

[SOCIETY]

Crammed in Thai detention center, Laos Hmong live in limbo

All 158 Hmong at Nong Khai have been listed as refugees and offered resettlement in the US, Canada, Australia or Holland. But Thailand will not let them leave

AFP, NONG KHAI, THAILAND

Three days after giving birth, Mai Xiong returned with her infant daughter behind the bars of a Thai detention center where she lives crammed into two dank, dark rooms with 157 others.

Mai Xiong has committed no crime. Her confinement is the legacy of a conflict that ended long before she was born — the Vietnam War, when members of her Hmong ethnic group fought alongside covert US forces in Laos, incurring the wrath of the communist authorities.

The 22-year-old fled persecution in Laos, has been classified as a refugee by the UN, and has been offered a home in Australia.

But instead of preparing her baby for a new life, Mai Xiong has spent nearly two years detained in dismal conditions, as Thai authorities keen to maintain good relations with Laos refuse to let the group of Hmong leave.

"Inside here it is very packed and easy to get diseases and it is not comfortable for a little baby," she said.

Beside her, Bao Yang rocks her three-month-old daughter Siriam, unable to keep her eyes off the sleepy newborn swaddled in a pink towel.

"We would like to get out from here so that our children can have a good education and future," said Bao Yang. "We are really afraid to go back to Laos."

All 158 Hmong at Nong Khai have been listed as refugees and offered resettlement in the US, Canada, Australia or Holland, says Kitty McKinsey, regional information officer with UN refugee agency UNHCR.

"These people are not guilty of anything, they are not criminals, they have not committed any crimes, there is no reason for them to be locked up — they are simply refugees who are waiting to go to a third country," she says.

"It would simply be a matter of issuing them exit visas and they would be out of Thailand," she adds.

The Laos Hmong have long been a sticking point between Thailand and its

communist neighbor to the north.

Some members of the ethnic group fought alongside the US in the 1960s and 1970s when the Vietnam War spilled into Laos, a conflict often referred to as "the secret war."

When the war ended in 1975, Hmong fighters feared the victorious communist regime would hunt them down for working with the Americans. About 150,000 fled and found homes abroad, mostly in the US.

Others hid in the dense Laotian jungle where a handful of fighters have until recently fought a low-level insurgency which, their supporters say, has been met with brutal repression.

In a March 2007 report, human rights group Amnesty International said that Laotian forces were still launching deadly attacks on the jungle-dwelling Hmong — findings denied by the authorities.

For the group now incarcerated at Nong Khai, life has become increasingly difficult.

"We were unable to live in the jungle anymore. Since 2000, we couldn't plant anything, we had to eat roots," says Bli Shoua Her, 61, a Hmong leader.

So in October 2006 he led a group into Thailand, where they made it as far as Bangkok before being rounded up by the authorities and sent to Nong Khai.

The group was due to be shipped back across the border in January last year, but the men barricaded themselves in the cell and threatened to commit suicide, and as the UNHCR stepped in, the deportation was called off.

"It was a great loss of face for them," said one Western official following the situation, referring to the Thai authorities. "They are anxious not to repeat a loss of face."

Bli Shoua Her's group is just a handful of the thousands of Hmong who have crossed the border into Thailand.

The Thai government claims they are economic migrants seeking work, and up to 8,000 have been rounded up in the last few years and put in a detention camp in northern Petchabun Province, where the

UNHCR is refused access.

But while Thailand is slowly shipping back the Petchabun Hmong to Laos — to the horror of human rights groups who say that some may be genuinely in danger of persecution — the Nong Khai group remains in limbo.

Thai officials say the Hmong are illegal immigrants and so Thailand has no legal obligation to recognize their UNHCR refugee status.

In a written answer to questions, the foreign ministry's social division said Thailand had suspended any decision on the Nong Khai Hmong because of "the great sensitivities involved," and discussions were ongoing.

"We hope to reach a durable solution for this group that meets the concerns of all parties involved, including the country of origin," it said.

