

# Puzzle of Laotian Refugee Deaths Is Probed in S.D.

## Federal Investigator Checks 3 Fatalities Here in Mystery Ailment Among Tribesmen

By KEAY DAVIDSON, *Times Staff Writer*

A federal health official has arrived in San Diego to look into the mysterious deaths of at least three Indo-chinese refugees.

Dr. Roy Baron, a physician-epidemiologist from the U.S. Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, is interviewing families of the deceased in an effort to determine what caused the victims to start gasping for breath, then die.

Numerous theories have been offered to explain the deaths. But Baron told county health director Dr. Donald G. Ramras that "so far every theory they've been working on didn't pan out," Ramras said Friday.

Nationwide, at least 35 Indochinese refugees — all but one of them men — have died of the strange ailment, which particularly afflicts members of the Hmong tribe that has more than 300 families in San Diego County. The nation has about 35,000 Hmong refugees, dispossessed from their Laotian mountain homeland.

Some researchers say the deaths appear to be related to a heart malfunction.

But the Hmongs say such deaths never occurred back in the mountains of Laos. Many blame the deaths on

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delayed effects of gas attacks by North Vietnamese during the war years.

"The deaths occur at night when they're sleeping," Ramras said. "Some people have found them (the victims) gasping for breath and having difficulty breathing, and then they die.

"No one has been able to find out what the cause is," Ramras continued. He said the CDC is "trying to collect as much data as possible . . . to find out why they're dying and, hopefully, if you can find out why they're dying, then maybe we can prevent others from dying."

Baron, who arrived in San Diego Wednesday, may stay "about a week or so, but that's a little up in the air," Ramras said.

### **Deaths Fit Pattern**

"He told me he came to San Diego because over about the last two years there were three deaths that occurred in our county that fit the criteria," Ramras said.

"In addition there was a death in Los Angeles and the (victim's) family is now settled here in San Diego, he believes. So he's trying to interview that family, too."

Baron was unavailable for comment.

At least four unexplained Hmong deaths have occurred in Orange County. "We are still baffled," a medical investigator who had studied those cases for almost six months told *The Times* in July.

The first known case in the country occurred in 1977 when a healthy young man died in his sleep.