MEET THE
KHMER-KROM

Focus Point:
EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement

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October-November 2018

Interview:
President of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation

KHMER-KROM NEWSLETTER
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FOREWORD

Have you ever heard of the Khmer-Krom people living both in Vietnam and in various diasporas around the world?

Were you aware that the Vietnamese government has been enforcing assimilation policies in schools with the purpose of acculturating Khmer-Krom children?

Did you know that today many Buddhist monks are persecuted by the government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for their religious beliefs?

As the world cannot keep overlooking the grave human rights abuses committed against minorities and indigenous peoples, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) has decided to launch a series of newsletters focusing on the Khmer-Krom. This campaign’s purpose is to raise awareness about the plight of the Khmer-Krom people, whilst taking a stand against all forms of exclusion.

Follow the campaign on social media, every Tuesday:

#KhmerKromTuesday
FOCAL POINT: EU – VIETNAM FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

Trade Contra Human Rights – Not Necessarily Incompatible Ideas

The European Union (EU)-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) aims to strengthen and increase bilateral trade between the bloc and the South-East Asian country. Whilst nobody doubts the economic benefits of such an agreement, it has definitely sparked a fierce debate concerning human rights in Vietnam. In the scope of global worries, the Khmer-Krom community is no exception.

Since September, the issue of Vietnam’s blatant disregard of human rights of minorities has been vocalised by a number of NGOs, including UNPO. In a nutshell, the crux of the issue is that in addition to delivering monetary benefits to business owners on both sides of the continent, the FTA also serves for the political benefit of the regime in Hanoi. In this framework, it is difficult to say whether the agreement will benefit the whole of Vietnam’s population, including its most marginalised.

Human Rights, as Seen by the EU

On 15 November 2018, the floor of the European Parliament in Strasbourg saw a fierce debate on the issue. The Members of the European Parliament gathered support and adopted a resolution on the situation of political prisoners in Vietnam. The resolution was supported by all major political groups and adopted by a simple majority. Intentionally, the debate in the Parliament coincided with the European Commission’s consultations with Vietnam. In response to the parliamentarians who were increasingly worried about the situation of ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities, the Commissioner responded that the EU will definitely keep a close eye on Vietnam’s track record of human rights.

It is also important to mention that the pivotal point around which any human rights debate in the EU revolves, is the question of what kind of an image will it project of the EU abroad. This sentiment is also very evident from the character of the debate on the floor: inasmuch as it seems treasonous to the identity of the EU to go forth with the EVFTA at the current moment, it may appear to some as a practical tool to coerce Hanoi into respecting human rights. UNPO would like to see the EU use this leverage more as a tool for the promotion of fundamental rights.

The Significance of the Khmer-Krom People in the Struggle for a Better Vietnam

In the scope of the world, the indigenous Khmer-Krom community in the Mekong Delta lacks platforms to express its grievances and recommendations, due to active repression by a regime that has enjoyed political and moral impunity since the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. In
light of the historical repression of the Khmer-Krom community, the fact that the rights of the Khmer-Krom are still subjected to trade agendas remains appalling to UNPO. While a human rights dialogue does exist between the EU and Vietnam, the current situation shows that with regards to countries like Vietnam, the EU does not wish to risk jeopardising economic benefits for the sakes of unquantifiable values like human rights.

Future Developments

The image of the EU is important in the long-term relations between the Union and the rest of the world. Let us return to the original thesis - that the EVFTA is highly probably to become the main tool of leverage for Vietnam to improve its human rights record. The EU is not a ‘power’ in the American sense of the term: Its population is flexible, it has limited common foreign policy, and above all, its values are truly soft in the context of contemporary world.

Inasmuch as being interested in remaining the biggest economy in the world, the EU is also interested in exporting human rights to the world. Since 1995 when development agreements with the EU started to include elements of political conditionality based on human rights, the EU has managed to carry out Europeanisation in many parts of the world. For this reason, it is also reasonable to presume that Vietnam is not an exception, but rather just another country, whose relation with the EU has moved from development to trade. What remains, is the question of what are the long-term benefits of this FTA to the EU? Human rights.

