49). In addition, a small but significant number of Hmong returnees (3 out of 23) were unable to obtain employment even as agricultural workers.

Table 56 Employment and Employment Opportunities among Hmong Returnees^[4]



Training Services in Thai camps [1]	%	Expected jobs on return [2]	%	Present occupations in Laos [3]	
Agricultural	4.3	Agricultural worker	67.2*	Agricultural worker	73.9
Educational	4.3	Teacher	1.2	Teacher	-
		Soldier	8.4	Military/police personnel	-
		Vendor	12.5	Trader	4.3
Mechanics	13.0		-	Skilled worker	-
Health care	-		-		-
	-		-	Labourer	4.3
Typing	-		-		-
Others	-	Others	10.7	Others	-
No training	21.7		-	No occupation	13.0
No answer	<u>56.5</u>		-	No answer	<u>4.3</u>
Total	<u>100.0</u>	Total	<u>100.0</u>	Total	<u>100.0</u>

* comprising of 63.4% as farmers and 3.8% in animal husbandry.

[1]. Data has been based on the 23 Hmong out of the 126 Lao interviewed in this study.

[2]. Data has been extracted from T. Conroy's *Highland Lao Refugees, 1990* : 36.

[3]. See [1].

[4]. The author appreciates that the two surveys are not proportionally represented. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the comparisons of the two surveys will serve as useful and interesting indicators of progression and change regarding the working attitudes of Hmong returnees prior to repatriation and the occupations of Hmong returnees, following repatriation.

Table 56 is based on the findings of two surveys, namely, the present study and T. Conroy's study on Highland Lao refugees¹, from which interesting comparisons between the present occupations of Hmong returnees in Laos following repatriation not only with the training services in Thai camps but also the Hmong employment expectations upon return to Laos can be illustrated.

Considering the high percentage of interviewees who expected to return to Laos to work as agricultural workers (67.2%) and those who actually obtained work as agricultural workers (75.9%), there was a poor attendance in the agricultural training course (4.3%). The causes for the low turn-out is uncertain. A possible explanation could be that most Hmong had been farmers prior

¹ Thomas Conroy, *Highland Lao Refugee: Repatriation and Resettlement preferences in Ban Vinai Camp, Thailand*. Bangkok 1990: 28-36.

to their departure from Laos and so considered themselves to be already well trained and experienced in such a field. Another observation is that the skills obtained from the training course on mechanics were not utilized on return to Laos as no Hmong interviewee became employed as a skilled worker after repatriation. Interestingly, no Hmong indicated any desire to undertake such an occupation when questioned on their employment expectations. The teaching profession and the military and police forces were other occupations which were not taken up by Hmong returnees. However, this was a direct consequence of the LPDR's employment policy which prohibited returnees from entering into occupations which held positions of influence and power. Regarding the group of Hmong who expected an occupation as a vendor on return to Laos (12.5%), although no such training programmes existed within the Thai camps, the camp markets which sold vegetables, fish, fruit and rice, undoubtedly provided the Hmong with experience in money transactions. They also received experience from the handicraft business. Other useful training courses such as on health care and typing were only attended by Lowland Lao. With only one fifth of the Hmong interviewees having definitely attended the training courses, it is not altogether surprising that on return to Laos, a sizeable proportion of Hmong returnees (13%) had no employment.

Table 57 Major Obstacles on Return to Laos: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Obstacle	Hmong	%	Non-Hmong
Lack of money	4.0 (5)		23.0 (29)
Lack of shelter	6.3 (8)		19.1 (24)
Lack of jobs	1.6 (2)		8.7 (11)
Health problems	-		3.2 (4)
Lack of educational opportunities	-		2.4 (3)
Adjustment problems	-		0.8 (1)
Others	1.6 (2)		6.3 (8)
No answer	4.8 (6)		18.2 (23)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (100)

Presented in Table 57 are the major obstacles which Lao returnees faced following repatriation to Laos. Among the Hmong, lack of shelter was considered to be the main obstacle by most interviewees (8 out of 23) due to the LPDR's policy which forbade the Hmong returnees to go back to the Highlands. In light of the relocation of the Hmong, it is surprising that not one Hmong stated that they encountered serious social adjustment problems. Lack of shelter also posed problems for a significant proportion of non-Hmong (24 out of 103). The shortage of money was also considered by a sizeable proportion of both Hmong (5 out of 23) and non-Hmong (29 out of 103) to be a major obstacle in spite of the financial assistance they received from UNHCR Thailand (see Table 32) and UNHCR Laos (See Table 33). In addition, a number of returnees also benefited from external remittances from friends and relatives living abroad (see Table 59). The other obstacles which returnees encountered on their arrival in Laos included employment, health problems and lack of education opportunities.

Table 58 Reasons for and against Returning to Live in Laos : Hmong - Non-Hmong

Reason	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
For			
Homesickness-family reunion	6.3 (8)		34.1 (43)
Personal freedom	4.0 (5)		19.0 (24)
Good job prospects	1.6 (2)		13.5 (17)
Opportunities for self-ownership of property	3.2 (4)		1.6 (2)
Democracy under new regime	-		0.8 (1)
Others	0.8 (1)		2.4 (3)
No answer	<u>2.4 (3)</u>		<u>10.3 (13)</u>
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>
Against			
Unavailability of land/houses	0.8 (1)		4.0 (5)
Lack of money	2.4 (3)		2.4 (3)
Indebtedness	-		1.6 (2)
More comfortable life style in camps	0.8 (1)		0.8 (1)
Others	-		0.8 (1)
No complaints	<u>14.3 (18)</u>		<u>72.2 (91)</u>
Total	<u>18.3 (23)</u>		<u>81.7 (103)</u>

Having decided to repatriate to Laos, the returnees were asked to put forward one reason for returning to Laos and one reason against going back to their homeland. The findings clearly illustrate that the majority of both the Hmong interviewees (20 out of 23) and the non-Hmong interviewees (70 out of 103) were in favour of a return to Laos. The most popular reason for returning among Hmong returnees was homesickness. With the general improvement in conditions in Laos, a significant ratio of both groups of returnees stated either personal freedom or good employment prospects as their reason for returning to Laos. Among the Hmong returnees, a surprisingly high ratio of interviewees put forward the opportunities for self-ownership of property reason (4 out of 23). Does this indicate that a minority group of Hmong returnees preferred relocation in the Lowlands under the LPDR policy to a return to their homeland in the Highlands where conditions may have deteriorated? Moreover, within the democracy under new regime category, the low or lack of representation among the Lao interviewees could indicate either that the majority of returnees were not politically motivated or that the political climate had not changed very much since their original departure from Laos. Regarding the no answers, they have been construed as the category which opposed a return to Laos.

As regards the reasons against repatriation to Laos, the majority of both Hmong returnees (18 out of 23) and non-Hmong returnees (91 out of 103) were unable to put forward any complaints. The minority who had causes for complaints, asserted the problem of unavailability of land or houses which most probably resulted from either the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy or the 1990 property reclamation law which promulgated that returnees who had departed from Laos after 1988 were economic migrants who were not worthy of any reclamation rights to land or property. Other reasons against returning included financial difficulties such as lack of money and indebtedness and the more comfortable life style in the Thai camps.

Assistance on Return

Table 59 External Remittances: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Amount	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
30-50 US\$	0.8 (1)		7.9 (10)
51-100 US\$	4.8 (6)		11.1 (14)
101-300 US	0.8 (1)		4.0 (5)
No remittance	11.9 (15)		58.7 (74)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

On arrival in Laos, returnees from all ethnic groups received financial assistance from UNHCR Thailand and UNHCR Laos. In addition, a minority of both Hmong returnees (8 out of 23) and non-Hmong returnees (29 out of 103) also received financial support from friends and relatives living abroad. These external remittances varied in both amount and frequency. The amount of the remittances ranged from US\$ 30-300 with the US\$ 51-100 range, the most common. The frequency also varied from a one-off hand out to a regular monthly income. Among the beneficiaries within the two refugee groups who received financial support on a regular basis, the average monthly remittance was US\$ 25. Concerning the returnees who had been given money in one lump sum, the average size was US\$ 105.

