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## Ex-guerrilla's gamble for peace backfires

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They poured into Arlington High School in St. Paul that morning last February, dressed in coats too short and too thin -- more than 100 ragged Hmong families newly arrived from a steamy refugee camp in Thailand.

Established Hmong immigrants had catered a buffet to celebrate the new arrivals. All week, rumors had been circulating that their leader, Gen. Vang Pao, would be there to greet the latest refugees.

This was the kind of event Vang Pao seldom missed -- an opportunity to welcome fellow Hmong to America, a chance to appear on stage with local politicians and show his power.

The general's unflagging loyalty to the United States during the Vietnam War had paved the way for hundreds of thousands of Hmong to immigrate to America over the decades. He always took pride in greeting them. It was even said that he cared more about the welfare of his countrymen than about his own family. But this time, Vang Pao didn't show.

To long-established Hmong in the Twin Cities, it was not surprising for him to stay away, given the cascade of events that had bruised him over the past year.

His power base had started to die off, and Vang Pao couldn't interest the younger generation in buying into his political network known as Neo Hom. They were Americans now, and had no wish to contribute money to a campaign to return to Laos.

In April 2004, the Maplewood home of Vang Pao's son, Cha Vang, had been torched by arson. In addition, the philanthropic foundation in Vang Pao's name was under investigation by state authorities, who were trying to find what had happened to \$500,000.

The FBI put Cha Vang under investigation and a top Hmong aide in the St. Paul mayor's office had been tainted with a bribery allegation. Elder veterans had broken ranks with Vang Pao.

The plan that had guided Vang Pao's life in America was falling apart.

The peace gamble

Vang Pao had been unwavering in his promise to Hmong refugees that he would help them overthrow the Communist government of Laos and return to their homeland. He had raised untold amounts of money -- some estimated millions of dollars -- by collecting monthly payments from immigrants who joined his secretive organization, Neo Hom.

But by mid-2003, his trusted adviser, attorney Steve Young, realized that Vang Pao's dream of returning to Laos was never going to come true. It was time for Vang Pao to create a bold new strategy, Young thought -- a strategy based on reconciliation.

He laid out his reasons why Vang Pao should sit down with Vietnamese Communists who still exerted great influence over Laos and attempt to make peace. The general was willing to take the gamble.

In early November 2003, Vang Pao arrived by cab at a small hotel on the outskirts of Amsterdam. He was accompanied by Young and Col. Ly Teng of St. Paul, Vang Pao's brother-in-law and an ex-guerrilla commander.

As they entered the hotel coffee shop, a Vietnamese man bowed to the general. Tea was poured for him, another gesture of respect. Then came the highest compliment: One of the Vietnamese spoke of Vang Pao's valor and unfailing determination during the war, traits that had made him a feared and respected foe. Vang Pao was moved, Young recalled.

For the Vietnamese, the meeting was an important opportunity to strengthen ties to the United States as a way to help neutralize their longtime antagonist, China. If Vang Pao agreed to throw his support to normalizing U.S. trade relations with Laos, the Vietnamese would pressure the Lao government to stop persecuting the Hmong who were still hiding out in the mountains.

Vang Pao knew this about-face would be a hard sell to his supporters. But he was willing, Young said, to take the brunt of any criticism that followed.

They left in agreement, and with the understanding that the meeting would never be made public.

On Nov. 23, 2003, at the Prom Center in Oakdale, Vang Pao was to unveil his radical message. His son Cha Vang spoke instead, while Vang Pao listened. To more than 700 Hmong and Lao gathered from all over the world, Cha Vang laid out his father's new doctrine to get human rights protections for the Hmong back in Laos in exchange for normalizing trade relations with Laos.

The meeting lasted six hours. Vang Pao spoke once.

"The era of killing must stop ... and allow a new era of peace, prosperity and happiness to come to millions of people living in Laos," he said.

But in Young's eyes, their diplomatic effort had been sabotaged: During the speech, Cha Vang disclosed that his father had secretly met with the Vietnamese in Amsterdam, breaking the trust that the meeting would not be discussed in public.

The damage was irreparable.

There would be no more meetings with the Vietnamese.

Historic break

In the Twin Cities, Vang Pao's new doctrine and the revelation that he had met with the enemy resulted in protests and violence. Many Hmong war veterans were not about to forgive, let alone forget, the suffering their families had endured at the hands of the Communists. For years, they had sacrificed their hard-earned money to Neo Hom on the faith that Vang Pao would return them to a free Laos. And now this?

It was seen as nothing less than betrayal.

Less than four months after the Prom Center speech, St. Paul police were called to a protest outside the office of U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum. About 400 Hmong and Lao were rallying against Vang Pao's proposal to normalize trade relations with Laos, a measure that McCollum supported in Congress.

The open rebellion by the war veterans against Vang Pao was historic: It was now acceptable to disagree publicly with the general.

The protest was the first of three increasingly violent incidents within weeks that drew the attention of state and federal authorities to a dangerous divide in the Hmong community.

Phil Smith, executive director of Lao Veterans of America, said he and other advisers had urged Vang Pao not to go public with the trip to Europe because it could be used to discredit the general among his own followers.

"Our worst fears became true," he said.

Worse yet, Smith said, the disclosure that Vang Pao had met with the Vietnamese emboldened the Pathet Lao in Laos. The visit backfired tragically.

