

**Departure from Phetchabun**  
**Press conference at the FCC (foreign correspondent club) Bangkok**

*Speech time about 14 minutes*

May 20, 2009

Good afternoon everyone, and thank you very much for attending this conference.

A few weeks ago MSF took the difficult decision to stop its humanitarian activities in the Hmong displaced camp of Huai Nam Khao. As a reminder, this camp is under tight military control, indeed the population of this camp is regarded by the Thai government as illegal migrants and therefore the place resembles more of a detention center than a refugee camp. Thus, in order to carry its assistance MSF has to work in close cooperation with the Thai army.

Since July 2005 MSF has been providing Humanitarian assistance to the displaced hmong population of Huai Nam Khao. At the start of our operation the population was about 5800 people, the number when up to 7800 people beginning of 2007 and there are currently about 4700 people remaining in the camp. MSF is the sole international organization working on the camp. We take responsibility for the medical activities including medical consultation and treatment, vaccination, nutrition, mental health (psychologist) and reproductive health (midwife). We also provide the water supply and sanitation services, and general distribution of food and non-food items.

The population of this camp claims to have fled Laos because of the persecution they endure from the Laos army. They claim that the Lao government never forgave them for fighting side by side with the Americans against the communist during the Vietnam War and want to make them pay the price of their involvement. MSF cannot confirm if this population is or not at risk of persecution in Laos but people's testimonies are consistent with reports given by human right organizations and independent journalists who have visited the areas of Laos from where many of the people fled. We can also guarantee that there are people in the camp who bear physical scars, such as bullet and shrapnel wounds, from alleged abuses in Laos. Also, the adults interviewed through our mental health activity presented various psychological disorders as well as a high level of psychological distress.

Since the beginning of this situation the Royal Thai Government clearly stated that these displaced people are not refugees but normal illegal migrant and that they shall be returned to Laos. On several occasions, UNHCR has demanded to go to the camp so that they can verify the claims of the refugees but the Thai authorities have always denied access.

In May 2007 the Thai and Lao governments made the agreement that all displaced Hmong will be repatriated to Laos, and the Lao government has made the firm demand that no third party should be included in the repatriation process. Since 2005 several hundreds of hmong people were forcibly repatriated to Laos but the government of Laos has continually prevented international organizations from actually monitoring and assessing the safety of Hmong returnees.

Over the past 3 years MSF has been advocating for more transparency in the management of the crisis.

- In October 2007 MSF issued a public report and a press release to attract the attention of the international community and demanded the Thai government to carry an objective screening monitored by a third party such as UNHCR in order to assess the legitimacy of the fears and verify the claims of the refugees.
- In February 2008 MSF witnessed some cases of forced repatriation and publicly denounced them.
- In May 2008 MSF issued a second public report and reiterated its demand for access of a third party and appealed Thailand to stop forced repatriation proceeding against the Hmong.
- In June 2008, again MSF issued a press release to denounce the forced repatriation of 800 Lao Hmong and reiterated its demand for more transparency.

Additionally, MSF has also publicly requested that ASEAN member states as well the US and French governments take actions to ensure that Thailand and Laos resolve this issue in accordance with international standards for the protection of refugees.

Unfortunately, the situation remains unchanged. In March 2009 Thailand reaffirmed its intention to return all Hmong refugees to Laos before the end of the year. Since December 2008 there are about 200 repatriations per month, up to 500 in March, and we have reasons to believe that there are many cases of forced return among them.

Over the past six months our cooperation on the field with the Thai army has been gradually deteriorating. The Thai army would like MSF to be more cooperative to their strategy; often the militaries have requested the assistance of MSF to convince the Hmong to return to Laos. On several occasions they have asked MSF not to distribute food to the refugees in order to add extra pressure on the population. Of course, MSF has always refused, arguing that humanitarian assistance should not be used as a coercive instrument.

The military define the rules and request MSF to follow them without condition. But those rules pay no respect for MSF's most basic operating principles. These include that no pressure be put on MSF staff and the refugee population have free access to MSF health structures. For the past six months, many times we have had disagreements with

the army to try to preserve these two fundamental principles but each time MSF was constrained to compromise:

Concerning pressure on MSF staff:

- Regularly, MSF staff are questioned by the army about their work and their salary.
- Since March 2009 the militaries oblige the Lao Hmong staff of MSF to pass through military control to come to work at MSF Clinic and warehouse.
- Beginning of March the army formally demanded that MSF stop hiring or using Lao Hmong as volunteer at the end of the same month. After a month of discussion we managed to negotiate but we were compelled to get rid of about 50% our Lao Hmong personnel.

Concerning the free access to the population. Several times the army has tried to control our gates.

- At the end of last year the army decided that patients would not be allowed to get direct access to MSF Clinic at night and forced them to pass through a military checkpoint<sup>1</sup>.
- Mid-February 2009, the army attempted to post a soldier around the clock at the gate of MSF Clinic to control the movements of patients.
- Beginning of March the army stopped MSF from distributing food to the population. We finally resumed this activity after three days of stand off.
- Finally April 16 the army took the liberty of locking MSF's Clinic and warehouse without any warning. Now, patients are obliged to pass through a military control to get medical consultation and treatment. Thus, people do not have free access to MSF structure anymore<sup>2</sup>.

Since the closure of MSF's clinic and store gates, part of the population has refused to come for medical consultation because they fear to be arrested; Male consultations have dropped by about 50%.

In these circumstances, MSF is no longer able to provide independent humanitarian assistance to the population of the camp.

Beyond the difficulties that we continuously have faced on the field in our relation with the Thai army, MSF is also deeply uneasy with regards to the lack of concern for human rights that surrounds and actually strongly exacerbates this crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> This measure led to an emergency birth delivery that almost cost the life of the mother; the women suffered from complication but did not dare to come to the OPD at nighttime because she was afraid to pass the checkpoint.

<sup>2</sup> This measure led to an emergency referral to the Thai hospital at nighttime of a TB patients.  
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1. MSF does not approve of the plan of the Royal Thai Government that aims to send all the displaced Hmong population of Huai Nam Khao back to Laos without any third party involved and without transparency. For the past 2 years MSF has always made this very clear and has publicly advocate for more transparency in the management of this situation.
2. MSF condemns the Thai army strategy that aims at putting pressure on the population to force them to return to Laos.
3. MSF finds unacceptable the tactic used on the field by the military that consists in targeting influential leaders, arresting them for unclear reasons, jailing them for a couple of weeks and then asking them to sign papers to voluntarily return to Laos.

MSF refuses to collaborate any more to this operation which, moreover, allow our presence on the field to give the international community a false sense of transparency and therefore we took the decision to stop our activity in the hmong displaced camp of Huai Nam Khao.

Our departure also aims to send an ultimate message to the Thai and Lao government, regional stakeholders and the international community:

After almost 4 years of presence on the field providing humanitarian assistance to the hmong displaced population, MSF believes that many of those people have credible fear to return to Laos.

Therefore, one more time, we request the government of Thailand and Laos :  
To stop the forced repatriation proceeding against the Hmong displaced population of Huai Nam Khao until an independent, third party can review their claim of persecution.  
And, to allow an independent third party to assess the area of return and the adequacy of assistance offered, monitor all repatriations, and verify the voluntary nature of returns and continued safety of returnees.

Once again MSF appeals ASEAN member states, regional stakeholders, as well as the US and French governments to use their influence to ensure that Thailand and Laos resolve this issue in accordance with international standards for the protection of people at risk of persecution.

Thank you for your attention.