

**Seventh Session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
Item 7 Half-day discussion on indigenous languages
Collective Statement by the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation and the
Montagnard Foundation**

By Charlie Thach

Madame Chair,

There is no doubt that our indigenous Khmer Krom people are distinctively different from the ethnic Vietnamese people. Our lives are guided by the moral teaching of Theravada Buddhism, ones that are passed on by our peaceful monks. Our traditional livelihood is sustained by working with and in harmony with our rich and fertile environment. Our Khmer language, both written and spoken tells you of our strong and historic ties to the motherland, Kampuchea Krom.

The Khmer Krom people have already in place a system to educate and pass on our Khmer language. Our Khmer pagodas are our traditional educational institution. It is there where we teach our children our basic language and literature. For over 4 decades now, the communist Vietnamese government have introduced policies to eliminate our languages by prohibiting our Khmer teachers from teaching Khmer.

The current public institutions run by the authorities often do not have Khmer classes or Khmer teachers and in the rare cases that it does, it only allows for appropriately 2 hours per week. It is not an indigenous friendly system or workable to help pass on our language. It is geared toward extinction not empowerment. In addition, there is no promotion or support of higher learning of Khmer-Krom and Dagar language studies, for the few college and university Khmer-Krom students.

High rates of Khmer Krom people migration into urban areas and deliberate renaming of Khmer-Krom's cities, towns, and villages has meant that the usage of Khmer-Krom language in our homeland has been completely marginalized or eliminated.

Madam Chair and Forum Members;

The Khmer Krom and the Degar people has been categorised as "uncivilised" or "backward" however we have do have a unique way of living and a distinctively different language to Vietnam. And very like the Vietnamese themselves, we are proud to call ourselves Khmer Krom.

We recommend that:

- Instead of having more schools, we ask that UNESCO, UNICEP and UNDP work with indigenous peoples and the Vietnamese government to build on existing traditional forms of education. For example Khmer Krom children from levels 1 to 5 should be encouraged to attend their traditional form of education via our Khmer temples. We even propose an egalitarian model for all cultures today. That a class installs two teachers, one that teaches Khmer and the other Vietnamese so that it is a fair system for all.

- Building on the Khmer pagoda system, once students complete year 5, an indigenous friendly system is in place to allow them to bridge into mainstream higher education.
- Ask that 50% of class instructions are taught in Khmer or create a Khmer immersion school. We have seen many models such as Aha Punana Leo in Hawaii that allow for students to excel in their own culture and do ell in the mainstream society rooted in own indigenous culture.
- Khmer-Krom language studies are implemented at all levels of the public educational system especially at the grass root level.
- Help to develop and distribute the Khmer Unicode to student computers in boarding schools and public institution as well as temples.
- All official documents and place of Khmer-Krom's or Montagnard's residence must have Khmer-Krom and Degar language alongside the Vietnamese language in acknowledge and preservation of Khmer Krom identity.
- The State should offer community development projects that will facilitate easy access to the Khmer language.
- The distribution of all important relevant international human rights instruments from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) to Khmer schools and community centers. If the government is unable to print then copies from the OHCHR and the KKF should be allowed with no punishment as such is the case with harassment and imprisonment
- At all Khmer-Krom and Montagnard institutions and cultural and religious ceremonies, the Khmer language is an accepted language.
- Khmer-Krom and Montagnard towns and villages must be restored to their original names.
- Urge UNESCO and UNICEF to help provide text books, DVDs and CD roms in our Khmer language so our Khmer Krom children can read books in their language.
- Urge UNDP and UNESCO to help open computer labs so our children can access to computer to learn how to use computers to read and write their language on computers.
- In areas where there are heavily populated Khmer Krom or Degar people, Vietnam needs a policy that allows official use of our language.

Madame Chair and Forum Members:

Language is the essential element of our indigenous cultural identity, and without it the world would see Khmer Krom only as Vietnamese in the Mekong delta. I would like to end with our Khmer proverb, "Pia Sa Bat, Jiet Rol Ley!" and in English means: "Language is lost, the Race is Eliminated!"

Thank You