Table 60 Returnees' Short Run Preferences on Items of UNHCR Assistance: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Assistance	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Cash	8.7 (11)		31.7 (40)
Housing	5.6 (7)		22.2 (28)
Agricultural tools	0.8 (1)		4.0 (5)
Consumable goods	-		0.8 (1)
Land for cultivation	-		3.2 (4)
Guarantees of safety	-		1.6 (2)
Others	3.2 (4)		14.2 (18)
No answer	-		4.0 (5)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

Illustrated in Table 60 are the short term preferences on items of UNHCR assistance of both the Hmong and the non-Hmong ethnic groups. The two items in most demand among Hmong interviewees were in the form of cash [11 out of 23] and housing [7 out of 23]. Cash was frequently preferred to other items of assistance among returnees because it could be easily traded for other goods at any point in time. Not surprisingly, following the implementation of the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy, a sizeable proportion of the Hmong returnees requested housing as their preferred item of assistance. The low Hmong representation within the agricultural tools and land for

cultivation categories, however, is a cause for future concern as this clearly demonstrates the Hmong interviewees' low opinion of and lack of interest in agriculture despite having been cultivators by tradition and in spite of UNHCR's promotion of agricultural self-sufficiency. Moreover, as late arrivals (see Table 47) whose stay in the Thai camps was for a short period of time (see Table 51), the interviewed Hmong returnees could not claim to have been unfamiliar with the traditional farming practices. Therefore, their preference for cash over items of assistance which promoted agricultural self-sufficiency displays the Hmong interviewees' lack of responsibility and short-sightedness.



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Social Reintegration

**Table 61 Types of Relationships among Villagers, Kinsmen, People in the Community/
Village: Hmong - Non-Hmong**

Relationship	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Good acquaintances with reciprocal assistance	0.8 (1)		4.8 (6)
Good acquaintance with most neighbours	7.1 (9)		42.0 (53)
Good acquaintance with few neighbours	1.6 (2)		2.4 (3)
No trust among neighbours	-		2.4 (3)
No relationship	0.8 (1)		1.6 (2)
Others	5.6 (7)		12.7 (16)
No answer	2.4 (3)		15.8 (20)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

In an attempt to ascertain the level of reintegration into Lao society following repatriation, returnees were questioned on their considered relationship with the neighbouring local villagers. The types of relationships fell into five main categories varying from a relationship which was well established with mutual assistance to one where no relationship existed. Like the non-Hmong replies, the category which had the highest proportion of replies among the Hmong interviewees was the good acquaintance with most neighbours category (9 out of 23). Interestingly, a comparison with the findings of a survey on the types of relationships between villagers and returnees (see Table 45) revealed that 80% of the 75 local villagers interviewed did not consider themselves to have established any relationships with the returnees although from the findings of the survey on the local villagers' opinions on Hmong returnees (see Table 63), the majority of the same group of local villagers (68%) held a favourable opinion on the Hmong returnees. The other significant observation was the high proportion of other unstated types of relationships (7 out of 23).

Table 62 Membership of Social Groups in Laos: Hmong - Non-Hmong

Group	Hmong	% (N)	Non-Hmong
Administrative Unit	2.4 (3)		10.3 (13)
Rice Cooperative	-		0.8 (1)
Security Guard	-		2.4 (3)
Men	3.2 (4)		11.1 (14)
Women	0.8 (1)		3.2 (4)
Leader and Old Age	-		0.8 (1)
Others	-		8.7 (11)
Non member	11.9 (15)		44.4 (56)
Total	18.3 (23)		81.7 (103)

Displayed in Table 62 is a list of social groups in Laos which some returnees joined following their repatriation. It is immediately noticeable that large proportions of both Hmong (14 out of 23) and non-Hmong (51 out of 103) interviewees did not join a social group. However, the reasons for the high percentage of non members are unclear. Nevertheless, concerning the returnees who became members, the most popular social group among both returnee groups was the Men Group. The other social groups which had members from both the Hmong and non-Hmong refugee group were the Administrative Unit Group and the Women Group.

Table 63 Villagers' Opinions on Hmong Returnees

Opinion		%
Favourable		68.0
Warm reception-refugees' return home welcomed	54.7	
Acceptance of returnees as loyal citizens	5.3	
Willingness to accept returnees as neighbours	5.3	
Recommendation for government provision of education to returnees	2.7	
Impartial		2.7
No idea / opinion	2.7	
Unfavourable		10.6
Threat to national security accusation	5.3	
Unwillingness to accept returnees as neighbours	4.0	
Accusation over robbery of Lowland villages by Hmong returnees before flight to Highlands	1.3	
No answer		18.7
Total		100.0

Illustrated in Table 63, are the villagers' opinions on Hmong returnees. The majority of opinions were favourable (68.0%), with most (54.7%) stating that they were pleased that the returnees had come home. The other villagers with a favourable opinion explained that they now considered returnees to be loyal and patriotic citizens (5.3%), that they were prepared to accept returnees as neighbours (5.3%), and that they were willing to recommend the government to provide education to returnees (2.7%). Out of the 10.7% who held an unfavourable opinion, 5.3% considered returnees to pose as a threat to national security, 4% displayed their unwillingness to accept returnees as neighbours while 1.3% accused Hmong returnees of having robbed Lowland villages before fleeing to the mountains. The other villagers either held an impartial opinion (2.7%) or gave no replies (18.7%). Finally, a comparison between the findings of Tables 63 and 64 clearly illustrates that villagers had a more favourable opinion on Lowland returnees than Hmong returnees. This would explain the reluctance of some Hmong refugees to repatriate.

Table 64 Villagers' Opinions on Lowland Returnees

Opinion		%
Favourable		93.3
Warm reception-refugees' return home welcomed	78.7	
Acceptance of returnees as reborn patriots	14.7	
Impartial		1.3
No idea / opinion	1.3	
Unfavourable		5.3
Non-acceptance of unpatriotic returnees	2.7	
Accusation over refugees' resettlement rejection motive for repatriation	1.3	
Banishment of refugees accused of abandoning Laos	1.3	
Total		100.0

Displayed in Table 64 are the opinions of the 75 villagers interviewed on Lowland returnees. It can be observed that the overwhelming majority of villagers (93.3%) had a favourable opinion of the Lowland Lao, with 78.7% expressing their delight to the news of the returnees' arrival in Laos and 14.7% viewing the returnees favourably since in their opinion, the returnees were once again loyal and patriotic citizens. Only 5.3% of villagers held an unfavourable opinion, with 2.7% considering returnees to be disloyal citizens, 1.3% voicing the accusation that the returnees only came back to Laos following their resettlement failure, and 1.3% asserting that those who abandon their country, should be banished from it. In addition, 3% of villagers had no opinion on the matter.

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Summary

In recent years, the Hmong refugee group has emerged as an issue of much interest and concern. As a refugee group which neither accepts resettlement nor repatriation, the Hmong refugees have continued to reside in the Thai camps at a time when plans for the closure of these camps and for the eventual return of all Lao refugees from Thailand to Laos by 1994, have been formulated. It is under such circumstances that special attention has been focussed on this group of refugees. Information campaigns which promote repatriation have been launched by UNHCR and by a number of NGOs. In an attempt to encourage its citizens to return home, even the LPDR has broadcasted within the Thai camps, the grant of amnesty to all Lao returnees. Yet, as of April 1992, over 45,000 Hilltribe refugees still remained in Thailand. Since the implementation of the Tripartite Agreement in 1989, the annual repatriation rate among Hmong refugees has stood at approximately 900 persons (see Table 2). At the present rate of repatriation, it is quite obvious that the 1994 deadline for the departure of all Lao refugees from the Thai camps can not possibly be met. The Hmong repatriation rate urgently needs to be accelerated.