"Not only was there no cease-fire and no humanitarian effort," Smith said, but "they installed a military operation and more [Hmong] died."

A son's secret

Smith said Vang Pao was following in his son's footsteps by meeting with the Vietnamese.

"Cha had been going to Vietnam since 1994," Smith said. "He told me face to face. ... I was supposed to keep it a secret. He said that he was meeting with Vietnamese generals and that he had opened a business in Ho Chi Minh City -- import-export, commodities.

"At the time, he was bragging to me about it. He's been working on his father because his father was naturally suspicious of the Vietnamese and their trustworthiness."

Smith said that Lao Veterans, who at one time supported Neo Hom with contributions, have broken from Vang Pao in large part because there was no accountability of how the money was spent.

And it didn't help to learn that Cha Vang, who was allegedly a high-ranking Neo Hom official, had been meeting with their enemy.

"Cha has created a civil war in the ranks of the general's supporters," Smith said. "He was the top guy in terms of his father's finances, raising money in the name of his father."

For the past several months, Cha Vang has declined interviews. But in October 2004, he spoke at length to the Star Tribune about attacks against his father and perceptions of corruption.

"It's hurt him ... to have someone attack us," Cha Vang said. "No one wants to be seen as a thug, thief, a robber."

He said his family never used Neo Hom contributions for themselves. He acknowledged that there was a perception in the Hmong community that Vang Pao's family dealt "drugs, has a Swiss bank account and owns four-star hotels in Southeast Asia. There's this perception that we're rich."

If that was the case, Cha Vang said, he wouldn't be living in Minnesota. "I have no use to live up here in the snow," he said. "We'd be the dumbest, rich, corrupt bastards in the world. I'd be on an island somewhere."

Open cases

Instead of an island, he has lived in Maplewood.

Several years ago, leaders of the Vang clan in the Twin Cities bought a brick and stucco house on a cul-de-sac, for the general to live in when he made his frequent visits to Minnesota.

Cha Vang, his wife and three children lived there, and Vang Pao stayed there whenever he was in town.

The night of April 24, 2004, was rainy. Cha Vang was at home playing cards with his buddies. He was worried about how tough it would be to play golf the next day, he told police later. His friends left about 11 p.m.

In the middle of the night, the house suddenly blazed up with fire. Cha, his wife and three children managed to escape. By dawn, the house was gutted.

Federal investigators ruled it arson, possibly caused by someone who sneaked through the woods to the back of the house. No one has been arrested.

The fire was the third in a string of violent incidents within a space of a few weeks. Shortly after the Hmong protest at McCollum's office -- and just four days before Cha Vang's house burned -- the Maplewood home of Xang Vang was shot up. At least three bullets pierced the living room window shortly before midnight on April 20, 2004.

That case, too, remains unsolved.

Authorities considered the three incidents -- the protest, the shooting, and the arson -- to be possibly related.

Cha Vang told police that he has never received direct threats. However, "he believes his father may have," the police report stated, "so he feels that he has been threatened indirectly."

## Crashing down

In the heart of downtown St. Paul at the corner of 4th and Cedar Streets, the high-rise Minnesota Building owned by California-based Bridgecreek Development sits nearly empty of tenants, its future uncertain. Cha Vang, vice president of Bridgecreek, has been working on turning the office space into condominiums, but the project has been stalled for months.

On the second floor, Cha Vang's youngest brother, Chi Vang, sat behind a desk and spoke candidly about their father's personal and financial losses. One of the first big setbacks for his father came about five years ago, when the Lao Veterans of America detached itself from the general under new leadership.

"In the end, everything came crashing down, the loyalty," Chi Vang said. His father, he said, feels betrayed by the leadership of the veterans group and what he says are lies that have been spread against him.

Neo Hom contributions have dropped off steeply, Chi Vang said. Today, there is barely enough money to pay rent and other bills, he said.

"Neo Hom itself cannot support the other half of the body," Chi Vang said. "That's why we are not

sending people to Laos. If we had the money, our politics would be harder and stronger. We don't have enough to run our operations here."

He said his father doesn't receive a government pension for fighting under the CIA and has not applied for veterans' benefits because he doesn't want to appear as if he's looking for government aid. The general's living expenses are paid for by his children, he said.

Xang Vang said the general lives with his wife and other family members and they reportedly perform piece assembly work out of their comfortable rambler in suburban Los Angeles.

Chi Vang said his father blames himself when he reflects on why trusted friends turned against him. "He says, 'Why couldn't I see it? Why wasn't I able to pick up the signals?' These are ... former comrades you ordered and trusted. He just gets mad. It's a lot of pain."

There's more than pain, however. These days, the general takes extra precautions during his trips to Minnesota, his son said.

"He only travels with a bodyguard when he comes here," he said.

Last week, at an open house at the Center for Hmong Cultural Studies at Concordia University in St. Paul, Vang Pao was flanked by more than a dozen armed bodyguards. The man who had mixed so easily with his countrymen all of his life didn't pause this time to mingle with Hmong admirers. His bodyguards hustled him away the minute the event was over.

Phil Smith, who once lobbied in Washington on behalf of the general, said his client self-destructed.

Vang Pao, he said, "took a wrecking ball to his historic legacy."

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