MEMBER PROFILE

KHMER-KROM

Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF)
Status: Unrecognised indigenous group

Population: 7 million

Capital City: Prey Nokor, later named Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City

Area: 67700km² (in Viet Nam)

Language: Khmer, Vietnamese

Religion: Theravada Buddhism, Roman Catholic

OVERVIEW

Kampuchea-Krom means "Cambodia Below" or "Southern Cambodia". The Khmer-Krom describe themselves as the "Cambodians of the South". Kampuchea-Krom was the southernmost territory of the Khmer Empire. Once known as (French) Cochinchina, it is now located in the southwestern part of Viet Nam, covering an area of 67,700 square kilometres bordering Cambodia to the north, the Gulf of Siam to the west, the South China Sea to the south and the Champa's territory to the northeast. Prey Nokor, later Saigon and now Ho Chi Minh City, was one of the most important commercial cities in Kampuchea-Krom.

The Khmer-Krom people have inhabited the south-western part of the Indochinese peninsula since 4,290 years before Christ (B.C.). The famous 'Khmer Empire' rose to prominence in the 9th century and began to decline in the 13th century. However, ever since the 1600s the Khmer have struggled with their Vietnamese and Siam neighbours. Facing such invasions, Khmer King Ang Duong appealed to one of his allies, French Emperor Napoléon III, for help. French troops arrived in 1858 and took power over the Vietnamese invaders by signing a first convention of subservience in 1862. They then colonised the area under the name of "French Cochinchina". When the whole territory of Kampuchea-Krom (Cochinchina) was pacified with the participation of the Khmer-Krom, another convention was signed in 1867, that was applied over the whole Kampuchea-Krom. But after one century of French colonisation of Kampuchea-Krom (French Cochinchina), on 4 June 1949, France gave this territory to Viet Nam instead of giving it back to Cambodia, under the Law no 49-733 modifying the status of French Cochinchina.

Since then Kampuchea-Krom has been under Vietnamese administration, much to the detriment of the Khmer-Krom population. They are denied the right to freely practice their religion and pass on their culture, and are generally treated as second-class citizens. The mission of the KKF is to seek freedom, justice and the acceptance of the right to self-determination for those Khmer-Krom who are living under the oppression of the Vietnamese socialist government, through the use of nonviolent measures and the implementation of international law.
UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE
The KKF is an organisation that represents over eight million Khmer-Krom, including members of the diaspora. KKF is led by the members of Board of Directors. The KKF Board of Directors is democratically elected every four years by the members from around the world including Australia, Cambodia, Canada, France, Italy, New Zealand, and the United States.

KKF Board of Directors consists of: Chairman, President, Vice-President, Director of Administration, Chair of Senior Council, Chair of Representatives Council, General Secretary, Treasure, Director of Planning, Director of Information, Director of Women, Director of Youth, and Director of Religious Affairs.

The President, who leads the executive committee, is responsible for daily operations of the federation. Besides KKF Board of Directors, KKF is also led by the Presidents of Regional, Continental, and local chapters.

The objective of the KKF is to campaign with the principle of nonviolence for the recognition of the rights of the indigenous people of Kampuchea-Krom, in accordance with international conventions.

UNPO REPRESENTATION: Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation
The Khmer-Krom are represented at UNPO by the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF). They were admitted as a member of UNPO on 15 July 2001.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
Modern archaeological evidence indicates that the region of the Mekong delta has been inhabited by the ancestors of the Khmer-Krom for thousands of years. French archaeologist Louis Malleret found the site of a city called O-Keo (or Oc-Eo) which is evidence of a Khmer civilisation in the region dating from the first century B. C. The arrival of settlers from India during this time introduced many new elements into the culture of the Khmer-Krom which have persisted to this day. In the 6th century, a series of civil wars broke apart what had been the Nokor Phnom Empire, comprised of modern-day Cambodia as well as Kampuchea-Krom. After a brief occupation by Sumatran invaders, the Nokor Phnom (Funan) Empire was established in the 8th and 9th centuries B.C. During this period the area flourished, leading to the construction of many famous temples such as Angkor Wat. However, the empire began to decline in the 13th century, culminating in the sacking of Angkor by Siamese (modern Thai) forces in 1431.