The research study was conducted in the light of such a dilemma. A group of 23 Hmong and 103 non-Hmong repatriates who had returned to Laos under the Volrep programme were interviewed. The research study's objective was to abstract from the findings of the interviews, a clearer understanding of the Hmong returnees' experiences in order to perceive the problems and difficulties involved in repatriation and reintegration, and in an attempt to help to explain why certain Hmong refugees had chosen to return to Laos while others have refused to go back. Nearly 90% of all registered Hilltribe refugees had departed from Laos between 1975-1981 (see Table 1). During this period, the Hmong ethnic group had been the subject of political persecution. Many had been associated with the pre-1975 Hmong army whilst others had been the victims of the 1979-1980 LPDR discrimination policy. However, this group of early Hmong migrants were not part of the group of interviewed Hmong repatriates who had returned under the Lao Volrep programme. Many had already been resettled into third countries while the rest chose to remain in the Thai camps for fear of political persecution on return to Laos. Instead, departures from Laos among the interviewed Hmong returnees were most concentrated in the late 1980s at a time when the Lao political situation had improved. Therefore, it would appear that the migration of these Hmong returnees from Laos had been more motivated by non-political factors than by the political factors which had driven so many Hmong out of Laos in the 1975-1981 period. The resettlement opportunity into economically prosperous third countries must have been a highly attractive proposition.

Confirmation of the attraction of the resettlement opportunity is illustrated in the high proportion of Hmong interviewees who stated as their reason for leaving Laos, the desire to reside in another country. Furthermore, the low representation of Hmong returnees among the political reasons for leaving Laos supports the notion that the migration of the interviewed Hmong returnees was not politically motivated.

Once inside Thailand, the Lao refugees resided in five main camps. Despite the large Hmong population in Ban Vinai Camp, among the group of interviewed Hmong returnees, the majority had been housed in other camps. Within the camps, income generating activities were forbidden under the camp employment policy. Instead, refugees were encouraged to attend the camps' training courses in preparation for repatriation and reintegration. However, only a small

proportion of the Hmong returnees had definitely attended the courses. Moreover, in spite of the UNHCR promotion campaigns for agricultural self-sufficiency among returnees on return to Laos, there was a disappointingly low turn-out of Hmong returnees on the agricultural training courses.

Nevertheless, UNHCR was highly effective in the dissemination of information on the Volrep programme. Regarding repatriation, it was after the implementation of the Tripartite Agreement that the Hmong interviewees began to return to Laos. Prior to 1989, there were no Hmong repatriates among the group of interviewees partly out of fear of persecution by the LPDR which at the time, had no policy to re-accept its citizens and partly due to the fact that among the interviewees, the years of departure occurred mostly in the late 1980s. Another explanation for the sudden rise in the Hmong repatriation rate was the introduction of the CPA's screening process in 1987 which identified genuine political refugees from economic migrants. A significant proportion of Hmong and non-Hmong returnees stated that the reason for both their repatriation and their delayed return to Laos was the selection failure for resettlement abroad. However, only a small proportion of the Hmong returnees put forward as the reason for their decision to opt for repatriation to Laos, the homesickness reason or the family reason. Following the LPDR's prohibition of a return to the Highlands and the fact that many Hmong had accompanied their families and relatives during their flight from Laos, the Hmong had no homeland and few relatives to return to. Moreover, since not one Hmong returnee asserted that the reason for repatriation was the LPDR's guarantees of no persecution, the notion that this group of Hmong returnees' original flight from Laos had little or nothing to do with politics, is further strengthened.

Once back in Laos, the majority of the Hmong returnees indicated that living standards in Laos was sufficient. However, a sizeable minority did assert that Laotian living standards were inadequate. Moreover, a comparison between the ratios of satisfied Hmong and non-Hmong returnees reveals that the non Hmong ratio is slightly higher (due to the Hmong's greater social adjustment difficulties). One of the major obstacles which Hmong returnees faced on return to Laos was the lack of shelter. As a direct consequence of the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy, Hmong returnees were forbidden from returning to their homeland in the Highlands. Another major obstacle which posed problems for Hmong returnees but which surprisingly accounted for only a small percentage among the interviewed group, was the lack of employment opportunities. Within the Thai camps, a disappointingly low proportion of Hmong returnees had definitely attended the camps' training programmes which prepared refugees for repatriation and reintegration. In addition, as the Hmong were less educated compared to the Lowland Lao and since their traditions had been based on the cultivation of land, the Hmong returnees' employment opportunities were limited to agriculture. Indeed, in reply to the question on their employment expectations on return to Laos, over two thirds of the Hmong interviewees in T. Conroy's survey, stated agricultural work.

Concerning the Hmong "longstayers" who had yet to repatriate and who unlike the majority of the interviewed Hmong returnees have been residing in the Thai camps since 1975, their reintegration would be even harder. Having had no employment since their arrival in the Thai camps and having been almost totally dependent on the support and assistance of aid workers, the need for the Hmong "longstayers" to become self-supporting would pose as an imposing challenge. Besides, there were some Hmong refugees who had been working with the CIA (US) in anti-communist activities and thus had no working experience. Furthermore, since an increasing proportion of the Hmong refugee camp population belongs to the under 20 age group (in 1987, the under 12 age group constituted 41% of the Hilltribe refugee population²), not only does this group have little or no

² Amara Pongsapich and Noppawan Chongwatana, "The Refugee Situation in Thailand", in *Indochinese Refugees: Asylum and Resettlement*, (ed. S. Chantavanich and B. Reynolds), Bangkok 1988, Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University, p. 25

recollection of life in Laos but also the longstanding practices of land cultivation would not have been passed down.

The shortage of money was also put forward by the interviewed Hmong returnees as a major obstacle following repatriation despite the financial assistance made available to all Lao returnees by UNHCR Thailand and UNHCR Laos, and in some cases, the additional external remittances from friends and relatives abroad. In addition, a sizeable proportion of the Hmong returnees requested cash as their preferred item of UNHCR assistance in the short run. The Hmong returnees' expressed desire for further financial support in preference to agricultural tools or land for cultivation, therefore, illustrates the returnees' inability to self-support and thus to reintegrate fully.

Regarding social reintegration, only just over half of the group of interviewed Hmong returnees asserted that their relationships with the local Lowland villagers were favourable. However, a significantly large minority of the Hmong returnees either had no relationship with the local villagers, other unstated types of relationships, or gave no answers. In addition, the high Hmong percentage as non members of social groups could also indicate that the Hmong returnees were not socially accepted by the local Lowland villagers. Moreover, when a group of 75 local Lowland villagers were asked about their opinions on the Hmong returnees, 32% did not specifically express a favourable opinion. Yet, when the same group of local villagers were requested to put forward their opinion on Lowland returnees, only 6.7% of replies were not specifically favourable.

From the findings of the research study, it would appear that the Hmong refugee group is not a homogeneous group. Within the Hmong refugee group, there exists two types of migrants. The first group comprises of the Hmong migrants who had departed from Laos between 1975-1981 as a direct consequence of the LPDR's policy of persecution and discrimination. These genuine political asylum seekers either have since been resettled into third countries or have become "longstayers" within the Thai camps. Desiring an eventual return to Laos but fearing further persecution on return to their homeland, the "longstayers" in the Thai camps have rejected resettlement and postponed repatriation. The second group which could possibly account for the majority of the Hmong returnees interviewed in the research study, are the Thai camps' latecomers who had migrated from Laos from 1981 onwards when the Lao political situation had begun to improve. Attracted by the resettlement opportunity into third countries, these Hmong migrants were more motivated by economics than by politics. On arrival in the Thai camps, many who had knowledge of the 1951 Convention which granted protection to anyone with well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, pleaded for political asylum. However, following the introduction of the CPA's screening procedures and the implementation of the Tripartite Agreement, these economic migrants were the first to be either screened out or rejected from resettlement, and thus have returned to Laos. The existence of two types of Hmong migrants, therefore, helps to explain the return of certain Hmong migrants, while so many have continued to reside in the Thai camps.



