Khmer-Krom

Human Rights Violations Facing the Indigenous People

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Khmer-Krom: Human Rights Violations Facing the Indigenous People

The Khmer-Krom are an indigenous people living in the Southern part of Vietnam, called Kampuchea-Krom, which translates as “Lower Cambodia”. For geostrategic reasons – mainly because of the region’s access to the sea through the Mekong Delta – the minority has been the target of severe repression from the Vietnamese authorities for now more than 40 years. State-sponsored repression affects all walks of their lives, from social and economic rights to the ability to participate in Vietnam’s political decision-making processes. But first and foremost, the Vietnamese government seeks to curtail the Khmer-Krom’s freedom to practice Theravada Buddhism, thereby jeopardising their culture, history and identity. Even though, on paper, the Vietnamese constitution enshrines principles such as the freedom of belief and of religion, Vietnamese authorities systematically interfere with the religious life of the Khmer-Krom and brutally crack down on Buddhist monks and other dissidents who engage in peaceful civil resistance to demand respect for their religious rights.

The Khmer-Krom issue seems to take root in the question of their recognition as an indigenous people. As such, they could claim respect for the rights enshrined in international law that are specific to them.

This report was made public on the occasion of a conference co-organised by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)’s and the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF) and held on 2 June 2018 in Paris, France. The event aimed to raise awareness of the case of the Khmer-Krom in order to encourage the international community not to overlook their struggle any longer.
HISTORICAL CONTEXT
FROM THE KHMER-KROM EMPIRE TO VIETNAMESE OCCUPATION

The Mekong Delta, drawn by nine estuaries also called the “Nine Dragons Delta”, is one of the most popular areas of Vietnam. The Khmer-Krom are the ethnic Khmer minority living in this southern part of Vietnam called the Kampuchea-Krom, which literally means “Lower Cambodia”. Surrounded by Cambodia on its West border, the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea on its eastern side, this land is considered as ancestral home by the indigenous Khmer-Krom. Vietnam strongly refuses this assertion despite recent archaeological research having proven that the area has been inhabited by this people for 2,000 years.1

The Mekong Delta was part of the Khmer empire from the ninth to the 13th century. This dominant empire of continental southeast Asia reached its culmination by conquering current-day Thailand and Laos and the decline of the empire that followed this period saw a first wave of Vietnamisation of the area with the annexation of the Mekong Delta by the province of Annam, a Chinese protectorate geographically situated in today’s Vietnam.

Image 1: The Indochinese Peninsula during the 12th and 13th century (Photo courtesy of Jean-Pierre Dalbéra, Flickr)

The Mekong Delta has been at stake in the area due to its location and the diversity of its resources. The Delta indeed constitutes an access to the Gulf of Thailand and the South China Sea. Due to its estuaries and its biologic characteristics, the area is environmentally diverse and rich in natural resources with fertile soil and considerable water resources. The Mekong Delta is considered as Vietnam’s breadbasket as 40 percent of the Vietnamese rice comes from this area. Biodiversity is one of the major assets of the Delta with a diverse fishery activity. However, these aspects are endangered by climate change and the Mekong Delta could be one of the world’s most affected areas with its landscape and ecosystem totally transformed by 2050.

These aspects make the area an arena which the region’s great powers tried to win over.

From 1862 to 1954, the area became Cochinchina, a colony under the French’s domination. Meanwhile, during this period, the rest of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos became protectorates. The status of French colony demonstrates the specificities of an area in which French settlers used ethnic dissension to take over and entrench their rule. During this period, as the French administration aimed at exploiting the area, workers from the Kinh minority settled in the ancestral Khmer-Krom land. On 4 June 1949, French Indochina became part of the French Union and Cochinchina was given back to the Vietnamese State despite Cambodian claims on the area. This status of Cochinchina was meant to be provisional, but on the occasion of the Geneva Convention, the area officially and definitively became a part of South Vietnam.²

Throughout the great power games to take hold of the Mekong Delta, the history of the Khmer-Krom has been transformed, jeopardised and modified. Beyond land appropriation, the concept of homeland was infringed upon and diminished throughout the years. From the Khmer empire to Vietnamese occupation, the Khmer-Krom are struggling

against all forms of discrimination but first and foremost against the cultural appropriation of their ancestral land, in order to maintain their identity.

