

MSF denounces the policy of forced repatriation of the Hmong population of Huai Nam Khao camp back to Laos, and refuses to work under military pressure.

Bangkok/Paris, 20th May 2009. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) denounces the growing pressure applied by Thailand's army to force the 5,000 Hmong refugees living in Huai Nam Khao camp, in northern Thailand, to return to Laos. A number of increasingly tight restrictions have forced MSF to put a stop to its assistance activities.

The Thai and Laotian governments effectively reasserted last March that they aim to repatriate all the Hmong back to Laos before the year is out, and without any external supervision. The number of refugees being repatriated has picked up since December 2008, reaching 500 last March.

During the last four months, the Thai army, present in the camp, has introduced increasingly restrictive measures with the aim of pressuring the Hmong into dropping their demands for refugee status and returning "voluntarily" to Laos. The refugees talk of arbitrary arrests and cases of forced repatriation.

Moreover, MSF denounces the methods employed by the Thai authorities, who have stamped out any possibility of offering independent humanitarian assistance to the camp's refugee population: restrictions on the population's freedom of access to MSF's assistance, the multiplication of military checks on the Hmong and MSF's staff. In the light of these conditions, MSF has decided to stop its activities in the camp.

"We can no longer work in a camp where the military uses arbitrary imprisonment of influential leaders to pressure refugees into a "voluntary" return to Laos, and forces our patients to pass through military checkpoints to access our medical clinic," says Gilles Isard, MSF head of mission in Thailand.

After almost four years in the field providing humanitarian assistance to the Hmong displaced population, MSF once again calls on the governments of Thailand and Laos:

- **To stop the forced repatriation of the Hmong refugees in Huai Nam Khao and allow an independent third party to review the refugee status determinations.**
- **To allow an independent third party to assess the areas of return and the adequacy of assistance offered, monitor all repatriations, verify the voluntary nature of returns, and ensure the continued safety of returnees.**

Furthermore, MSF also requests that the ASEAN member states, key regional stakeholders and the French and U.S. governments ensure that Thailand and Laos resolve this issue in accordance with international standards for the protection of people fleeing persecution.

MSF has been providing medical and sanitation assistance to some 7,500 refugees in the Petchabun camp since 2005. Less than 5,000 still remain. It has been the only international organisation present, and could provide firsthand accounts of events in the camp. MSF also works in Maesot, on the Myanmar border, offering care for patients with tuberculosis and infected with HIV/AIDS. Other teams work in Phang Nga, providing access to health care for Myanmar migrants, and in Sangklaburi, where they run a cross-border malaria project.

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Photos are available at these address :

<http://www.msf.fr/2009/05/19/1315/photographies-de-greg-constantine-dans-les-camps-hmong/>

<http://www.msf.fr/2009/05/19/1314/photographies-de-francesca-dibonito-dans-les-camps-hmong/>