Conclusion

The Lao refugee issue, with an influx of over 320,000 Lao asylum-seekers into Thailand since 1975, has proven to be an issue of major concern. The migration included both Lowland Lao (nearly 200,000 in number) and Hilltribe people (over 120,000 in number). Between 1975-1980, the average rate of migration was at its highest at 41,685 per annum. However, although the annual rate has never since reached such heights, the migratory flows continued up to as recent as 1988. Meanwhile, two solutions to the Lao refugee issue have been adopted, namely, resettlement and repatriation.

The migratory flows into neighbouring Thailand were mainly caused by political and economic factors. The first outflows of 1975 took place as a result of the imposition of political restrictions and economic constraints, the latter having been exacerbated by bad harvests. The dispatch of Vietnamese military forces and advisory corps in 1979 as well as the political discrimination of the Chinese and Hmong ethnic groups created more migratory flows into Thailand. By 1984, the unforeseen double edged sword effect of the resettlement opportunity to third countries triggered off further flows of refugees. However, with the withdrawal of the Vietnamese military presence and the improvement of the general situation in Laos, the migratory flows began to decline in size and frequency.

Resettlement into third countries, as a durable solution to the Lao refugee issue was first implemented in 1980. For a while, when a number of Thai camps closed down due to the reduction in the number of inhabitants, the resettlement solution appeared to have been successful. However, its success was only for the short term for in the longer term, the resettlement opportunity encouraged more Lao to flee their homeland. Moreover, the rate of resettlement acceptance into third countries began to decline. The global economic depression and the domestic problems of third countries made the decline inevitable. As is quoted in times of dearth, "charity begins at home". Consequently, an alternative solution was sought after.

Although the initial UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Programme had been established in 1980, between 1980-1989, the repatriation rate was inconsistent and stood at a meagre average of 378 returnees per annum. It was not until 1989, following the implementation of the CPA and the Tripartite Agreement that repatriation, as a durable solution to the Lao refugee issue has become more successful. At the International Conference on Indo-Chinese Refugees held in Geneva in June 1989, with the adoption of the CPA, the status of asylum seekers could be determined while at the Tripartite Agreement of 1989, the rules and procedures under which the repatriation programme would be enforced were laid down. Subsequently, as a result of these events, the rate of repatriation was accelerated. In the first three and a half years of the programme since 1989, 5,384 Lao refugees have voluntarily returned to their homeland. Moreover, it has been forecasted that under this programme, the last groups of Lao refugees will have departed from Thailand to Laos by the end of 1994. Therefore, it would appear that the Lao Voluntary Programme has now become firmly established.

With the change in approach to solving the refugee issue from one which had been geared towards resettlement to one which has been geared towards repatriation, a revision in the policies and operations of the key policy-makers was necessary.

UNHCR, the core agency in the Voluntary Repatriation Programme has two objectives, namely, the promotion of repatriation within the Thai camps and the reintegration of returnees into Lao society. With the adoption of the repatriation approach in favour of resettlement, educational and

vocational training programmes have had to be revised and modified to provide an educational system compatible to the Lao curriculum as well as to be of more relevance to rural life in Laos.

There have been 30 UNHCR funded projects between 1980-1989 which have provided both direct and indirect assistance to individuals as well as to hosting areas. More recently, there was the Review Mission of 1990 which recommended a three phase plan for repatriation with the objective being, the completion of the repatriation of Lao refugees by the end of 1994. Currently, there are a number of UNHCR projects in operation such as the settlement project to allocate land and housing and the education programme to promote educational opportunities for both children and teachers.

Information campaigns to promote repatriation have also been conducted by UNHCR. Its success can clearly be illustrated in one of the findings of the survey on the 126 Lao returnees who were interviewed in 1991. Asked for the origin of the sources of information on the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme, 63% of interviewees replied that UNHCR was the source which supplied the news.

Regarding the reintegration of returnees into Lao society, UNHCR has given special attention to the Hilltribe people, especially the Hmong, whose social adjustment has been made all the harder due to the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy which prohibits a return to the Highlands. Furthermore, unlike the Lowland Lao who have possessions and relatives to return to, most Highlanders had fled from Laos with all their possessions together with most of their relatives and so had nothing to go back to.

The RTG refugee policy, however, has fluctuated over the course of time. Nevertheless, throughout, the RTG has remained consistent in its main objective, namely, to permit refugees to stay in Thailand only on a temporary basis. In the RTG's opinion, refugees are a threat to national security.

The RTG refugee policy can be divided into four phases. Between 1975-1979, refugees were permitted to remain in Thailand temporarily provided they complied with certain rules and regulations. However, with the rise of the Kriangsak government in 1979 and until its fall from power in 1980, the refugee policy favoured resettlement in third countries as a suitable solution. During this brief period, it appeared that the RTG had decided to accept the refugee burden. Between 1980-1988, there was a less favourable refugee policy due to the change in the RTG's stance to the Humane Deterrence Policy in 1980. Finally, since 1988, a more moderate approach which favoured repatriation has been adopted by the RTG. With the improvement in Thai-Lao relations and following the Tripartite Agreement, the repatriation of Lao refugees has taken place on a more significant scale. Nevertheless, the rate of repatriation has been considered to be unsatisfactorily low, notably by the Thai authorities. Further measures have been undertaken to improve the repatriation rate.

The day-to-day life in the Thai camps has been shown to be relatively comfortable with refugees possessing a certain degree of freedom in their daily camp activities. As a result, many refugees, particularly the Hilltribe people seem to prefer to remain in the camps than to return to Laos. Illustrations of the level of freedom within the camps are the refugees' economic activities, notably, the flourishing silversmith business, which have taken place contrary to camp policy. Economics certainly has played a significant role in discouraging refugees in the Thai camps from returning to Laos. Therefore, it is not altogether surprising to discover from the 1991 survey on 126 Lao returnees that opinions on the day-to-day life in the Thai camps were most favourable. Consequently, attempts have been made by the Thai authorities to stop all income generating activities in the camps. In this way, ethnic groups like the Mien whose thriving silversmith business has deterred them from leaving for an uncertain way of life back in Laos, would be given less incentive to remain in Thailand.

Another preventative measure was the closure of Ban Napho Camp as a resettlement processing centre for Lowland Lao in 1991. It was decided that resettlement into third countries ought

to be made much harder in order to act as a disincentive for Lao to flee from their homeland, on the one hand, as well as to persuade the refugees of the futility of their prolonged stay in the camps, on the other. This policy certainly seems to have had some success. From the 1991 survey on the 126 Lao returnees, it was revealed that 42.2% of interviewees admitted that they had returned to Laos as a direct consequence of their selection failure for resettlement to third countries.

Although the LPDR has only recently adopted a policy which re-accepts its citizens, it has made it clear that the refugee issue is considered to be an "internal matter". Nevertheless, in efforts to promote repatriation, guarantees of no discrimination against returnees have been assured. Furthermore, an information campaign which informed refugees in the Thai camps of the Lao returnee policy of granting amnesty for returnees has been launched. On return to Laos, however, repatriates have faced a number of restrictions and constraints which they have had to comply to.

The LPDR returnee policy can be divided into two categories. First, concerning all returnees, regardless of ethnic group, a return to certain former occupations, notably, the civil service, the armed forces, and the teaching profession, could not be guaranteed for these positions held responsibility and influence and thus might be unsuitable for citizens who previously had fled their homeland. Other restrictions took place in the resettlement of returnees. Repatriates could only return to their villages of origin on condition that their relatives still resided there. Failure to meet this condition resulted in resettlement in areas delegated by the LPDR. The second category was the LPDR Hilltribe policy. In an attempt to prevent the practices of slash-and-burn cultivation and opium growing, the Hilltribe people have been prohibited from returning to their homes in the upland.

Despite its internal policy, the LPDR has acknowledged the need to accelerate the rate of repatriation. The time-consuming administrative procedures of the repatriation process have been amended while the reception centres have been expanded to cater for larger numbers of returnees.