During the 1600s, what is now Viet Nam was caught up in a civil war between the Trinh Dynasty in the north and the Nguyen Dynasty in central Viet Nam. In order to bolster their position, the Nguyen leader enacted a campaign known as “Nam Tien”, or “Southward Expansion”. Through intermarriage the Nguyen gained leverage over the ancestors of the Khmer-Krom and obtained the right to build settlements in the area. In 1698, after the death of the Khmer King, there was a mass population incursion of 40,000 Vietnamese, which turned the Khmer-Krom into a minority in their own homeland. They set up their own government and embarked on a policy of forced assimilation and domination of the Khmer-Krom. Traditional Khmer-Krom names had to be changed to a handful of names chosen by the Vietnamese in order to more easily identify those of Khmer-Krom origin. From 1813 to 1820, they were forced to dig the Vinh Te canal, designed to create a border between Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Kampuchea-Krom. Thousands of Khmer-Krom workers, kept in pillories of 20-40 men on the bed of the canal, were deliberately drowned when the canal was flooded.
In 1856, the Cambodian King secretly contacted the French colonisers and obtained a promise to help Cambodia reclaim the territory of Kampuchea-Krom. However, France broke this promise and retained the territory for itself, renaming it Cochinchina. Under the French colonisers, the Khmer-Krom were granted a temporary reprieve from outright persecution; however, the French heavily favoured the Vietnamese, integrating them in the administration of the territory while prohibiting the Khmer-Krom from rising above the status of labourers. On 4 June 1949, the French National Assembly, disregarding the protests of the Khmer-Krom, placed the territory under Vietnamese control. In exchange, a set of Khmer-Krom rights was enumerated and the Vietnamese government was tasked with respecting these rights. However, since that day the Khmer-Krom have been denied their right to practise their traditional way of life or preserve their culture.

**CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT**

**Agriculture**

Agriculture is very important in Viet Nam. The industry and services sectors are not very well developed. Agriculture is even more important in the Mekong delta, the area where the Khmer-Krom people live. The main crop for the Khmer-Krom is rice, which yields one crop a year, during the rainy season. The lack of freshwater from other sources restricts the planting of more crops, making the Khmer-Krom highly dependent on the rains. While the Viet of the Mekong delta broadcast or scatter their rice seeds, the Khmer-Krom still plant and transplant their seedlings. Secondary crops include shallots and tobacco plants. Another source of nourishment and income is fishing. Both fish and shrimp are caught and dried to preserve them. Some Khmer-Krom are also engaged in trade, selling such items as home-made brooms.

*Photo courtesy: Sharmainzu*
Religion

Approximately 95 percent of the Khmer-Krom are Buddhists. They practice Theravada Buddhism, whereas the majority Vietnamese population practice Mahayanna Buddhism or Christianity. The Chams minority group are Muslims and the Chinese are mostly Buddhists, with some Christians. For centuries, Theravada Buddhism has been part of the Khmer identity and culture. Practiced by virtually all the Khmer-Krom, Theravada Buddhism influences all aspects of life to a much greater extent than do religions in the West. The Khmer-Krom see Theravada Buddhism as a rational religion, possessing a coherent philosophy, which neither incites violence nor excites passion. Theravada Buddhism shaped the Khmer-Krom way of life, guiding the standards of conformity for men, women and children. Religious institutions are responsible for the education and guidance of children. There are more than 450 temples and more than 10,000 monks throughout Kampuchea-Krom. Some temples were built many centuries ago and are still standing today, but many others were destroyed during the wars of the second half of the 20th century. The Khmer pagodas play a vital and fundamental role as guardians of the Khmer culture and in the field of education.