ETHNIC GROUPS AND RECOGNITION

Kampuchea-Krom today represents one fifth of the Vietnamese territory and the Khmer-Krom constitute the majority ethnic group in the area.\(^3\)

The dynamics of the area and the situation of the Khmer-Krom people are linked to Vietnam’s ethnic diversity\(^4\) and the way the government disrespects the rights of the country’s minorities.

The notion of ethnicity in Vietnam is related to the historical background of the country and the history of the expansionist movement. Vietnam built itself on a complex history of expansion, occupation and integration. Communist expansion and the construction of the country based on communist principles created a situation in which a unique political reality tried, and still tries, to unify an ethnically diverse country. The shape of Vietnam today has been drawn by an expansion to the south and then to the west. Vietnam’s vast ethnic majority is the Kinh also called Viet, who gave their name to the country.

Vietnam recognised 54 ethnic groups and Khmers are the fourth most important in terms of demographics. According to the country’s last census in 2009, the Khmer represent 1.5 percent of the population. The Viet represent 85.7 percent of the total population.

The recognition of these ethnic groups is one of the main challenges the Khmer-Krom and other minorities have to face. Vietnam speaks about “ethnic groups” but doesn’t use the term “indigenous” for any

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of these groups. This subtlety allows the government to manipulate reality, especially regarding data. Whereas Dr Philip Taylor estimates the number of Khmer-Krom living in Kampuchea-Krom to 7 million, the official census, which declares the Khmer as the fifth ethnic group in Vietnam, counts about 1,260,640 Khmer. The recognition of the Khmer-Krom people is flawed by the ambiguity of the definition.

Another challenge also stems directly from the non-recognition of the “indigenous” status of some of the ethnic groups by Vietnam: the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People doesn’t apply to them. Vietnam voted in favour of the 2007 Declaration but didn’t ratify the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, or Convention 169, of the International Labour Organization, and does not recognise the status of indigenous people to its minorities. The recognition of this status would be a way to put the Khmer-Krom under the protection of international indigenous rights law and ensure the preservation of their cultural, linguistic and religious rights according to their indigenous status. Not recognising this status allows the Vietnamese government to create its own legislation and overthrow the international system under which indigenous people should find protection. The laws that have been enacted by the Vietnamese government have been alibi for the latter to be able to present a positive image to the international community. These laws are a way to demonstrate a theoretical respect of minorities while keeping the control over how to implement the rights they should be entitled to. An agency for “the rights and interests of ethnic minorities as is guaranteed by the law” has even been created by the authorities to create the appearance of an effective action whereas it actually propagates the State’s policies of integration.

Today, the Khmer-Krom are the victims of this double game of the Vietnamese government, which claims to preserve and protect ethnic groups’ cultural heritage while actually forcing the cultural assimilation of those groups to the majority.

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POLITICAL CONTEXT

ATTEMPTS AT ASSIMILATION AND MARGINALISATION AND THE RESULTING RESISTANCE OF THE KHMER-KROM PEOPLE

The occupation of Kampuchea-Krom by Vietnam is first and foremost characterised by the State’s objective to “Vietnamise” the area. The first steps of this Vietnamisation process consisted in repressive assimilation campaigns that the Republic of Vietnam launched in the 1950s and 1960s. Paradoxically, those attempts failed at creating full assimilation and instead reinforced a movement of resistance based on the defence of the Khmer-Krom’s indigenous people status and rights.

