

**Statement by
The Delegation of Thailand
6th Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**

Madame Chairperson,

As this is the first time that my delegation is taking the floor, we wish to congratulate you upon your re-election as the Chair of this session. My delegation would also like to extend our well-wishes to all distinguished members of the Permanent Forum. ~~as well as participants~~ *panel participants*

My delegation has listened attentively to statements made throughout this session. We are convinced that constructive and sincere dialogue should be the guiding principle for the advancement of the cause that underpins the work of this Permanent Forum.

With this constructive spirit in mind that my delegation would like to respond to the joint statement made by the Hmong Lao Human Rights Council with regards to Hmong Laos in Thailand, who entered the country illegally.

Madame Chairperson,

Thailand has had a long track record of humanitarian tradition. As a result of multiple push and pull factors, millions of people had left their homelands and passed through Thailand in past decades. More than a hundred thousands still remain in our country today awaiting durable solutions while over one million people have illegally entered Thailand for economic reasons. This massive amount of people is a huge burden for a developing country with limited resources like Thailand.

And because the Hmong Laos mentioned in the statement illegally entered Thailand, the Thai authorities have to uphold the rule of law. But we have clearly shown that we have done so with utmost concern to the humanitarian principle. The Thai authorities have been working closely with all parties concerned, especially through the bilateral channel with the country of origin, to find a durable and comprehensive solution to this problem. All parties concerned have been kept closely informed about the developments.

Madame Chairperson,

Speaking about constructive spirit, my delegation would like to register our serious concern about a statement coming from one organization has utterly failed to adhere to the guiding spirit of this Forum. And here, we are speaking of a statement made by Mr. Matthew McDaniel from the Akha Heritage Foundation, which contained misleading allegations about Thailand.

It is important for my delegation to set the record straight in response to such an untrue statement that stretched the limit of imagination and could not be further from the truth.

Madame Chairperson,

Thailand has always been a land of diversity by virtue of being at a geographical crossroads. The Thai society is an open society within which people of all backgrounds have long lived side by side in harmony. All Thai citizens regardless of their backgrounds are entitled to the same rights and responsibilities without distinction.

With regards to allegations made by the Akha Heritage Foundation about the seizure of land in the Northern Thailand, my delegation would like to inform the Forum of the following fact.

Mae Fah Luang District, Chiang Rai Province, in Northern Thailand is inhabited by various hill tribes, the Akha being one of them. Traditionally, these people engaged in unsustainable practices, such as slash-and-burn farming, which resulted in massive deforestation. Their engagement in opium cultivation had also led to many serious problems relating to narcotic drugs within their own communities and beyond.

Against this backdrop, royally-sponsored development projects have been initiated in the said area with the aim to achieve comprehensive sustainable development for these communities. This goal has been consistently pursued through a variety of measures, which include reforestation, environmental protection and conservation, alleviation of rural poverty, cultural conservation and preservation of heritage, and improvement of the quality of life of villagers by providing education, health care services, basic infrastructure, creating alternative employment opportunities and providing vocational training.

Local participation and ownership are at the heart of these projects. Prior to initiating these projects, the Thai authorities concerned had consulted widely with the community leaders and villagers, and explained to them about the projects. The people in the area, therefore, have full understanding and have worked closely with the Government agencies concerned. Some local Akha villagers even donated parts of their own lands for these projects while many have been participating actively in them from the start. Why? Because they believe that these initiatives would benefit them and feel that they are a part of the endeavour from the start.

So far, these projects have proven to be immensely successful in raising the well-being of the local villagers and discouraging them from being involved in narcotic drugs. These royally-sponsored projects have been recognized worldwide as a model for sustainable alternative development and community empowerment, which successfully builds on the strength of local wisdoms and traditions.

In closing, my delegation would like to stress once again the importance of constructive dialogue as the way to advance the cause of this body. Ill-intentioned propaganda driven by personal agenda, like the one made by the so-called Akha Heritage Foundation, should not be allowed to abuse the spirit that has led to the creation of this Permanent Forum.

Thank you.