The role of NGOs in assisting returnees in Laos has been limited due to the LPDR policy which considers the returnees to be a domestic issue. The few NGO assistance programmes in Laos have only taken place in collaboration with the LPDR. Moreover, these programmes provide assistance to the country as a whole and not specifically to returnees. One exception has been the vocational training programme which was established in August 1991 by ZOA Refugee Care to support the reintegration of returnees.

However, within the Thai camps, NGOs have been able to provide considerably more assistance. Training programmes in health and sanitation as well as in education have been set up by MSF and IRC, and ESF, respectively. In addition, an information campaign on repatriation was launched by COERR in February 1991 to assist refugees on decisions about their future.

Nevertheless, all NGOs have criticized the lack of reliable and substantial information on the general conditions in Laos which have subsequently caused difficulties in preparation of relevant training for repatriation and reintegration. Calls for the LPDR to relax their stringent approach to the refugee issue to allow NGOs to work on both sides of the border, have been proposed. In this way, not only would in-depth and more specific information be made available but also, as prospective returnees have openly stated, the knowledge that NGOs would be working in Laos would be most reassuring and would probably encourage further repatriation.

From the findings of the 1991 survey on the 126 Lao returnees, an attempt to analyze the political and practical feasibility of the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme can be made. Furthermore, it is possible to ascertain where certain weaknesses exist both at the level of the Thai camps prior to repatriation as well as at the level of the Lao towns and villages during reintegration.

Within the Thai camps, only 36.5% of returnees definitely attended the camps' training courses. Since the training courses in the camps are considered to be essential for the repatriation and reintegration to be successful, more encouragement must be given to refugees to attend the training courses. Moreover, the camp employment policy which prohibits income generating activities in an attempt to deter refugees from their continued stay in the Thai camps, also has the detrimental effect of discouraging refugees from taking on employment. Subsequently, prospective returnees were less prepared for reintegration into Lao economic life.

Interestingly, it would seem that a large proportion of returnees went back to Laos for the wrong reason, namely, as a direct consequence of their rejection from resettlement in third countries. Similarly, a sizeable proportion gave the same explanation for their delayed return to Laos.

Once back in Laos, returnees were confronted with reintegration problems. Regarding economic reintegration, however, there appears to be discrepancies in the findings. On the one hand, the majority of returnees considered living standards in Laos to be sufficient with nearly 90% having been able to obtain employment on return to Laos. On the other hand, a substantial percentage of returnees received no remittances while a sizeable number of returnees had debts. As regards social reintegration, returnees generally seem to have been ostracized. Although 60% of returnees considered themselves to have established some degree of friendship with their neighbours, 80% of a group of 75 local villagers questioned, proclaimed that they had no relationship with the returnees. However, the majority of villagers did express favourable opinions on the return of both Lowland and Highland Lao, although the latter were less well received. Another possible indicator of the social adjustment difficulties among returnees might be the high proportion of non members within the Lao social groups. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that 84% of the local villagers, when asked on their opinions on the LPDR's returnee policy, replied that returnees were well treated and assisted by the LPDR.

However, a study specifically on the Hmong returnees reveals that the repatriation and reintegration of this refugee group compared to the Lowland Lao have been much more difficult. Fears of political persecution and discrimination, economic constraints, and the LPDR's Hilltribe relocation policy into the Lowlands and the subsequent social adjustments problems are factors which have dissuaded the Hmong against repatriation. Furthermore, in attempting to explain the return of certain Hmong refugees to Laos while so many have postponed repatriation, having earlier rejected the resettlement offer, it emerged that within the Hmong refugee group, there exists two types of migrants. The first Hmong group comprises of pre-1981 migrants who had fled the LPDR's policy of political persecution. This group of genuine political asylum seekers have either been resettled abroad or have become "longstayers" having remained in the Thai camps till this day. The second group are the late-comers, the post 1981 migrants. This group of Hmong migrants who could possibly account for most of the Hmong interviewees in the research study had departed from Laos when the political situation in Laos was improving. More motivated by economics than by politics and attracted by the resettlement opportunity into third countries, this Hmong group of economic migrants arrived in Thailand disguised in the cloaks of political asylum seekers. However, following the introduction of the CPA's screening procedures and the implementation of the Tripartite Agreement, these economic migrants were either screened out or rejected from resettlement and have since returned to Laos.

Therefore, it would appear that with the Tripartite Agreement which unified the key policy-makers' policies on the refugee issue and with the subsequent higher repatriation rate, the Lao Voluntary Repatriation Programme is both politically and practically feasible. However, with over 45,000 Hmong refugees still in the Thai camps in April 1992, in order to meet the RTG's 1994 deadline for the return of all Lao refugees, the present Hmong repatriation rate must be immediately

and drastically accelerated. As the root of the Lao refugee problem rests with the Hmong "longstayers", the problems in persuading and reassuring the Hmong leaders and their people of the improvement in the general situation in Laos as well as the LPDR's grant of amnesty must be urgently resolved. Failure to do so would result either in the Hmong's prolonged stay in Thailand well passed the 1994 deadline or possibly the forced repatriation of the tens of thousands of genuine refugees?



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Discussion

It was not until 1989 that the Volrep programme for Lao refugees began to become more successful with the number of returnees increasing from 267 in 1988 to 1727 in 1989. What is the explanation for this abrupt change? This phenomenon can partly be explained by the implementation of the CPA and the participation of the LPDR, the RTG and UNHCR at the Tripartite Meetings in 1989. In addition, the phenomenon was also due to the bilateral relations between Thailand and Laos which had ameliorated by that time. However, what hid behind those events was the political "denouement" in Laos and in Vietnam. By the end of the 1980s, the two socialist states had to accept that the political and economic restrictions practiced in their countries were not favourable to national economic growth. Farm collectivization and political reeducation for the mass drove people into poverty and into the decision to flee. As a result, the governments had to lift up certain measures to ease the economy. Farm collectivization was receded. Political and military alignment between the two countries were lessened. Market economy has become accepted. It was under such changing scenarios that the LPDR and the SRV participated in the International Conference on Indochinese Refugees in 1989 and agreed on the CPA. Thus, it can be concluded that the political environment in the LPDR under which people returned in 1989 was quite receptive and acceptable to returnees, even though it was not totally welcoming. As Barry Stein stressed:

"There is a strong political element inherent in voluntary repatriation. Refugees flee from their homeland because the basic bond between citizen and government has been broken, fear has replaced trust, the father-or-motherland is persecuting and rejecting some of its own. Trifles do not cause massive exoduses, and refugees cannot easily pick up and go home until substantial changes occur. International politics are an integral part of voluntary repatriation".

However, the fact that the LPDR as well as other socialist states wished to become a politically socialist country but at the same time, adopt an economically capitalist policy has put Laos in an awkward position. The state would like to increase national income and possess a prosperous economy but yet has been unwilling to give full freedom to its nationals for fear that the latter would become corrupt and lose their ideologies. National security would then be threatened. This is the starting point to consider the repatriation phenomenon in Laos.

Two major issues that need further discussion in this study are the technical management of the repatriation process on the one hand and the reintegration of repatriates in Laos on the other. Both issues are related to the above-mentioned political environment under which refugees return.

Research findings revealed that there was a delay in the process of repatriation and some irrelevant preparations for such a process. The delay in receiving more returnees was caused by the limited number of Laotian officials in charge of repatriation, the time-consuming procedures of checking name lists at the district level and the limited space in the reception centers. If the delay persists, at the present Lao repatriation rate of 1500 returnees per year (see Table 2), it will take over 30 years to repatriate all Lao refugees from the Thai camps. These problems may be to a certain

extent, overcome if the LPDR has a policy to push repatriation to the forefront. It depends on the government's stand point on its political stability. By increasing the number of personnel and expanding the capacity of the reception centres, more applicants can be accepted. The long process of checking and scrutinizing candidates' identities indicates the government's mistrust of its nationals who have voluntarily applied for repatriation. If the government really wants to accept its citizens, the process should be shortened. Moreover, the identification and provision of suitable areas for returnees should be ranked as the first priority because it reflects the government's concern for its nationals and this should not be expressed in terms of Lowland-Highland discrimination. In fact, Highlanders should receive certain resettlement privileges from the government because their cases are more uprooted. They are expected not to return to their home villages. As a result, they would need more state assistance.