The assimilations campaigns were reinforced by a 1956 “nationalisation” decree in which the government ordered the closure of Khmer pagoda schools, discouraged the use of the Khmer language and required Khmer-Krom to take on Vietnamese surnames. For example, the Franco-Khmer school in Soc Trang was turned into a Vietnamese institution and the Republic of Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was a Roman Catholic, implemented anti-Buddhist laws that touched the Mekong Delta. Some land reform policies also induced a government-sponsored migration of Kinh to the Mekong Delta provinces.

Assimilation policies use different ways to destroy the specificities of the ethnic groups. Whether it be through education, the language, names, religion and land, these laws impact both the Khmer-Krom’s living conditions and identity.

The land act and policies favoured the Kinh minority by giving them the most fertilised areas and access to the main resources of the Mekong Delta. Despite the Khmer-Krom being indigenous to the region, they were deprived of their lands and got sterile soils in return, which strongly affected their access to resources. These assimilation laws, with the objective of integrating Kinh minorities, instead marginalised the Khmer-Krom. This marginalisation even showed on the landscape, as the Khmer-Krom were evicted from their lands and had to settle in peripheric, marginal soils. Access to education and health was limited and the economic and social situation of the people worsened. The Khmer-Krom therefore become the ethnic group with the highest rate of poverty in the Mekong Delta.

If the “Vietnamisation” of the area impacted the living conditions of the Khmer-Krom, it was also a form of symbolic “occupation” of the Khmer-Krom identity.

By closing Khmer pagoda schools and forbidding the use of the Khmer language, the Vietnamese government pursued the destruction of the Khmer identity. Education and language are two central elements of a shared identity. Language carries the history, the
cultural framework and the practices of an ethnic group. Education is the main transmission channel and a bridge between generations, therefore by preventing teaching in Khmer pagoda schools, the Vietnamisation of the Khmer-Krom ethnic group projects itself to the next generations. The Vietnamisation of the name is also a way to discard Khmer identity and to transform the Mekong Delta. As for names, they carry a history and are the first referential used by people to build their identity, to recognise themselves and others. The change of names is therefore a negation of people’s identities and a clear signal in favour of cultural assimilation, since the latter implies that people give up on their identity to become part of the more general framework. The Vietnamisation of names therefore completes the process initiated with the forbidding of Khmer language and aimed at erasing Khmer culture and identity from people’s day-to-day realities.

However, Vietnam’s occupation of Kampuchea-Krom was not only land appropriation. The Vietnamisation of the area is based on both practical appropriation of resources and symbolic violence. Assimilation laws were meant to erase the idea of an ancestral homeland by erasing Khmer culture, Khmer religion and Khmer language. The first human rights violation that the Khmers had to face was regarding their rights to remember their history, as well as to memory and identity. With the manipulation of the myth of the origins, the concept of homeland, the indigenous Khmer of the Mekong Delta have fallen victims of a first form of appropriation and negation of their identity, which constituted symbolic violence against them. The main result of these attempts to silence Khmer-Krom identity has been to create, through the denial of the Khmers’ origins, a rupture with their common background with Cambodia, therefore preventing independentist claims.

More recently, the use of national policies and discourse to discredit the Khmer-Krom’s culture is still operational. The Vietnamese government, for instance, has a tendency to use gender equality as an excuse to prevent the preservation of ethnic minorities’ cultures. In its report to the Committee for the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2011, Vietnam uses expressions such as “outdated”, “obsolete” and “backwards” to designate ethnic minority traditions, especially concerning marriage and family relationships. An attitude which is contrary to the fundamental right of indigenous peoples to promote their cultural heritage and traditions.

However, these assimilation laws tend to erase and discredit the Khmer-Krom identity. The consequence was to actually marginalise the community while creating a strong feeling of resistance.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE KHMER-KROM RESISTANCE MOVEMENT AND ITS DEMANDS

The attempted Vietnamisation of the Khmer-Krom people, far from constituting a successful assimilation policy, gave birth to a resistance movement aimed at demanding the respect of the Khmer-Krom

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identity, its Four Freedoms\textsuperscript{9}, as well as the right to self-determination. This movement’s first goal is to demand equality with the Kinh majority, and as a second step the re-annexation of Kampuchea-Krom to Cambodia.

