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In Northern Wisconsin, Death of Immigrant Fuels Tensions

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White Man Detained in Slaying of Hmong
Hunter in Wildlife Area; Incident Follows
2004 Killings of Six

By Robert Gutsche Jr.
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PESHTIGO, Wis. -- This part of America -- Wisconsin's Northwoods -- is known for huge logging trucks cramming narrow highways, thick blankets of evergreens that stretch for miles and markers lining the roads' bends, advertising opportunities to harvest your own maple syrup or to buy fresh-cut wood and deer corn.

But although this area of the state stretching from Michigan to the Twin Cities has been a place of recreation for generations of Midwesterners, it has also become known in recent years for something more troubling: incidents of prejudice toward racial minorities, some of them recent immigrants. Some here now wonder whether a recent slaying will turn out to be another example.

On Jan. 6, Cha Vang, 30, a Hmong factory worker from Green Bay who had gone missing from his weekend hunting party, was found stabbed to death and partially hidden in the Peshtigo Harbor Wildlife Area, part of 5,000 acres of hunting land.

James A. Nichols, 28, of Peshtigo, who is white, is in custody for possessing a firearm as a felon and as a person of interest in the death. Nichols, a convicted burglar, has not been charged in the killing, although police say he and Vang met accidentally in the woods and were involved in an altercation there.

"At this point, all I can say is it was an accidental meeting," Marinette County Sheriff James Kanikula told reporters days after Vang's body was found. Authorities have since been tight-lipped.

The incident follows the 2004 slayings of six white men by a Hmong hunter in Rice Lake, Wis. In that case, Chai Soua Vang, of St. Paul, Minn., shot eight hunters during an altercation over hunting on specific land.

Chai Soua Vang has been sentenced to life in prison. During his trial, he said the group of white hunters shouted racial slurs and started shooting at him before he shot back. The surviving hunters disputed that assertion.

Combined, the slayings have fueled continuing racial tensions here, which included incidents of violence against Native Americans in the late 1980s during clashes over hunting rights.

"People are protective of their land and their hunting -- that's what it is all about," said Randy Jarvis, a lifelong resident and electrician in the Peshtigo area. "Overseas, they do things differently than they do here, and many people here feel they are being invaded. But it's not like people stay awake at night to pick on the Hmong."

But there are concerns that the tensions over hunting will only grow as the influx of Hmong, an ethnic group from Southeast Asia, continues. Many Hmong men hunt, a skill and tradition carried over from their time in the rugged environments of refugee camps in Thailand and Laos.

"This is what a lot of the men are used to doing, and it is something that a lot of people here don't understand," said Xiongpaoo Lee, resource and youth coordinator for the Hmong Cultural Center in St. Paul, Minn., where 15,000 Hmong have immigrated since 2003. "No one here ever had to hunt like these people did before."

Tens of thousands of Hmong have evacuated the last of the refugee camps and, with the help of federal and state governments, have moved to pockets throughout the United States, including northern Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The small numbers of Hmong in much of Wisconsin's Northwoods -- about 6,000 in northeastern parts -- do not mix very much with the white majority, many of whom are farmers and longtime residents.

"This little social interaction with different people allows the breeding of stereotypes," said James Danky, a professor of race and media at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. "There is no missing the white dominance of the public space there, and that's going to make it hard for them all to get along."

Since the late 1970s, at the beginning of a 25-year court battle over treaty agreements that reserve Native Americans' rights to spearfish while banning others from that activity, racial tensions have sometimes flared into violence.

Last month in Minocqua, about 140 miles northwest of Peshtigo, Lakeland Union High School was locked down after threats were written in graffiti at the school and fights broke out between white and Native American students. During the lockdown, the gun of a sheriff's deputy accidentally went off. No one was injured.

Bob Kovar, a retired cranberry grower, left his job to head his own initiative to talk with middle and high school students in the Minocqua area about their racial views.

"At first, I didn't think my community was racist -- then I saw when I had kids in the schools that this community is pretty open about its prejudice views and has had generations of violence over that," Kovar said.

His program focuses on introducing tribal and white students to each other's cultures -- many

characteristics of which they find are similar -- and educating them on diversity.

On Tuesday, Kovar plans to hold a town hall meeting with students and families from the area schools to discuss racial tensions.

But he has heard from many white parents that they will not attend because the meeting will be held on the reservation that feeds Indian students to Lakeland Union, the one high school in the region.

Back in northeastern Wisconsin, in Crivitz, not far from where the recent Hmong slaying occurred, Frank Harth said it may take years for some in the area to recognize the shifting of the targets of prejudice from Indians to the Hmong.

"What has to happen is people need to understand and accept the differences between people," said Harth, who owns a hunting shop. "Otherwise, people are going to be out there hunting, come across each other, and things will continue to escalate."

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