Language

Language has been an extremely contentious issue for the Khmer-Krom. Though used within Khmer families and communities, the Vietnamese language is proscribed and strictly enforced in the public sphere. However, only 10 percent of the Khmer-Krom speak and write Vietnamese correctly. The use of Khmer is the highest in rural zones and the language is spoken mainly by the older generations. In urban zones Khmer is strictly used within the personal sphere and many youths have no functional knowledge of the language. The Khmer-Krom have been advocating for the acceptance of Khmer as a minority language and the allowance of its use in public discourse but this has met with harsh resistance from the Vietnamese government. The Khmer-Krom have been harassed, jailed, tortured, deported or persecuted for speaking, learning or teaching the Khmer language and the publishing of documents in Khmer is illegal unless they contain government propaganda.
IMPORTANT FACTS

The United Nations officials in Geneva have been made aware of the religious oppression of the Khmer-Krom people in Viet Nam, a violation of one of their major human rights. The Khmer-Krom are glad that the suffering their people have experienced has been shared with the international organisation. But much more awareness and action by the world community is needed to ensure that the Vietnamese government abides by international law, if the Khmer-Krom people are to be saved from gradual extinction.

The teaching of the Khmer language and the cultural heritage is still against the law in Viet Nam, resulting in the harsh treatment of the Khmer-Krom under the Vietnamese government. Consequently, there are virtually no official programs in place to protect the culture of the Khmer-Krom. The Khmer language barely survives in the Khmer Buddhist temples. Official Vietnamese history offers inadequate explanation to fundamental questions related to the Khmer-Krom such as "How did Vietnam encroach on the Khmers’ land?". The children of the Khmer-Krom, generation after generation, have been misled by Viet Nam’s educational system and a low percentage of Khmer-Krom children are aware of their true heritage. The Khmer-Krom diaspora is fortunate in that they enjoy the real freedoms provided by their host countries, and have the opportunity to teach their children about their heritage and the true history of their people. The KKF and UNPO have also submitted reports about Viet Nam’s human rights violations to the United Nations via the Universal Periodic Review mechanism and host conferences to raise awareness about their plight.
CURRENT ISSUES

Land Ownership

Land is of utmost importance for the Khmer-Krom. Today, most of the members of the community are farmers in the Mekong delta, a very rural area. Without land, many find themselves without any means to support their traditional livelihood of rice farming. Thus, land rights are also a precondition for their right to the preservation of their culture and right to a livelihood. However, after 1975, the possession of land was made illegal as part of the Land Reform Acts, enacted to implement the Proletarian Revolution.

The main purpose of land reform was to eliminate the vestiges of feudal and colonialist exploitation and to provide the landless and the land-poor collective means of production. To enforce this reform, they expropriated land owners to redistribute them among the other part of the population. In the Mekong Delta, the Khmer-Krom were detaining most of the lands because most of them were farmers. A small amount of their lands was eventually returned by the Vietnamese authority to the Khmer-Krom but it is still inferior to what was taken back in the days.

Environmental Problems

There are two main problems in zones which have sizable Khmer-Krom settlements. The salt deposits in the soil are sapping the coastal areas of their fertility. In the district of Duyen Hai, the rice yield has decreased by between 50 percent and 90 percent in the last 30 years. These salt deposits worsen with the increased use of irrigation systems using the waters of the Mekong. The irrigation canals proliferate in the regions of An Giang, Long Xuyen and Can Tho.

Flooding is an intensifying factor to this problem. It also kills a sizable number of people and destroys harvests. These floods are due to the rains of July to October. The resulting swelling of the water of the Mekong is exacerbated by the weak slope of the river, the low dams, the weak drainage and the problem of deforestation, which lead to the loss of lives, harvests and the mangrove swamps.

Linguistic Restrictions

The Khmer-Krom has struggled for years to have the use of Khmer allowed in schools and public places, but the Vietnamese government has remained intractable on this issue and no satisfactory result has been achieved. In many instances, Khmer-Krom have been harassed, jailed and generally persecuted for speaking, learning or teaching Khmer language. Vietnamese authorities severely restrict the publication of books or documents in Khmer.

The current teaching of the Khmer language in public schools attended by Khmer-Krom students is not sufficient to really allow Khmer-Krom children to learn their mother language. Khmer classes are only provided for two to three hours a week. Thus, most of the young Khmer-Krom cannot read nor write their own language.