The Khmer-Krom’s role was first important in the anti-colonial movement, where they were instrumental in giving birth to the first independentist movement in Vietnam. This also helps to understand the violence of the Vietnamese government towards protests and movements that claim the Khmer-Krom’s right to self-determination - an activism that is also closely linked to Buddhism.

Vietnamisation efforts led to the birth of ethno-nationalist movements among the Khmer-Krom. These included the Front for the Struggle of Kampuchea-Krom, also nicknamed Khsaing Sar, or “White Scarves”, a group which aimed to preserve Khmer-Krom identity and focussed on calling for equal rights between the Khmer-Krom and the Kinh majority. In 1963, its leader Chau Dara was arrested and demanded that Vietnam “return” Kampuchea-Krom to Cambodia.

The question of sovereignty is essential to understand the challenges that the Khmer-Krom face today in the Mekong Delta. But the question of identity is also important to take into account as, based on their historical and cultural background, the Khmer-Krom identify shared values with the Cambodians. Initially, the Vietnamese were occupants who then conducted policies of assimilation toward the Khmer-Krom. These policies aim, little by little, at assimilating the populations of the Mekong Delta to Vietnam and deny their cultural rights and historical specificities, therefore denying the common background uniting Cambodia and the indigenous people living in the Delta.

Today the Khmer-Krom activist movement demands the respect of the people’s Four Freedoms. It refuses the State’s assimilationist policies, stressing instead their particular identity and more specifically their religious beliefs, which are different from that of the majority people.

In this context, the monks are at the forefront of the Khmer-Krom’s struggle. They continue to demand respect for their people’s practice of Theravada Buddhism by invoking the freedoms of religion and worship.

Freedom from fear and freedom from want also have to be considered - their non-respect stems from the systematic repression of Theravada Buddhism by the State, as the second part of this report will further explain.

To reply to these demands, the Vietnamese government created a smokescreen by enacting new laws that present Vietnam as a united nation where each ethnic group is equal and division and ethnic discrimination are forbidden. In this vein, the constitution was amended in 2013\textsuperscript{10} and new articles that stress the importance of the respect of minority rights, such as language rights were added. In practice however, multiple forms of discrimination still exist. For

\textsuperscript{9} These Four Freedoms were first mentioned by United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, in an address known as the Four Freedoms speech, in which he proposed four fundamental freedoms that people “everywhere in the world” ought to enjoy, namely the freedoms of speech, worship, from want and from fear.

example, human rights defenders criticise the fact that the communist party still owns land and can decide of its attribution, and use this as a tool to further marginalise the Khmer-Krom. Today the Mekong Delta is the richest province in Vietnam in terms of resources and is the one which produces the most rice, but the Khmer-Krom suffer the highest rate of poverty. The state can take back the land on behalf of “economic development” at any moment and keep control of the land without considering its users.

Behind the smokescreen used by the Vietnamese government to make a good impression toward the international community and restrain the legitimacy of the activists lie strong discriminations and human rights violations against the Khmer-Krom.
THE PLOIGHT OF THE KHMER-KROM
HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND LACK OF FREEDOMS

The Khmer-Krom are subjected to human rights violations and severe restrictions of their individual and collective freedoms almost on a daily basis and in all walks of life. Their freedom to exercise their religious freedoms in particular is heavily curtailed due to state-imposed restrictions and harassment.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN VIETNAM

Theravada Buddhism has been shaping the life of the Khmer-Krom for the past two-thousand years. After the Vietnamese invasion in 1975, all religious groups were forced to join the Patriotic United Buddhist Association (PUBA) that is itself under the control of the Vietnamese Sangha Buddhists, strongly tied to the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP). This relationship partially explains the religious repression of the Khmer-Krom who have been under a strict political control since then, which jeopardises their culture, history, and identity.11