"To speculate at this time on a return to Laos or otherwise would not contribute to the solution."

Thailand has lately been cultivating Laos as a key regional ally, with the energy-hungry nation buying increasing amounts of electricity from Laos.

Thai officials have also in the past voiced concerns that if some Hmong are resettled, more might flood over the border in the hope of being sent to rich nations.

And so the 158 Hmong remain at the stuffy Nong Khai detention center, only allowed out of their dark prison rooms for two or three hours in the morning and up to one hour in the afternoon.

"We just sit inside here, we cannot see the sun or the moon," says Chong Lee Lor, a 44-year-old detainee.

When the few visitors arrive, children gather behind the bars at the bottom of a flight of stairs, most in dirty T-shirts and barefoot.

More than half of the detained Hmong are children, and 11 babies have been born since the group began their incarceration.

"This is just like a prison, I don't like it here," says 11-year-old Chalou, who has never been to school.



The Hmong incarcerated in a Nong Khai Province detention camp in Thailand, fled persecution at the hands of Laos communist authorities following the Vietnam War when members of their ethnic group fought alongside covert US forces.

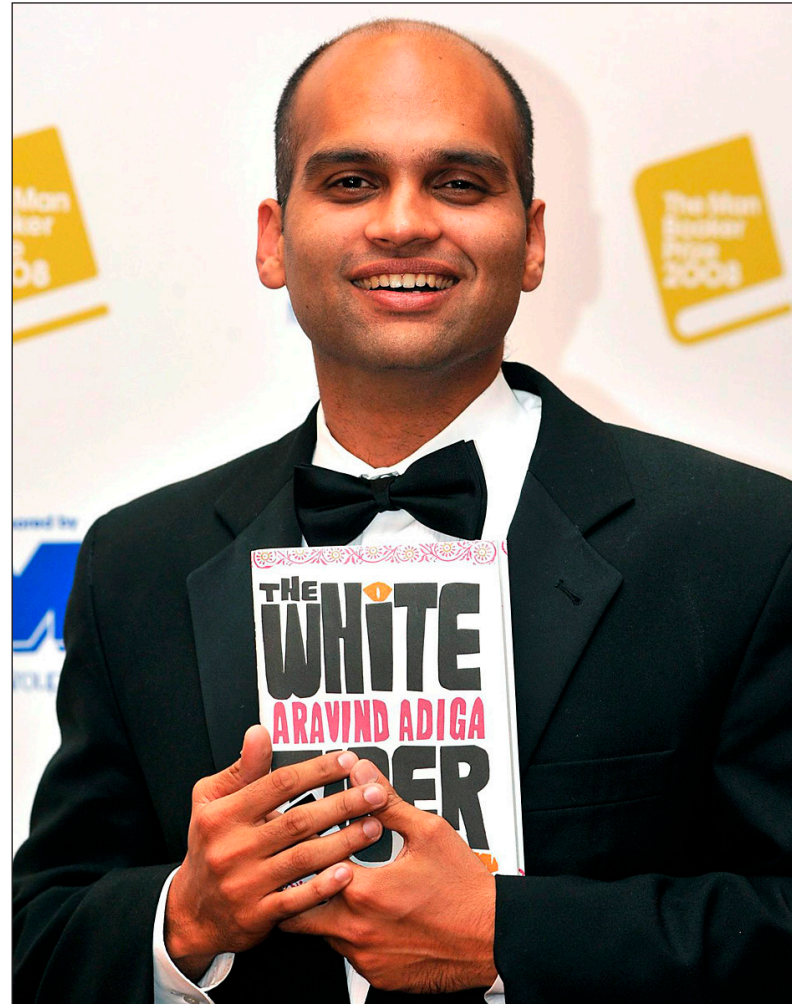
PHOTO: AFP

[BOOKS]

Aravind Adiga rides 'Tiger' to Booker win

The debut novelist scooped prize despite stiff competition from heavyweight writers such as Sebastian Barry and Amitav Ghosh

BY CHARLOTTE HIGGINS
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON



After an "emotionally draining" and closely fought final judging session, Aravind Adiga, one of the two debut novelists on the Man Booker shortlist, was on Tuesday night awarded the US\$87,000 prize for *The White Tiger*, a bracingly modern novel about the dark side of the new India.

