



General Assembly

Distr.: General
7 September 2012

English only

Human Rights Council

Twenty-first session

Agenda items 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Agenda items 5

Human rights bodies and mechanisms

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[24 August 2012]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Religious persecution of the indigenous groups in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam: Hmong and Khmer Krom

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam is a multi ethnic country with 54 recognised ethnic groups. However, these ethnic groups are basically the indigenous groups which the Vietnamese government has officially classified as 'ethnic groups'. The Kinh (Viet) constitutes as the largest group (86%) while the remaining 14% of the population is made up of ethnic minorities, among them are the Khmer Krom (1.4%) and the Hmong (1%). Over the years, the ethnic minorities of Vietnam have braced widespread human rights violations at the hands of the socialist government. They are often subjected to restriction on freedom of speech, religion and movement. The government of Vietnam has also systematically initiated different assimilation programmes that are leading to a slow destruction of their culture. Moreover, by classifying these indigenous minorities as 'ethnic minorities', the government has been depriving these indigenous groups their right to self determination.

For the 21st session of the UNHRC, the Society for Threatened Peoples would particularly like to highlight the current and grim situation of the indigenous groups Khmer Krom and the Hmong, who among other minority groups face blatant discrimination and recurrent persecution.

The Hmong are the hill tribes from North and Northwest Vietnam, with an estimated population of 1 million, who mainly practice Christianity. In the Vietnamese government's effort to stem the growing number of Christians, the Hmong, like the Montagnards from the Central Highlands of Vietnam, are being persecuted for practicing their faith since their house churches are considered illegal. In March 2012, a Vietnamese court sentenced 8 Hmong tribesmen to two and a half years of imprisonment, plus two years under house arrest, on charges of 'disturbing security', in connection to the ethnic violence in May 2011. In May last year, the Vietnamese army unleashed a wave of repression against the Christians Hmong in the Northwest provinces of Vietnam. It all began with an incident on 30th April near Huoi Khon (Dien Bien Province) when about 8,500 Hmong gathered to press the government to allow religious freedom and stop confiscation of their land. The Vietnamese army violently attacked the gathering, beheading pastors that left at least 49 dead and hundreds arrested or disappeared.

According to a report published by Boat People SOS in January 2012, the Central Bureau of Religious Affairs of Vietnam calls for 'resolutely overcom(ing) the abnormal and spontaneous growth of Protestantism' and 'Propagandiz(ing) and mobilz(ing) the people to safeguard and promote good traditional beliefs of the ethnic minorities.' The local governments in the northern provinces of Son La, Lai Chau and Dien Bien have successfully implementing this national policy through crackdown on Hmong house churches, arresting and detaining men from Hmong communities, prohibiting Christian clergy from visiting Hmong villages, confiscating land and destroying homes in Hmong villages. In early 2011, the government sent troops to demolish the entire Hmong village of Xa Na Khua. This was one of the incidents that precipitated into the events of May 2011. During the following months, scores of Hmong, many of whom participated in the demonstration, fearing the brutality of the government have fled to the neighbouring countries, eventually ended up in refugee camps in Thailand. Their dreadful and gut-wrenching accounts from back home in Vietnam are the only source of information on the factual news from these provinces that the state run media rarely acknowledges.

The Khmer Krom from the Mekong delta in southern Vietnam faces a similar fate as that of the Hmong except that the Khmer Krom follow Theravada Buddhism. The Vietnamese government recognises six religions: Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Cao

Dai and the Hoa Hao Buddhists and also 29 'religious organisations' including Theravada Buddhism. The government controlled Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) presides over all the Buddhist organisations that includes activities like overseeing the pagodas, Buddhist education institutes, publications, donations to pagodas, language training programmes and temple expansion. Hence, the Khmer Theravada Buddhists have to seek permission prior to conducting many religious activities. In addition, the government authorities in the Mekong delta prohibit reading or holding Khmer language books and publication in pagodas. The monks are required to study Ho Chi Min's biography and teach Vietnamese history. Violations of these restrictions are considered threats to national unity and security that often results in defrocking of the accused monks.

On July 28th, 2012, the Buddhist monk officer of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha issued the defrocking of a Khmer-Krom monk, Venerable Thach Thuol, who is currently ordaining at the Tra Set Temple in Soc Tran province. The Khmer-krom monk is accused of violating the VBS rules. In the past, Vietnamese authority has accused the Venerable Thach Thuol of contacting the Khmer-Krom living abroad and reporting human rights violations committed by the Vietnamese Government. For the Khmer Krom in Vietnam emphasis on preserving their identity, culture and tradition is considered through Theravada Buddhism and by imposing such restrictions, the government continues to oppress the Khmer Krom living in Southern Vietnam.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to urge the Government of Vietnam to:

- End arbitrary arrest and detention of people for peaceful expression of their religious views;
 - Authorize and legalise Christian house churches in the Central Highlands, Northern provinces and North western provinces of Vietnam;
 - Stop confiscating land belonging to the impoverished ethnic minorities of Vietnam;
 - Stop the persecution of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam including H'mong People and Khmer Krom;
 - Stop defrocking the Theravada Buddhist monks;
 - Recognise the Khmer Krom pagodas that refuse to be affiliated with the officially authorised Vietnam Buddhist Sangha.
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