The practice of Theravada Buddhism is subject to severe regulations: by setting arbitrary rules and denying principles such as freedom of belief and of religion, even though they are enshrined in the Vietnamese Constitution, the authorities interfere with the religious life of the Khmer-Krom with no concrete justification. Two historical arguments explain such a backlash: the illegal and unsupported transfer of Cochinchina to Vietnam by France and the 2007 peaceful demonstration organised by Khmer-Krom monks that led to a strong suppression from the government and utterly strict restrictions.12 This peaceful protest, which gathered 200 Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks in the province of Soc Trang, was aimed at the defence of the Khmer-Krom’s freedom of religion and their right to use their own language in education. The event, as often, led to a severe repression from the Vietnamese authorities who forcefully defrocked and exiled monks, arrested and questioned them without any form of lawsuit and even beat some of them. Some of the activists were sentenced to jail.13 Tension has not decreased since then.

The System of Permissions

A system of permissions which particularly affects the Khmer-Krom limits the travels, exchanges with the diaspora and information through overseas-based media. For instance, a permission from the

12 Ibid.
PUBA must be requested to practice any kind of ritual as well as to be ordained as a Buddhist monk.¹⁴

Language Limitations for the Khmer-Krom

The Khmer-Krom are forbidden to speak their own mother tongue in the religious context and monks are expected to speak in Vietnamese as soon as the government is involved. Even when a dialogue in Khmer takes place in a closed setting and involves two Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks, the risk of being asked to stop is strong if the case is being acknowledged. Protests seem to have no effect as shown by the case of Danh Ba Tinh, a Khmer-Krom Buddhist monk who, in 2012, sent a complaint letter to the authorities and is still waiting for an answer.²⁵ Another striking example is the one of Theravada Buddhist monk Liv Ny, head of the Khmer-Krom Seredy Tasek Buddhist Temple, who was locked up in jail for four years from May 2013 to May 2017. He had refused to defrock one of the monks in his temple who was accused of teaching the Khmer language, history and geography.²⁶

Systematic Surveillance in Temples

In order to keep an eye on the Khmer-Krom’s activities inside the temples, the Vietnamese government has informant insiders who are mostly monks themselves. These monks accept to monitor and report any action taking places in these temples as they are subjected to political pressure. Some of them accept to do it in exchange for a financial gain - sometimes a monthly salary - and promises such as a seat at the Congress as illustrated by the case of Thach Houl, a former Khmer-Krom Buddhist monk who is now a politician who oppresses Khmer-Krom monks. Such a situation inevitably leads to constant fear and pressure for the religious practitioners who are not allowed to speak freely.²⁷

Violence and Repression Against Activists

In order to protest against the restraint of their rights and the submission of their religious practices to the control of State-led PUBA, Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks have been organising several peaceful demonstrations in the last few years. But as the repression of the 2007 protest illustrates, the Vietnamese government’s answer consists in the use of military force, unfair arrests, continuous interrogations, imprisonments without a fair trial, false accusations and forced confessions, heavy surveillance and even forced defrocking, which represents a strong humiliation for the Khmer-Krom. This violence that can be physical as well as psychological is also symptomized by one of the most recent methods used by the authorities that consists in summoning the monks to attend “defence” and “security” trainings during which they are indirectly threatened. These meetings tend to be individual, which makes it more complicated for them to run away and handle the pressure.²⁸

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¹⁵ Ibid.


¹⁸ Ibid.
As of the end of 2016, no answer had been provided to the petition signed by more than sixty human rights organisations, including Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the Khmer-Krom Federation, calling upon the President of the Vietnamese National Assembly to re-examine several articles of laws related to religion and belief that violate the human rights conventions.19

