

13th session/ Regional meetings of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

Theme: *“The impact of COVID-19 on the rights of indigenous peoples under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”*

Regional Meeting: Pacific and Asia: Tuesday 1 December from 9:00 AM – 11:00 AM (Geneva time)

Organization: Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF)

Presenter: Sereivuth Prak

On behalf of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF), I would like to bring up the challenges that our Khmer-Krom, the indigenous peoples of the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam, who have been facing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the indigenous peoples living in the Mekong Delta, most of our Khmer-Krom are farmers and the poorest people in the region. During the pandemic, these Khmer Kroms have not received any public or financial assistance from the Vietnamese government.

Fortunately, none of our people have died from the COVID-19. Most of them live in the rural areas and have minimal access to the public health facility, especially receiving a free COVID-19 test. When these Khmer Kroms experience the COVID-19 symptoms, they have to use our traditional herbal medicine, that has been used to cure cold and flu, to treat it (COVID-19) very effectively. It is the main reason why none of our people lost their life due to this Corona virus yet.

As the farmers in the Mekong Delta, our people's livelihood is mainly based on rice farming. Their lands are their only lives. On May 8, 2020, the Vietnamese Communist local authority of Tra Phot commune, Phu My village, Giang Thanh district, Kien Giang province sent hundreds of their police forces, armed with guns, electric batons, and tear gas, to brutally beat up 46 Khmer-Krom farmers who were farming on their confiscated farmlands.

On June 7, 2020, Mr. Huynh Van Dep was arrested and detained for three months. The Vietnamese authority will bring him and three other Khmer-Krom farmers (Mr. Tien Dam, Mr. Tien Nam, and Mrs. Thi Pich) to face court with the alleged crime of **“Resisting a law enforcement officer in performance of his/her official duties.”**

During the pandemic, some of the Khmer-Krom workers had been laid-off because they are ethnically Khmer-Krom. For example, the company named “San Lim Furniture” at Bau Xeo Industrial Park in Dong Nai province laid off about one thousand workers in April 2020. Most of them were Khmer-Kroms. These laid off Khmer-Krom workers had not received any unemployment benefits.

In July 2020, San Lim Furniture started hiring workers, but the hiring managers refused to rehire their former Khmer-Krom workers. When our KKF organization received this information from the Khmer-Krom workers in Vietnam on July 25, 2020, I wrote a letter to the officials in charge

of this company to request them to stop implementing their discrimination in the hiring process. Fortunately, in the past couple weeks, we received the good news that some of the Khmer-Krom workers have been re-hired.

Vietnam has been criticized for using the cybersecurity law to silence the activists for speaking up on social media. The new decree, **Decree No. 15/2020/ND-CP in effect as of 15 April 2020**, is being used to fine whoever sharing information that the government considers as “false information and confusing social networks.” In June 2020, the Vietnamese authority of Tra Vinh province fined two Khmer-Krom youths, Thach Cuong and To Hoang Chuong, about \$300 for sharing “false information.”

In this regard, I would like to provide the following recommendations to ensure the indigenous Khmer-Krom peoples do not face more challenges, besides coping with the pandemic:

- Urge Vietnam to drop the charge against Mr. Huynh Van Dep, Mr. Tien Dam, Mr. Tien Nam, and Mrs. Thi Pich. They are just peasants and want to farm on their cultivated lands that are being confiscated by the Vietnamese local authority of Kien Giang province. The Khmer-Krom farmers need their farmlands to be returned, in order for them to start planting. They have been facing with the poverty and been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic without any help from the Vietnamese government.
- Urge Vietnam to implement the policies to prevent discrimination in the hiring process against the indigenous peoples so that a company like San Lim Furniture cannot discriminate against the Khmer-Krom workers in the firing or hiring process.
- Urge Vietnam to stop using Decree No. 15/2020/ND-CP to punish internet users who share information that the government does not like.