Recently, the seals of Khmer-Krom temples, usually made of writings in Khmer language, have been completely switched to Vietnamese.

Religious Freedom and Freedom of Association

The Khmer-Krom people, indigenous peoples of Mekong Delta region, have been living in their ancestral homeland since the first century. They have centered their community on a strong belief in Buddhism since 365BC. The Theravada Buddhism is not just a religion, but it is part of their unique cultural self-identification. Since 1975, livings in a one-party
Communist state, the Khmer-Krom people have been practicing their Theravada Buddhism in fear.

The Vietnamese government tactically establishes the state-sponsored religious association, called "Patriotic United Buddhist Association (PUBA - Hội Đoàn Kết Sự Sắt Yêu Nước)" for only Khmer-Krom to practice their Theravada Buddhism. The Vietnamese government uses this association as a showcase to show to the world that Vietnam allows the Khmer-Krom to form its own Buddhist association. Moreover, the Vietnamese government uses this association to control and degrade the way the Khmer-Krom practicing their religion.

The Vietnamese authorities largely view Khmer-Krom monks as "a threat to national integrity". Many monks are active campaigners for religious freedom and for land rights and as such are frequently harassed and imprisoned by authorities.

The situation did not improve with the adoption, on 18 November 2016, by the 14th Vietnamese National Assembly, of a Law on Belief and Religion, which requires all religion groups to register with the authorities – who have the power to refuse registration – and report on their activities.

The Communist Party recognises 39 religious organisations within 14 religions, including Protestantism and Theravada Buddhism. The latter are represented in the Communist Party-affiliated Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), which interferes heavily with the day-to-day operations of Khmer-Krom pagodas.

The Vietnamese government offers a small amount of salary to most of the Abbots (head monks) who are leading the PUBA in each province throughout Mekong Delta. As the Buddhist monks, they are not allowed to receive any salary. When they receive a salary, that means, they have to follow the order from the government. Thus, when the Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks and Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers stand up for their religious rights, the Vietnamese government orders the Khmer-Krom Buddhist leaders who are leading the PUBA along with the Vietnamese police to arrest, defrock, and imprison them.

The KKF notes that the Vietnamese authorities use the Law on Belief and Religion to silence whoever complains about their religious rights being violated. Indeed, the law bans religious activities that infringe on national defence, security, sovereignty and social order and safety; harm social ethics, personal lives and assets; offend other persons’ honour and human dignity; prevent the performance of civil rights and obligations; and disunite the nation, religions and among belief and religion followers and non-followers.

This attitude toward religious institutions also constitutes a violation of the freedom of association. Despite the government claiming that there are currently "460 associations, social - professional organisations whose geographic scope of activity are nation-wide or inter-provincial" (statement made by the Vietnamese government during its 2nd Universal Periodic Review (UPR), only the associations under the government’s control are allowed to operate in Viet Nam, as demonstrated with religious associations.

Beside the Law on Belief and Religion, which reinforces fears of government oppression ostensibly on grounds of public order, national security or “national unity”, articles of Viet Nam’s Penal Code still criminalise in ambiguous terms “propagating against, distorting or defaming the people’s administration” (article 88) and abusing communicative freedoms or the freedom of religion to “infringe upon the interests of the state” (article 257).

As of today, Venerable Thach Thuol, a Khmer-Krom Buddhist monk, has been imprisoned since 2013 for peacefully claiming his right to teach Khmer language in his temple school. Mr Thach Thuol had also been interviewed by the Voice of Kampuchea-Krom, the Khmer-Krom’s internet radio, on 23 December 2010, regarding the rights of the Khmer-Krom to freely practice their religion in the Mekong Delta.
Freedom of Expression, the Press and Information

Despite Viet Nam claiming that “the rights to freedom of expression, press and information are enshrined in the Constitution and laws” (Viet Nam, 2014), the authorities continue to arrest and imprison bloggers. The media are under the direct supervision of the Communist Party and the only independent sources of information – bloggers and citizen-journalists – are the targets of persecution from the State, including police violence (Reporters without Borders).