Land Appropriation Methods

The religious persecution goes further as land disputes involving citizens and Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks frequently occur in Vietnam. One of the most enlightening examples to illustrate this discrimination is when a temple is destructed in order to build a house. The land on which Buddhist temples are erected is sacred and given the importance of religion in the Khmer-Krom’s lives, land appropriation can be seen as a direct attack towards this people. Any attempt from the Khmer-Krom people to protect its land is pointless as the government, when it does not organise it, at least supports these land confiscations, especially in the Mekong Delta were the ground is rich and fertile. In August 2017, former Kampuchea-Krom Buddhist monk Dav Tep, who was convicted for alleged drug abuse and death threats on grounds of fabricated evidence, was released after spending two years in jail. The well-known activist often participated in protests held in Kampuchea-Krom and advocated on behalf of those involved in land and border disputes. After his re-ordination, he declared that his experience had not deterred him from getting involved in further activism, but instead this had rather constituted an encouragement.20 The same year, one land dispute case was brought to the international community’s attention, which allowed the monks to move back to the temple which was supposed to be demolished. But this very rare outcome does not reassure Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks who do not systematically benefit from international attention.21

For instance, the case of the Wat Me Peang Buddhist Temple whose land was grabbed to build homes, a road and a public school shows that even if the Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks protest, the connivance and corruption of the Vietnamese police and the Vietnamese justice system impeach any kind of conflict resolution.22

THE KHMER-KROM: LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL OUTCASTS

Legal Repression Against the Communities

On 1 January 2018, the Law on Beliefs and Religions, the first religion regulation since the reunification of Vietnam in 1975, has taken effect. This law, despite some light improvements, enforces a more severe

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and government-driven control over religious activities in Vietnam, whereas religion had already been monitored for decades. For instance, the law requires all kinds of religious groups to register with the government, but this was already the case since the establishment of the PUBA after 1975. Organisations such as Human Rights Watch are particularly worried, since the law uses wording such as “national great unity, harm state defence, national security, public order, and social morale” therefore enhancing and legally justifying the room for power abuse. Paradoxically, the law also supports more obvious freedoms but the authorities have the ability to allow or not allow religious groups and exercise enhanced surveillance over faith groups. Moreover, some articles are deliberately ambiguous and some conflict with already existing policies such as the possibility for religions to engage in educational activities that clashes with the fact that it is forbidden to insert religious input in education.

Lack of Recognition for Past Sacrifices

During the Vietnam War that was initiated by the Americans to fight the rise of communism in the region, the Khmer-Krom were recruited into units of the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) and mobilised to participate in the war effort as an additional local force against the Vietnamese, just like the Hmong in the north. Some advocated for the recognition of their role in the war, such as United States (US) Army Captain Steve Yedinak and Scott Walker, who succeeded in doing so in 2012 in the state of Minnesota. As the Vietnam War remains a sensitive topic in the US, it seems rather optimistic to expect the American Congress to show signs of recognition despite the several iterations of a resolution recognising the Khmer-Krom and a memorandum signed by President Richard Nixon in April 1970 stating that the Khmer had fought alongside the US Army in Cambodia. Prior to that, the Khmer had already been recruited by the French Army as they were an anti-Vietnamese and anti-communist minority ideally located in the Mekong Delta.

The recognition of the role of the Khmer-Krom in the conflict could represent a welcomed push to raise awareness about their case and, by extension, to receive help and support from the international community. The current non-recognition of the sacrifices made by the community in the past is also one of the factors that foster the destruction of the Khmer-Krom historical heritage.

Notably, in 2016, ten years after having been removed from the US’s list of countries of “particular concern”, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCRIF) made a statement about the ongoing suppression of several religious groups by the Vietnamese government and about local authorities that continue to

systematically harass and discriminate those religious organisations which lack formal governmental recognition, even at a local level.\textsuperscript{27}

