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July 20, 1993

Ladies & Gentlemen, Diplomats, & Friends:

It is a great encouragement to me to be in the midst of people who have a concern and a commitment for the rights of indigenous people around the world. I would like to express my personal appreciation to the indigenous people's working group for their efforts and accomplishment in putting together the Universal Declaration of Indigenous People's Rights. Your efforts have provided a foundation and a point of focus for defining the rights of all indigenous peoples.

During these next few critical minutes, I ask you to listen carefully to the message that I bring. The Montagnard people are on the verge of extinction. I am here to be a voice for the Montagnard people at a time when a page in history is about to be turned. As we are about to enter the 21st century it is very possible, and I fear probable, that the world will find itself with one less race with which to share this planet. The pages of history which record the past of the Montagnard people will become a closed chapter, for even as I speak, we face extinction.

The Montagnard are the people indigenous to the mountainous area of south Indochina, which now goes by the name Vietnam. We are also known as "Dega" which means sons of the mountains, a name coined by those Montagnards who continue to fight in the forests of their land to preserve their culture.

For centuries, the Montagnard world has revolved around small villages, where resources were shared and kinship was important. We have co-existed in harmony with our natural surroundings. Over 40 distinct tribal groups have well defined leadership, systems of education and justice which have respected the rights and dignity of the individual. Each tribe developed its own unique and recognizable forms of art, architecture, music and dance. For centuries, their traditions have preserved a way of life which was rewarding and satisfying. On the plateaus of south Indochina's highlands, we have lived for two thousand years, free to dwell under the benevolent eye of God. But during the last 200 years our land was turned into a target for imperialistic invasion. Now oppressed, and for the most part silenced, the indigenous people from this corner of the world are unable to demand or defend their right to freedom and their

right to live as a distinct people in their own land. There is a silent cry from south Indochina. A cry that has been muffled by those who suppress and oppress us as a people. I stand here today committed to being a voice for the voiceless, to speak for those who are forbidden to speak; to stand for the rights of those whose rights have been stripped and whose future is grim.

Many who have led the cause for freedom and identity for the Montagnard people both in Vietnam and Cambodia were killed during invasive wars and the aftermath of oppression and persecution that followed them. I am confident that my life was miraculously spared so that those who are unable to speak for themselves, unable to cry out against the injustices they have suffered, and unable to defend their right to their lands, their families, and their freedoms could be heard. Montagnards who are living in their homeland are not allowed to leave their country to address you today. Their voices remain forcibly silent, their borders closed and impenetrable. I am speaking for them in hopes that mankind will listen and take action to end the persecution, oppression and forced starvation that will blot the Montagnard people from the pages of history.

The Montagnard population has dwindled to less than one million. Wars and oppression have taken a deadly toll. From 1945 to 1975 alone a million Montagnard men, women and children were lost while 85% of our villages were destroyed or abandoned. Impossible as it may sound, those terrible losses pale in comparison to the devastation we have endured since 1975. The demise of the Montagnard culture is at hand. A grave darkness looms on our horizon. We have been the target of the Communist government's determination to suppress, dilute, and finally erase all vestige of distinction of the Montagnard as a separate people. Montagnard people living in their homeland are oppressed by the horror of what the Communist government terms "ethnic cleansing." This policy and practice is designed to destroy the identity of the Montagnard by depriving the minorities of their basic right to ethnic autonomy. Our languages are forbidden in schools; our books and our traditional clothing replaced and our women are forced into mixed marriages.

We are starving; starving for basic freedoms. Our political and religious activities have been outlawed. We are forbidden to own land that has been ours for centuries. Millions of lowland Vietnamese have been resettled into the Highlands, stripping us of our homes and forcing us deeper into the jungles to survive. Our properties have been stolen and many once proud and free Montagnards have been forced into slave-like labor to support those who have taken our lands and our freedoms.

We are starving; starving for justice. With our traditions and customs being systematically abolished, our legal rights cease to exist under Communist domination. All Montagnard tribal

law documents have been destroyed. Those who have dared to dispute the Communist decrees have been imprisoned in concentration camps, many of whom died. Voices of protest have been silenced, and sometimes never heard from again.

We are starving; starving for intervention. Concerned individuals and organizations like you want to help save the Montagnard by providing badly needed medical supplies, educational materials, and other forms of humanitarian aid. But the highlands remain closed to the outside world, casting a cloak of silence on the systematic destruction of our people. The crimes committed against the Montagnard people go on in secret. Humanity's collective eye has been blinded to a different kind of holocaust. This holocaust is without gas chambers, mass graves and killing fields, but is just as effective. The life's blood is being drained from Indochina's indigenous people through intolerance, deceit, ignorance, and violence.

I am a proud member of the Jarai tribe. My brothers and sisters are Rhade, Bahnar, Koho, and Sedang. Our tribes have many names, but we are all Montagnards. The Communist regime in south Indochina is committed to the systematic destruction of the Montagnard as a distinct people and they are succeeding. Having cloaked their activities with walls of silence they are succeeding with virtually no outcry from the outside world.

For hundreds of years, my people have inhabited the mountainous area of south Indochina, and now I cannot return to the land of my birth. I am still regarded as an enemy of the Communist regime because I cry out for the right of my people to be what they should be...a Montagnard.

Here in Geneva, a world away from the highland towns of Pleiku, Kontum and Bnmethuot, I beseech you on behalf of those whose cry has been silenced to help us end the cultural genocide that has pushed the indigenous Montagnard people of south Indochina to the virtual brink of extinction. Alone, we are doomed. Our leaders are either in prison, hiding in fear or rotting in unmarked graves. We are not free to live in our own land. We are poised at the threshold of extinction and without help the Montagnard people will become swallowed up by their oppressors and disappear as a distinct people forever.

I ask you to listen intently to the silence until you too can hear the cries for help from the voiceless Montagnard people. Help us to reach into the conscience and heart of mankind. Join with us to insure the survival of the Montagnard people and return to them the land and freedom that once was theirs.

Thank you very much.