



REMARKS TO THE UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Geneva - July, 1995

WGIP 95 / SEA. VNM / 1

Presented By Mr. Kok Ksor
Executive Director,
MONTAGNARD FOUNDATION, INC.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my indigenous brothers and sisters, and members of the Working Group:

Two years ago, I stood here and introduced you to the indigenous people of Vietnam's Central Highlands...the Montagnards. It was a proud moment for me and my people. It was the first time a Montagnard had raised his voice in the presence of the world community. It was a chance to remind people that, in the words of Rigoberta Menchu, "we are here...we live."

Back then, I spoke of the Montagnard "starvation," where a people hungered for not only the basics of life, but for justice and the right to preserve some vestiges of their ancient culture. I talked of human rights, cultural genocide, and extinction. It was not a bright future that I painted for you then.

Much has happened since our meeting in 1993. The Central Highlands of Vietnam have been opened to foreign visitors and investors. The United States embargo has been lifted...Coke and Pepsi now fight the cola wars in Vietnam. Last April marked the 20th anniversary of the fall of Saigon. The United Nations has celebrated its 50th birthday. And just days ago, the United States normalized diplomatic relations with Vietnam.

All the while, however, the Montagnards have remained invisible, struggling to survive in a land that is no longer their own. Suffering...hanging on...doing what it takes to persevere. We are like so many of you in this audience: mis-treated, mis-understood and mis-taken for something less than human.

This year, instead of sharing my personal vision with you, I will respectfully offer up the testimonies of Montagnard voices from within Vietnam itself; afterall, it's their lives, not mine, that must endure the hardships and the hopelessness. Here now are some of the painful realities witnessed by my brothers in Montagnard country:

About land: "The government has taken the good land and forced the Montagnards to move their villages. After Montagnards were enslaved to develop collective farms, they were then removed so that ethnic Vietnamese could inhabit the area."

About religion: "Montagnard churches have been closed, preachers arrested and prohibited from worshipping God."

About education: "Most of the Montagnard schools have been closed. Those children that do receive schooling are destined to fail because they are not treated equally to their Vietnamese counterparts. And most students do not have the money to continue their studies."

Besides these tragic conditions within Vietnam, there are also deplorable abuses affecting the Montagnards outside of Vietnam dealing with family reunification. Efforts to reunite brothers and sisters, parents and children, husbands and wives....with their families now living abroad continue to face roadblocks by officials inside Vietnam. Two tactics are used to deny our people this basic right: 1) Montagnard families are not informed of their ODP (Orderly Departure Program) interview date and therefore miss their mandatory meeting, and 2) exit visas for eligible Montagnard families are not being issued because of the political affiliation of their U.S. relatives.

We should not be punished because of the legacy of the Vietnam War. To intentionally deny a family's reunification goes against all moral conscience.

My friends, I've kept my remarks brief, because I know there is much work to do. But before I sit back down, I must implore you to help us. I don't pretend to know all the answers or solutions; but I do know that we must begin a process within Vietnam of investigation, of observation and analysis. To me, only someone from the outside stands a chance of discovering the objective truth, thus working towards recommendations for the future. With that in mind, I truly look forward to our time together.

In conclusion, I'd like to leave you with these words from a French missionary who expressed this thought 45 years ago while living in the Highlands of Vietnam:

"For everyone there is a magnificent page of history to be written here in a communion of ideals and with intelligent cooperation. It is a matter, no more, no less, at a time both particularly favorable and critical in its destiny, of saving a beautiful and engaging people: of saving it both body and soul."

I pray it is not too late.



Mr. Kok Ksor is the Founder and Executive Director of the **MONTAGNARD FOUNDATION**. He is a member of the Jarai tribal group, and has resided in the United States since 1975. The **MONTAGNARD FOUNDATION** is dedicated to the preservation of the heritage, continuity and dignity of the Montagnard people and culture, now and into the future.