In light of this reflection it is reasonable to presume that the plight of the Khmer-Krom people shall remain an important point of reference in the further discussion concerning human rights in Vietnam.
LATEST NEWS: OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER 2018

Nov 21-22, 2018
Dragon Boat Racing

Coinciding with the rice harvesting season, the Ork Ombok festival is the largest of the year. A festive celebration of the Khmer-Krom culture, it foresees preparation of Ombok, a ceremonial rice dish, participating in religious activities and dragon-boat racing. Whilst the religious aspect is nature-oriented, hoping for good weather for the coming year to ensure a fruitful harvest once again, then the Dragon Boat Racing (Pronang Touk Ngo) is an event held in celebration and memory of the Khmer-Krom navy that was victorious on the Bassac river.

Whist in recent years the Vietnamese government has harnessed Pronang Touk Ngo to attract tourists in the Mekong Delta as an extension of the tourism season, it is also a positive sign that the Khmer-Krom community is allowed to take part in their cultural activities. It is a small victory for the community, but there also remains the problem that the profits made are usually gathered by the authorities and thus not re-invested back into the Khmer-Krom community which holds the festival.

The Dragon Boat Racing festival had a successful turnout of 51 teams. If men race on a 1,200-meter (3/4 mile) track, the women’s division race lasts for 1000 meters (5/8 mile). Men’s competition was won by the Pong Tuk Chas temple; women’s competition was won by the Tum Nup temple.

Perhaps most significantly, and also evident from the way in which the winders are announced, it is in fact the Khmer-Krom temples that enter a team into competition. In this way, the Dragon Boat Race serves as a celebration of the Khmer-Krom culture.

Oct-Nov, 2018
UNPO and KKF Submitted Reports to the United Nations Committee Against Torture

In October the KKF and UNPO submitted two separate reports to the United Nations Committee Against Torture (UNCAT), as Vietnam was under review. Whilst the two reports complemented each other perfectly, they remained quite different in nature.

The report submitted by the KKF contained practical episodes of how the human rights of the indigenous Khmer-Krom people have been violated since Vietnam ratified the Convention against Torture in 2015. UNPO’s report remained focused on analysis of domestic and international legislation, especially concerning the new Penal Code effective as of this year.

The fruitful cooperation between KKF and UNPO was primarily characterised by a good and productive dynamic, trying to address the wider issue of NGO cooperation which is particularly significant in our times.
INTERVIEW: SEREIVUTH PRAK, PRESIDENT OF THE KHMERS KAMPUCHEA-KROM FEDERATION (KKF)

Ahead of the annual meeting of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation in San Jose from 7 to 9 December 2018, it is most suitable to conduct an interview with the President of the KKF. Mr Prak started to work for the KKF in 1995, almost 25 years ago, and became the functioning helm of the organisation in late 2016. After two years of presidency, Mr Prak has intensified the organisation’s ties in the EU and beyond, and has started a renewed interest in the plight of the Khmer-Krom community in the Mekong Delta. Apart from hard politics and his important role, Mr Prak continues to carry out his duties with humility and diligence. To find out his long-term vision of the KKF and the role it should play, but also some insights into his own personal journey, read the interview below!

Mr Son told me about the Khmer-Krom refugees from Vietnam in Thailand, who were not allowed to go to the USA. At the time, there were only 3-4 refugee codes (officially agreed two letter signs for a geographic indication of a refugee) from Indochina: KH for Khmers from Cambodia like me; HM for Hmong in Laos; and VN for Vietnam, but the Khmer-Krom had no code and were listed as Vietnamese. So we recommended that “KK” be added for the Khmer-Krom. The American officials added the code in, but there was a problem: they had to deport or “repatriate” the refugees first, before they could come back and re-apply. So they were sent back to Vietnam and about 6-12 months later, they reapplied. I did not even know until I attended a KKF conference and people came up to thank me after hearing my name!

Interview of Sereivuth Prak, President of the KKF

1- Start by introducing yourself; where are you from and what is your story?