Some irrelevant preparations had been made by UNHCR, the RTG, and NGOs in Thailand as well as organizations in Laos, especially on training and the provision of tools to returnees. In the Thai camps, skills training programmes in the early 1980s had been for resettlement in third countries rather than for repatriation. It was not until September 1989, following the repatriation of a group of Laotians that NGOs involved in skills training started to discuss about the revision of their programmes.² Consequently, it was perceived that the training services had been insufficiently geared towards the future of the refugee situation. Evidence of such irrelevance was the mismatch between the primary school curriculum in the Thai camps and the existing National primary school curriculum in Laos which resulted in Laos' refusal to recognize the primary diplomas issued by NGOs in the Thai camps. The camp employment policy which prevented refugees from cash earning work was also unfavourable for repatriates. The RTG should not give too much emphasis on the security aspect which neglects the legitimate rights of refugees. Cash earning is de facto very common in the camps. Accumulating cash for investment as well as work experiences are primary conditions for occupational possibility and stability once returnees go back to Laos. Both conditions should be encouraged in the Thai camps with close supervision by the RTG and UNHCR officials to prevent the abuse of the use of cash for other purposes.

Most returnees recognized that vocational training programmes would be required in the long run to enable them to settle down. The types of training programmes mentioned were mechanics, agriculture, motor electronics, dress-making and hairdressing (see descriptions of Table 38). However, the occupational distribution of returnees once they had been repatriated showed that 43.7% were agricultural workers and 23% were labourers with only 6.3% in skilled work and 9.5% in trade (see Table 26).

Another interesting issue concerns the occupations and training of the Hmong. The Hmong response to the interview of the Joint Volunteer Agency (JVA) study in 1990³ revealed that 63.4% of respondents would like to become farmers, 12.5% vendors and 8.4% soldiers, following their return to Laos. In this study, most Hmong returnees have become agricultural workers while very few have become labourers and traders. There are even some with no occupation at all (see Table 55). Moreover, it can be seen that there was a mismatch between the Hmong employment expectations and actuality. Given the fact that most Hmong migrants had been farmers or unemployed prior to their flight from Laos, there should have been special vocational preparation

2. The Repatriation of the Hilltribe Lao from Ban Vinai and Ching Kham Camps, results of Workshop held on September 2nd, 1989. Phitsnulok.

3. Thomas Conroy, *Highland Lao Refugee: Repatriation and Resettlement Preferences in Ban Vinai Camp*, Thailand Bangkok, 1990: 28-36.

for them on repatriation. However, the findings of Table 56 illustrate that vocational training in the camps did not prepare prospective Hmong returnees for relevant occupations in Laos.

It should be noticed that the training programmes were not provided simply because they had been asked for. Training programmes geared towards the future life of returnees had to take into consideration other aspects of the quality of life. Training in primary health care, ecology preservation, and democratic politics are all indispensable to sustainable repatriation. Furthermore, some special target groups would need specific training programmes. For example, the Hmong returnees ought to be trained in the conservation of forest and water sources as well as in the farming of substitution crops to slash-and-burn cultivation. Additionally, refugees who have worked with NGOs in health services ought to be trained as health development workers in their community in Laos.

Where should training take place? This is a quasi political question since it means the pull of resources. A relevant method of preparation for training services would be for a survey to be conducted in order to identify the right type of training, at the right place, and at the right time. If time and resources such as personnel are now more available in the Thai camps, training could take place there, although not permanently. Training in ecology conservation and democratic politics as well as informal education for adults involve long processes and should be conducted in Laos. It should be incorporated as the superstructure building for Lao society.

Kits and agricultural tools provided by UNHCR are less appreciated than cash by repatriates. Even rice rations have been substituted by UNHCR Laos and the LPDR for cash. However, this does not mean that cash is the only relevant and meaningful item of assistance to returnees. Moreover, to think that agricultural tools would be useful to all returnees is an incorrect assumption. The assistance package should be distributed according to returnees' future occupations. A prospective food shop owner would prefer a freezer/refrigerator to a hoe or a fishnet. Furthermore, it seems impossible to provide tools for all occupations since some equipment might be more costly and this would result in an unfair distribution of assistance. In this respect, some loan projects should be realistically established to enable returnees to start a new life. It is also possible that after a period of time, returnees might change their occupations and travel to new destination areas without informing UNHCR or the LPDR. Such relocation creates a strong impact on any plan on occupational assistance. Responsible agencies must be aware of this possibility and find measures to tackle the problem.

The second issue for discussion is the discrimination and reintegration of returnees. It is not evident whether there has been any discrimination among the Lowland Lao. The authorities announced that they would provide equal and indifferent treatment in order to absorb the Lowland Lao into a normal way of life. Although there existed some small inequalities in the opportunity for the attendance of occupational training programmes organized by UNHCR in Vientiane, this seems to have happened because of personal nepotism rather than because of national policy. The more subtle discrimination appeared in the rejection of former government officials, especially teachers, military and police personnel, to resume their positions or to return to the civil service. This will only create conspiracies, obstruct reintegration and damage the usage of human resources within the country. There should be opportunities for qualified people to return to their jobs. If the government wants to screen the readmission for the sake of national security, then considerations for readmission into the civil service ought to be conducted on an individual basis, not collectively. In addition, teachers are a valuable asset to the nation and should not be neglected.

In terms of social and political reintegration, returnees still found themselves marginal to their society. Both ordinary villagers and repatriates sensed that the latter were under the

authorities' surveillance. However, one handicapped returnee did say that he had never encountered an assistance monitoring team since he had left the transit center. Therefore, there have been too many reconnaissances to oversee the new arrivals' compliance with Lao laws on the one hand but a lack of attention to ensure the repatriates' well-being on the other. This seems to be the major problem of social and political reintegration. It is not clear whether or not a returnee lives a normal political life in Laos. However, at least, he or she lives a life which is not too different from the other Lao people. As one of the authorities said:

"All returnees have rights equal to any other Lao, those who come back do not bring with them their rights from abroad. They become Lao again, and must follow Lao law".⁴

Regarding the repatriation of the most vulnerable group, the Hmong, a comparison between what has been discussed in the JVA study in 1990 and what has been discovered in this report should be made.

In 1990, the Hmong interviewees at Ban Vinai gave as the main reason for delaying their return to Laos, to await for political changes in Laos. In this study, the 23 Hmong returnees interviewed gave as the first reason for their delay, the resettlement opportunity. Other reasons included fears of anarchy in Laos, no desire to return, and having no personal judgment (i.e., dependency on others' decisions), (see Table 53). Therefore, the two studies reveal a mismatch in the main reason for delaying a return to Laos between Hmong refugees in the Thai camps and Hmong returnees in Laos. A possible explanation for this could be that within the Hmong ethnic group, there has existed two groups of refugees:

1. The Hmong refugees who departed from Laos between the mid 1970s and the early 1980s out of fears of persecution and discrimination in Laos. Many had been associated with the pre-1975 Hmong army and had cooperated in anti-communist military operations with the CIA (US). Others had fled the LPDR's policy of political discrimination against the Hmong ethnic group. This Hmong refugee group comprised of genuine political asylum seeker who had fled political persecution. A sizeable proportion have since been resettled into third countries but as of April 1992, over 45,000 Hmong refugees still remained in the Thai camps.

2. The Hmong refugees who fled Laos from 1981 onwards. As a direct consequence of the resettlement abroad of the early groups of Lao refugees, further migratory flows of Hmong occurred. With the deterioration of the socio economic conditions in Laos, with inflation reportedly at 29% in 1985, together with the practice of collectivization (particularly during 1984-1985), the resettlement opportunity into third countries became irresistible. Moreover, the Hmong's lack of experience in agricultural work as well as in other skilled occupations led them to a "huis clos". This group of Hmong who arrived in Thailand were economic migrants.