Adiga, 33, is a surprise winner: at long odds he batted aside the claims of veteran writers on the shortlist such as Sebastian Barry and Amitav Ghosh.

He is only the third first-time novelist to win the Man Booker — after Arundhati Roy in 1997 and DBC Pierre in 2003 — and he is the second youngest after Ben Okri, who won in 1991 aged 32.

Michael Portillo, the chair of the judges, talked of a final panel meeting characterized by "passionate debate."

Adiga's book won by a "sufficient," but by no means unanimous, margin.

"It was pretty close," said Portillo, and in the last stages it was down to a battle between *The White Tiger* and one other book.

The White Tiger takes a sharp and unblinking look at the reality of India's economic miracle. Its antihero and narrator, Balram Halwai, is a cocksure, uneducated young man, the son of an impoverished rickshaw driver. By lying, betraying and using his sharp intelligence, Balram makes his ascent into the heady heights of Bangalore's big business.

Portillo said that Adiga "undertakes an extraordinary task — he gains and holds the attention of the reader for a hero who is a thoroughgoing villain."

He also praised the work's attention to "important social issues — the division between rich and poor, and issues on a global scale. And it is extremely readable." The main criterion for the prize, he said, was: "Does this book knock my socks off? And this did."

'THE MOST COMPULSIVE BOOKER WINNER FOR YEARS'

The feeling among the judges, Portillo said, was that "here was a book on the cutting edge, dealing with a different aspect of India, unfamiliar perhaps to many readers.

"What set it apart was its originality. The feeling was that this was new territory."

Portillo likened the novel to *Macbeth*. "It is about ambition realized through murder," he said, "but with a delicious twist. Whereas Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are driven mad by their crime, the hero of this book is only driven mad by the fact that he hesitated and might not have committed his crime."

The novel takes the form of seven letters addressed by Balram to the Chinese premier on the eve of a state visit, and its tone is almost Dickensian, as the unpleasant reality of contemporary Indian society is revealed via mordant sketches of characters from millionaires in their air-conditioned tower blocks to the unfortunates who are trapped in poverty and who live literally below them, catering to their every whim.

Beryl Bainbridge, reviewing the book for the *Guardian*, called it "a witty parable of India's changing society."

Adiga was born in Chennai in 1974 and was raised partly in Australia. Having studied at Columbia and Oxford universities, he became a journalist, and has written for *Time* magazine and many British newspapers. He lives in Mumbai.

Jonathan Ruppin, of the London book shop Foyles, said: "This is a refreshingly unromanticized portrait of India, showing that a vast gulf between rich and poor is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. It's a very exciting winner for bookshops as it's so commercial. It could prove as popular as *The Life of Pi*, the Booker's best-selling winner."

Janine Cook, fiction buyer at rival Waterstones, said: "Some of the biggest-selling Booker victors have come from India, and this is one of the most compulsive Booker winners for years. It's an amazing debut that has already done incredibly well for us, but will now move to a higher level altogether."

The other authors on the shortlist were Philip Hensher for *The Northern Clemency*, Steve Toltz for *A Fraction of the Whole*, and Linda Grant for *The Clothes on Their Backs*.

The other judges were Alex Clark, critic and editor of *Granta*; the novelist Louise Doughty; James Heneage, the founder of Ottakar's bookshops; and Hardeep Singh Kohli, the broadcaster.

Last year's winner of the Booker prize was *The Gathering* by Anne Enright, which has now sold more than half a million copies in UK, Ireland and the Commonwealth.



Indian writer Aravind Adiga poses with his book *The White Tiger* after winning the 2008 Booker Prize in London, on Tuesday.

PHOTO: AFP