My name is Sereivuth Prak; I was born and raised in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Growing up I heard about the Khmer-Krom because my grandmother on my father’s side was born and raised in the Mekong Delta. But I had no idea what was happening to the Khmer-Krom in Vietnam until later

2- When did you first start working for the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF)?

I started to work for the KKF in 1995. Former Executive President Edward Son asked for help, as he had done multiple times before, but I had always refused because I had no clue about the situation of the Khmer-Krom. Then in 1995 I don’t know why I accepted – coincidence or destiny – but I could not refuse anymore.

3- How did you become the President of KKF?

In late 2016, the board asked me to become president as I had been VP for 12-15 years so I had a lot of experience. But I refused, I didn’t want the title and I was worried I lack the qualities and ability to sacrifice. It’s a position that means a lot of travel, a lot of flights and a lot of stress. Finally, we asked Mr Vien Thach to be President, but he’s an old man – over 80 years old – and he didn’t want it either. But he said that if no one took it, the organisation could not continue to exist; so that’s why we asked him to at least take it temporarily.
Eventually, because we were running without a head, I accepted – but I said to them, whenever they want me to step down I will happily do so! I feel satisfied that at least, the knowledge I gained from public service I can use to help the Khmer-Krom. I am happier working for KKF than a lot of people who earn a lot of money at their jobs.

4- What do you think is one of the biggest challenges for the KKF in the next few years?

The obvious concern is money; we’re struggling to get funds to continue our work. Everyone in the organisation is a volunteer and the money comes from donations. We are like the Buddhist temples in Kampuchea-Krom, who rely heavily on the neighbouring villagers and community to survive.

We aren’t a superpower, a country, a nation-state. We’re a “nobody”, we don’t have enough power or authority to make Vietnam respect our rights or to make the US and Canada support us. For a lot of these powers, human rights are secondary considerations to trade and employment – like the EU at the moment with the EVFTA. Of course, when you show them human rights violations they care, but it’s peanuts compared to their priorities. Our people, both back home and in the diaspora, don’t always understand; they thought, when they offered us the money, they could expect quick results.

5- What is your message to the Khmer-Krom community, in Vietnam and beyond?

Be patient. Eastern Europe, including the former USSR, never dreamed to regain their freedom from the communist regime. For almost 100 years most of them were trapped, only a few could escape. Yet today, the USSR no longer exists and the Berlin Wall has become a museum. It was beyond peoples’ expectations; many people died before they could see it happen, but now the younger generation can enjoy its freedom.

For the Khmer Krom, who live under Vietnam’s oppression, they have to think that if the Eastern Europeans can have their freedom after almost a century, we are going to have freedom too one day.

I also want to reach out to the young Khmer-Krom people, and encourage them to join KKF and help us work for our human rights. We don’t want to become an organisation run entirely by older people, we’re not trying to hold onto power or prestige. We want younger generations to come and build on the work we started.

6- Why did the KKF join UNPO?

I think UNPO will have a big role to play, in the future, at the UN’s side. The UN has 193 nation-states; each of those nation-states have their internal problems, of which one is the indigenous problem, which they try to bury and ignore. Those little nations called indigenous people are like a brushfire, because they mostly sit on the hotspots of economic competition and interest. The diplomacy system is outdated; it cannot be effective in today’s world like it was in the 1940s. So you cannot go to the UN Security Council to fix this, you go to the indigenous people, you study their history, culture, language.

And the organisation that has that expertise is the UNPO. They know the root causes of the problems. Of course right now they [the international community] try and ignore the UNPO, but I think one day they could be the middleman between the unrepresented and the rest of world. That’s my hope, and UNPO has been very helpful in working side by side with its Members, including the KKF. It is our moral obligation to help one another.

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FIND OUT MORE

- **UNPO Report** to UNCAT on Abuses Towards Khmer-Krom in Vietnam (October 2018)

UPCOMING EVENTS

- 2018 Annual Meeting of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF) in San Jose 7-9 December.

Every Tuesday on Instagram: #KhmerKromTuesday

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