In July 1987, however, the CPA was implemented and genuine refugees were separated from economic migrants, the latter having since been screened out and returned to Laos. Therefore, since the JVA study in 1990 was conducted among the Hmong "longstayers" in the Thai camps who have been considered as genuine refugees while the present study interviewed 23 Hmong returnees in Laos, some of whom it would appear, had been screened out, the main reason for either returning to Laos or delaying a return to Laos differed between the two studies because the Hmong interviewees in the former study were politically motivated while those in the latter study, despite attempts to conceal by means of the camouflage of persecution, had been economically motivated.

4. Maligna Xaignavong, *ibid.*



The Hmong "longstayers" in the Thai camps require further analysis. For several years, this group of Hmong refugees has been eligible for resettlement abroad under the US resettlement programme. However, it has continuously rejected the resettlement offer. Similarly, this group of genuine political refugees has shown great reluctance in returning to a homeland run by a regime which once persecuted it and later drove it out of Laos. Among the older generations, the memories of the LPDR's reign of terror and persecution are still vivid. Moreover, the LPDR policy to resettle Hmong in the Lowlands has made a return home ever more unlikely. In a society where great respect is accorded to ones' elders and where the final word in all matters rests with the leaders, a return other than to the leaders' birth place and homeland in the Uplands would be unacceptable. Instead, until the political environment improved which would make it safer and more desirable to return, a continued stay in the Thai camps has been preferred. However, 1994 has been fixed as the deadline for the return of the last groups of Lao refugees from Thailand to Laos. Therefore, in order to meet the 1994 dead line, attempts must be made to tackle the political issue, to strengthen economic development for the Hmong, and to negotiate with the Hmong leaders.

It was also discovered that among the Lowland Lao, a number held negative attitudes towards the Hilltribes. This constituted a cultural dimension to reintegration, one which has deeper roots than the political or economic dimensions. Although there were high ranking officials who were themselves Highlanders, namely, H.E. Nyi Singpaseut (Vice Minister of Social Welfare and War Veterans in 1990), H.E. Asang Lawalie (Minister of Interior), and Vongphet Xaikeu-Yakhongtua (Governor of Louang Phabang in 1990), most members of the ethnic Hilltribes were less educated and suffered from Lowland's prejudice. The reintegration of the Hilltribe people, therefore, is a delicate, multi-facet undertaking which needs time and dedication. A healthier atmosphere in the political forum would enhance such reintegration. This would depend on the LPDR government's attitude and policy towards the Hmong and the liberation movement of the rightists. It would also depend on the Hmong's perceptions of the LPDR. In Chiang Kham and Ban Vinai camps, it was not difficult to obtain subversive documents which accused the LPDR of having plans to commit massive genocide on all Hmong between the ages of 5-50 years of age.

Spontaneous returnees amounting to 12,000-13,000 in 1990 also deserve a special mention. They returned outside the legal framework and without the humanitarian assistance. Since the number of spontaneous returnees might increase further and thus would constitute a considerable proportion of the number of the voluntary returnees under UNHCR, measures to provide them with necessary assistance should be considered.

What have been the consequences of both voluntary and spontaneous returnees to Laos? The majority of repatriates had been agriculturists and non-skilled workers. Hence, they have been absorbed into the agricultural and social labour groups in society. Those who had been former government officials have entered into business as long as their services were no longer required by the government. From the government's point of view, this group not only posed as an ideological issue but also as an administrative one. The positions in the bureaucracy had been filled by militants from the socialist regimes. They might have been younger and less experienced than the former officials but their ideology was not doubted. Moreover, in what echelons could the government put the former government official group so that they could be acceptable to both the young newly recruited as well as the old conservatives? How could they work together? If the government could not answer such questions, it would be unable to exploit the existing human resources for national development. However, this phenomenon could strengthen the private sector since skilled manpower would enter into business and trade. The success of this social group would be very significant to the return of resettled Laotians in third countries. Those who wished to return would first wait to see how successful their predecessors have been in adapting to life in Laos and then

they would decide whether to stay or to go back. Similarly, if intellectuals were able to integrate into the governmental hierarchy, others would be interested to return.

Social and political acceptances alone can not attract Lao refugees to repatriate without economic promises, especially for the highly skilled manpower who have been used to high salaries in developed countries. Their first channel to return to Laos might have to be as employees of overseas/trans-national companies or international organizations since the big gap in the standard of living between LPDR officials and foreign/international employees would be too great. This would dissuade them from returning to the Lao bureaucracy.

Regarding agriculturers, the accelerated rural development programmes coordinated by the LPDR government and the UN organizations (especially UNHCR and UNDP) would enable the sustainability of the agriculturers' settlement in rural areas. However, long term plans to build the superstructure have been considered to be as important as those for the infrastructure. Lessons from other developing countries could serve as an example for Laos not to hastily enter into the market economy to become a peripheral capitalist country which would be totally dependent on the super powers, themselves the core capitalist states and controller of the world market. In the process of economic reconstruction, Laos should give a proportional awareness to the concepts and practices of people's participation, self reliance, indigenous knowledge, appropriate technology and the preservation of the natural environment.⁵ A long term perspective with wisdom and a change in the development paradigm is needed to efficiently reconstruct the country and subsequently to attract more repatriates.



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5. Supang Chantavanich, *Refugee Flows from Indochina*, *ibid.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

According to UNHCR statistics, as of April 1992, the number of Laotian refugees in the Thai camps had decreased dramatically. 8,787 refugees had returned through the Volrep programme, which left 10,267 in Ban Napho camp, 15,898 in Ban Vinai camp and 17,422 in Chiang Kham camp. Divided by ethnic groups, only 6,207 Lowland Lao and 45,027 Hilltribes were in Thailand, making a total of approximately 51,200 Laotians. With this number, the repatriation of 6,207 Lowland Lao can certainly be accomplished by 1994. Nonetheless, the return of 45,027 Hilltribes will be extremely difficult to accomplish within the same time frame. The following recommendations are made keeping in mind the above mentioned facts. It is also hoped that the findings and suggestions from this study can be applied to the repatriation of other ethnic groups in Indochina, i.e., the Khmer and the Vietnamese as well as the repatriation of refugees in other parts of the world.

Politics

1. It is well known that Lao repatriates have returned to a country which still has the socialist regime which once drove them to leave the country. Due to the ease in political and economic restrictions by the government, Lowland refugees, however, have found that living in such a society has been tolerable. But the Hmong still have doubts about the LPDR measures towards them. The government could convince more Hmong to return by expressing a sincere wish to reconcile with the liberation movement. Although the government can not accept the Hmong's proposal to resettle in an autonomous zone within Laos, it can nevertheless demonstrate to the Hmong its willingness to let them live a democratic life with certain freedom. It can also make assurances that there are no persecution or discrimination plans as rumoured. The authorities should use the mass media for this information campaign. They should also use the media to educate the Lowland Lao not to look down upon or mistrust the Hmong.

2. For returnees who were former government officials in the old regime, the government should try to absorb these people into the civil service again, given the severe need for skilled manpower in the country. This action would solve the problem of limited existing human resources in the bureaucracy and would also boost the morale of those returnees who want to participate in the reconstruction of the nation. A committee should be set up to consider returnees' requests to join the bureaucracy individually. A probation period can be fixed to try out their efficiency and dedication.

3. For those who do not want to join the civil service and are capable of running non-governmental organizations, the authorities should permit them to establish NGOs or become volunteers in such NGOs and help the government in social development work. Much foreign financial assistance is available for Laos. However, if the government can not completely utilize the assistance due to lack of manpower, why not let the Lao private sector help? Moreover, there are NGOs which can help in the training of vocational, health and literacy programmes which are not too sensitive to national security.

