

WITHOUT SOLIDARITY WE ARE ALL DOOMED TO FAILURE

There is something very wrong with far too many of us indigenous people today, we have become as coldhearted as our oppressors....maybe we in the Caribbean are just different....but I have seen a disheartening lack of empathy and solidarity among some indigenous peoples for each others plight.

Let me give you an example of what I am alluding to:

I first read about the Hmong people of South East Asia in a National Geographic Magazine that was given to me by my last headmaster (and Poet) in secondary school in Barbados (Mr. Gregory Castagne) where I was born and raised. So naturally, I was pleasantly surprised when on the night of Saturday April 19th 2008 - Mr. Yachue Chao – the International Secretary General of the Hmong World Congress (a body in exile); unexpectedly walked into our hotel room.

The foundation that had sponsored 15 of us indigenous activists/representatives from around the world (me included) - and had organised our hotel rooms, had placed 4 of us per room; and our Hmong visitor made 5. We only had 4 beds but he was quite content to sleep on the floor in the corner of our room. One of our roommates (who was not from the Caribbean) had met Yachue Chao in Geneva Switzerland in 2007 - and Yachue seemed excited to be in contact with his 'friend' in the hope that he would be assisted in bringing the incredibly shocking human rights emergency facing the Hmong people today - to the attention of the world.

Since 1976 582,000 Hmong people have been 'exterminated' by the armies of Laos and Vietnam, today in the jungles of Laos less than 7,000 Hmong are left alive; hiding and foraging in the jungles like wild animals. If they dare to clear any land to grow crops to feed themselves - military 'spotter aircraft' relay their location to the military High Command, who immediately order aircraft to drop bombs (both conventional and Chemical - another violation of the Geneva convention) on the 'target', while Laotian troops converge on the area from all sides to conduct 'mopping-up' exercises - which literally means to slaughter every Hmong Man, woman and child they find alive.

Al-Jazeera News Agency sent an English journalist recently to find these few survivors in the wilderness of Laos and document their wretched state, the 2 parts are on Youtube (under 'The lost tribe'); and if you have a heart and you dare to watch them -you will be reduced to tears just as I was. I simply could not believe that in this day and age something so heinous could be occurring in our world, this was not an 'armed conflict' - this was the government of a United Nations member country systematically and successfully implementing a policy of Genocide on an entire tribe of people for over 32 years...and no-one was doing a damned thing to stop it.

In the 1960's the American Central Intelligence Agency CIA) had asked the Hmong and other native 'tribal allies'- to help them "Rid Indo-China of the Communist threat", the Hmong and others tribes trusted the Americans and fought bravely; only to be abandoned by the Americans at the end of the Vietnam War. We all know who won that conflict, and the communist victors have been exacting a fanatical revenge on the Hmong and other former allies of the USA, this even though the tribes begged for peace over 32 years ago; and even though the vast majority of the Hmong who have been slaughtered to date knew nothing of the Vietnam war - with most victims actually being born AFTER that bloody conflict ended.

The 7,000 surviving Hmong in the jungles of Laos have almost given up the will to live, if they stay in the wilderness they are hunted down and shot on sight like animals; but if they surrender to the Laotian military - fathers and sons are forced to watch their wives, daughters and sisters raped and killed before their own eyes...before they too are tortured and murdered. Mr. Chao (who was born in 1967) himself remembers how as a boy of 7 he fled into the jungle with his entire tribe, in December 29th 1979 his father carried him on his back and lay on a bamboo raft - and almost his whole immediate family in a group of 100 refugees crossed the treacherous Mekong River in order to save their lives...an act which allowed them to emigrate to America as refugees of war.

Fast forward now to Wednesday April 23rd 2008, Mr. Chao comes to our hotel room in New York City - as usual, and chats with his 'friend'; in less than 5 minutes I notice Mr. Chao picking up his bags and heading for the door. I immediately go to him to enquire what was wrong, he informs me that his friend told him that he could not stay in our room because the Hotel told him no extra people were allowed in our rooms. I told him "Sure, but no-one comes to our rooms to inspect so how will they know, brother you can stay here atleast one more night!". Mr. Chao smiled and shook his head and said "I don't want to cause any trouble, I think it is better that I go"; and with that he left.

I felt bad in my heart to see him leave, and even worse to see how a fellow indigenous person could treat a brother who had suffered so much and carried the weight of 7,000 desperate souls on his shoulders with so little empathy. I told my roommate the Carib Chief of Dominica (and fellow Caribbean islander) what had just transpired, and how dismayed I was that after knowing all the misery in Chao's life, one of us had used the "it's not my decision, but..." excuse to send him away.

I have travelled quite a lot in my own (Western) Hemisphere - and I know for a fact that none of us in the Americas are suffering as severely as our Hmong brothers and sisters are in the wilds of Laos. I was able to put my own people's problems into context, and accept without hesitation that there are others in far greater need than ourselves. Perhaps I naively thought that everyone else would be willing to do likewise and we would all work in solidarity to find any and all ways that we could help save the lives of the remaining 7,000 Hmong in Laos.

The Carib Chief agreed with me when I said "We Caribbean Peoples seem to have more love in our hearts for our indigenous brothers and sisters around the world". We would never have turned our Hmong brother away under any circumstances. Despite this sad note I remain personally committed to saving as many of those 7,000 Laotian Hmong lives as I possibly can, even if that means I ignore the laws of men - in order to fullfil the laws of God.

*Damon Gerard Corrie
Eagle Clan Arawaks
Member of the Caribbean Caucus
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Seventh Session*