According to a January 2017 circular, Viet Nam now has the right to block “ill-intended and toxic” online content, which “responsible entities” shall take down or adapt according to the authorities’ request, within 24 hours (to our knowledge, this circular is not available online but this news was reported by several media such as the Saigon Times on 19 January 2017 and Vietnam Breaking News.com).

Overall, the whole media landscape – newspapers, editors, the radio, television – is still under governmental control. Some of the websites providing human rights information and reporting human rights violations, including the KKF website, are currently being blocked by Viet Nam. Khmer television programmes that are broadcasted a couple of hours per week are the vector of the government’s propaganda. This explains why the Khmer-Krom people wishes to turn to satellite television programmes broadcasting from Cambodia, which the Vietnamese government prevents them to do (KKF).

Enforced Disappearances

The Khmer-Krom who are arrested are sometimes victims of enforced disappearances. This was the case for Venerable Thach Thul and Veneral Lieu Ny and their two Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers, Thach Tha and Thach Phum Rich, arrested on 20 May 2013. Their whereabouts remains unknown until they were brought to court on 27 September 2013.

Education

The Khmer-Krom children are not able to learn the rights of the child, as stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in their Khmer language. The Khmer-Krom children are not allowed to study their true history in their language.

There are no magazines or booklets in the Khmer language, for Khmer-Krom youth to express their opinions that are independently produced without the interference of the Vietnamese government. Khmer-Krom youth who are in high school have very limited access to public forums to express their opinion, especially on the internet.

The Khmer-Krom people are hard-working farmers but some of them do not even have enough rice to eat because the expenses of farming are too high. The Khmer-Krom people are the poorest people in the Mekong Delta region. The poverty of the KhmerKrom affects the livelihoods of the Khmer-Krom youth and their future. In recent years, the percentages of Khmer-Krom students dropping out of school are alarming. They have to help their parents on the farm or look for employment to help their families make ends meet. Without education, the future of Khmer-Krom youth is bleak.

There are millions of Khmer-Krom people in Kampuchea-Krom, but very few hold a Master Degree or Ph.D. Vietnam has sent thousands of Vietnamese students to study abroad, especially in the United States, Canada, and Australia. But the Khmer-Krom students do not receive those benefits.

Khmer-Krom students receive no benefit from scholarships that are generously offered by international governments and organizations due to the repressive policies of the Vietnamese government. Outside efforts to support the Khmer-Krom advancement of education is blocked because the government of Vietnam ties these efforts to political motives.
Health

Vietnam has ratified three international conventions that explicitly guarantee the right to health: The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Most of the Khmer-Krom people do not know of the existence of those international conventions. They do not understand that the health problems they face are human rights violations.

Since 2003, the blindness issues of the Khmer-Krom in Soc Trang province are still prevalent. There are thousands of Khmer-Krom people who are affected by blindness of either the left or right eye, and in some case both eyes. The main problems that cause the blindness are from contaminated drinking water from their surroundings which are largely polluted by pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers. This problem has been reported to the Vietnamese government, but the Vietnamese government has taken no actions about it because the victims are primarily Khmer-Krom.

Vietnam claims that it provides free healthcare services to the ethnic minority populations, but the free healthcare service is not really free as the government claims. In order to receive a free Health Insurance card, the Khmer-Krom must be from a Khmer-Krom family that is categorized as “Hồ Nghéo” which means a “household poverty”. When they are sick, they go to the hospital and are treated as “second-class citizens” because they only pay about 5% of the total bills. Thus, despite the claim of free healthcare, they still face charges and discrimination. Some Khmer-Krom patients cannot even afford to pay that 5% and end up selling their farmlands or worthy belongings in order to get the treatment or receive the medication.

If the Khmer-Krom families are not categorized as a household poverty, their family members have to buy insurance. The Khmer-Krom people are poorest people in the Mekong Delta region. They barely make enough money to have food for their family. Thus, most of them do not have insurance. When they are sick, they go to the local hospital in their village. Some diseases cannot be treated by the doctors at the local hospital and they are sent to the hospital in the City, but many Khmer-Krom patients cannot afford the treatments and die as a result.
SOURCES

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