4. It is also recommended that the government and UNHCR should encourage repatriates to organize among themselves some kind of local community group to help each other under state supervision. This would create a feeling of self help, self reliance and dignity among returnees who previously had been overdependent on others for too long. It would provide a good basis for the establishment of competent groups at the local level which would utilize external assistance and which would learn to participate in a democratic way.

5. UNHCR and LPDR should discuss the possibility of creating a “returnees’ ombud system” in Laos. Taking the ideas from Hanne Sophie Greve,⁶ a former UNHCR assistant protection officer in the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand, a returnees’ ombud which would have the mandate to follow up on complaints against the administrations of both the LPDR government and UNHCR, would further protect returnees in their country of origin. Findings in Chapter Three revealed that discrimination against some returnees did take place such as through the surveillance of returnees by LPDR officials. However, the establishment of an ombud system would endeavor to ensure that such injustice would not be committed against any citizen.

Economics

Economic reconstruction is the priority of the nation and repatriates should contribute to fulfill this aim rather than to act as a burden to the country. The enhancement of a successful economic life for returnees can be achieved through:

1. The establishment of a fund or loan to support small scale enterprises for returnees who are interested in business. Initially, the project would provide returnees with the equipment needed for business, and not cash. However, they would have to prove that they are competent to run a business. Low interest rates and an appropriate length of time to repay the loan should be proposed. Businessmen should also be exempted from tax for 35 years like farmers have been under the government policy. Information on this offer should be disseminated in the Thai camps and applicants should send their requests to Vientiane to explore the many possibilities in order to be able to formulate a concrete plan for their economic activities. Groups of Lowland Lao and Hmong who do not wish to settle in rural areas would be given more alternatives through loans. The substitution of rice rations by cash is not recommended because it is felt that returnees would spend the money too quickly. Instead, in-kind substitution in the form of equipment is suggested.

2. The provision of more training programmes for returnees who lack expertise in starting economic activities. The kinds of training should be in accordance with suggestions.

3. The expansion of external and internal markets for commodities which returnees are capable of producing, i.e., silverware and handicrafts. The two products are not for every day life consumption in Laos, but are products which could create good income and yet do not require training. Therefore, these activities should be promoted and associations or groups should be established to assist the producers.

4. Guarantees that infrastructure building in rural areas are relevant to repatriates’ needs and that returnees are placed in appropriate areas to live a sustainable life. The permission for foreign as well as local NGOs to assist returnees in their agricultural work outside Vientiane is an urgent need.

5. Guarantees that special efforts would be made to help the Hilltribe returnees to start their new economic activities provided they are not against the state policy.

6. Hanne Sophie Greve, “Repatriation : A Proposed Returnees’ Ombud in Cambodia in Refugee Participation”, Network (12), March 1992. *Refugee Studies Programme*, Oxford:28-29.

Social

The recommendations for the reintegration of Laotian returnees into society are as follows:

1. The revision of the reorientation programme for new arrivals in the transit centres. The components should include occupational opportunities, availability of financial resources for starting jobs, and rights and duties of repatriates. The programme must cover all target groups in the centre, and not the dominantly male returnee group alone. Women and children should receive special attention.
2. The creation of a social welfare for disabled returnees.
3. The inclusion of spontaneous returnees for humanitarian assistance and welfare by informing them of their rights.
4. The continuation of the monitoring service for returnees for the well-being of repatriates and not for surveillance purposes.
5. The education of Lao people on the existence and appropriate treatment without prejudice of repatriates.

Education

1. The new primary school curriculum with its new textbooks used in Laos urgently need to be introduced in the Thai camps. Given the limited number of Lao officials to provide services to returnees once they go back, children and adult applicants should be offered the relevant educational services while they await for repatriation in the Thai camps.
2. Some useful and necessary training courses should be given in the Thai camps:
 - 2.1 adult education for refugees waiting for repatriation.
 - 2.2 ecological preservation and cash crop substitution to opium growing should be taught to Highlanders by experienced Thai NGOs working with the Hilltribes in northern Thailand.
3. In Laos, training courses needed by prospective returnees, namely, vocational training in mechanics, agriculture, motor electronics, dressmaking and hairdressing, should be organized. However, a survey of job availability for these training courses must be conducted first to ensure their cost benefits.
4. UNHCR and LPDR should ensure that children returnees have entered into the school system in Laos. If possible, there should be a follow up to the children's adjustment and academic performances at school. Hmong and other Hilltribe languages should be recognized and taught in schools.

APPENDIX

ANNEX 1

Non-Governmental Organization

American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Quaker Service Laos

- Small Scale Irrigation
- Women's Project
- Veterinary Project
- Ethnic Communities
- Unexplored Ordinance
- Clean Drinking Water
- Drought Aid (Rice Bank)
- Rice Based Integrated Farming

Bahai Development Committee

- Integrated Development (Education, Primary Health Care, Agriculture, Environment)
- Education (School Assistance, English Teaching)
- Agriculture
- Health
- Appropriate Technology Community Aid Abroad
- Small Scale Irrigation Rehabilitation
- Community Irrigation
- School Agriculture Project

International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity (CIDSE)

- Agriculture Projects
- Health
- Agriculture Training
- Education and Culture
- Emergency
- General

CUSO

- English Language Teaching

Ecoles Sans Frontieres (ESF)

- Education

Enfants et Developpement (EED)

- Health Training
- Promotion of Primary Health Care Services

Handicap International

- Prostheses for Handicapped
- Work in Leprosy Villages
- Training Physio-therapists

Japan International Volunteer Center

- Construction - MCH
- Agriculture Training - Rural Development

Medicins Sans Frontieres (MSF)

- Medical Library - Laboratory Work
- Surgical Training

Mennonite Central Committee

- Agriculture - Education
- Health - Income Generation/Village Based
- Peacemaking and Reconciliation Technologies
- Relief and Social Welfare

Save the Children Fund Australia

- Education - Health
- Village and Women's Development

Save the Children Fund (U.K.)

- Mother and Child Health - Primary Health Care
- Hospital Support - English Language
- Dental Programme - General Support
- School Construction Programme - Pre-School Teacher Project
- Women's Development - Kindergarten Support

World Concern

- Health - Education

ZOA Refugee Care

- Vocational Training

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ANNEX 2

Proposed criteria for the participation of Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) in repatriation/reintegration programmes in Laos.

In order to be able to work for the reintegration of repatriates in the LPDR, the NGO must fulfill the following basic criteria:

1. Administrative requirements

- a. It must be legally registered at the location of its Headquarters and/or in the country where it is operating (Lao PDR).
- b. It must duly obtain the LPDR's authorization to operate within the country.
- c. It must have the authority to operate a bank account and the ability to maintain separate accounts for any expenditures incurred on behalf of UNHCR in the implementation of the joint projects.
- d. It should be able to demonstrate financial reliability through the production of official audit statements.
- e. It must work under the leadership of the Ministry of Social Welfare and War Veterans and UNHCR in line with the frame work approved by the Tripartite Meeting (LPDR/RTG/UNHCR)

2. Expertise and quality of service

- a. The NGO should be primarily development oriented and possess relevant expertise and experience in one or more of the following fields: integrated rural development, rural settlement planning and implementation, transport/logistics, agriculture, irrigation, income generation activities, education/vocational training, water development, public health, community development, management etc..
- b. The NGO should be able to demonstrate a previous ability to deliver such assistance, either in the same country, in Thailand or in similar situations elsewhere.
- c. All things being equal, preference may be given to NGOs already operating in the country.
- d. Similarly, preference may be given to NGOs with previous experience with UNHCR and in the above mentioned fields. However, this should not prevent new agencies with relevant experience and expertise in these fields to qualify for partnership.

3. Neutrality

The NGO should be willing to provide assistance strictly on non-political and humanitarian basis.

4. Contribution of resources

Preference could be given to NGOs which, other than possessing relevant expertise/experience and fulfilling the above mentioned conditions, could obtain total or partial funding for the projects to be carried within the approved assistance parameters.

Annex 3

Vientiane Municipality



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