\textit{Attempts at Cultural Assimilation}

Vietnam’s Penal Code states that “ethnic spoken and written languages, and identities shall be protected; the fine customs, practices, traditions and cultures of each ethnicity shall be promoted; all ethnicities shall respect each other’s customs, practices”. As seen above, one of Vietnam’s most important ways to enforce the cultural assimilation of the Khmer-Krom is their attempt to shut down and control religious activities. However, Theravada Buddhism is not the only target of their assimilation policy. For instance, the authorities dried up the sacred Sras Ku Srey lake and in 2014, demolished a symbolic stone gate, part of the Khmer-Krom cultural heritage. The government also works toward the concrete assimilation of the Khmer-Krom by exploiting traditional games such as Ox Racing and Dragon Boat Racing in the name of tourism, making the Khmer people increasingly lose control over the cultural rituals that they have to perform as if they were finalised to entertainment only. On top of that, it is common for the Vietnamese government to replace the names of places and monuments with Vietnamese ones and authorities are going as far as preventing the Khmer-Krom people from speaking their own language and forcefully referring to them as the “Khmer ethnic minority”.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{Social Inequalities and its Consequences for the Khmer-Krom}

The social inequalities suffered by the Khmer-Krom are visible in a variety of fields ranging from health to education. As such, for instance, ethnic minorities children in Vietnam suffer from malnutrition twice more than Kinh children and are less likely to receive proper education.\textsuperscript{29}

In general, it is proven that Vietnam’s ethnic minorities face considerably more health challenges than the rest of the population. In 2014 for example, the free healthcare programme from which the Khmer-Krom benefitted, which allowed among others for women to get free health check-ups during their pregnancies, was revoked.\textsuperscript{30} According to the Vietnam Women’s Union, rural and ethnic minority women lack opportunities to get access to healthcare services in the country.\textsuperscript{31}


In the field of education, because of the lack of specific help provided to Vietnam’s most vulnerable peoples such as the Khmer-Krom, very few of them hold a Master’s degree or a PhD and due to the discrimination they face, they don’t benefit from the scholarships the government generously offers to the thousands of students studying abroad.\textsuperscript{32}

According to the United Nations Vietnam Brief on Young People 2012-2016, published in 2013, the poorest and most vulnerable young people - including youth from ethnic minorities - are falling behind their counterparts in terms of access to and completion of schooling. Because of poverty, lack of education - the drop-out rate is high among Khmer-Krom pupils - and lack of opportunities for Khmer-Krom youth and especially girls, most are forced to travel outside of their provinces where they become victims of human trafficking.\textsuperscript{33}

It has been recognised that some Khmer-Krom girls receive scholarships from the government to attend university or vocational schools. Yet after graduation, many of them cannot find a job related to their field of study. They often lack a network or the money that is required in a corrupt hiring system.\textsuperscript{34}


\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
CONCLUSION

Khmer-Krom: Human Rights Violations Facing the Indigenous People

Any attempt by the Khmer-Krom people to protest peacefully and to make their voice heard is rewarded by the Vietnamese authorities with suppression, unfair arrests and increasing control. The latter rely on alleged Khmer-Krom nationalist aspirations to uphold deliberately discriminatory policies, fearing that indigenous and religious leaders gain a political influence that could jeopardise their power. Consequently, Khmer-Krom religious practitioners are, together with activists, bloggers and journalists, among the main targets of the Vietnamese authorities. For them, Khmer-Krom monks are “disturbing the Vietnamese society” and “involving with anti-Vietnamese government activities”, offences that are punished under articles 87 and 88 of the Vietnamese Penal Code. The government not only targets activists but also their families, increasing the pressure and pushing them to flee and seek refugee status abroad. But Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks are not the only target of the religious backlash perpetuated by Vietnamese authorities. Religious practitioners who operate outside official government-registered and controlled groups are also often charged under the light of article 87 that condemns any attempt to “[undermine] national unity”, punished with prison sentences.

Given this lack of international attention, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization stands in solidarity with the Khmer-Krom community. In accordance with what stated by other human rights organisations, such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, UNPO also condemns in the strongest sense the Vietnamese government’s infringement on the freedom of religion and belief. The UNPO calls upon the Vietnamese government to respect the commitments it has taken when becoming a State party to the main international human rights instruments.

REFERENCES:


The Unrepresented Nations and People Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent and democratic membership organisation. Its Members are indigenous peoples, minorities, unrecognised States and occupied territories that have joined together to defend their political, social and cultural rights, to preserve their environments and to promote their right to self-determination.