Focus Points:
International Year of Indigenous Languages

2019 Conference on the Khmer-Krom’s Right to Self-Determination

Latest News:
January-March 2019

Interview:
Youth President of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation
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 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.
International Year of Indigenous Languages

A Year to Honour Indigenous Languages

On January 2019 began the International Year of Indigenous Languages. This special year-long celebration illustrates the importance of indigenous languages around the world and presents a perfect occasion for holding events and developing projects aimed at preserving, revitalising and promoting these endangered languages.

The United Nations (UN) highlighted the significance of indigenous languages in various areas of society such as economic and social development, peace building and more particularly in the expression of cultural identity and diversity. The disappearance of indigenous languages can only have negative effects on the lives of indigenous people, and we all should work against movements aiming at linguistic uniformity, whether it be led by political actors or triggered by the phenomenon of globalisation itself.

A Vocal Heritage Under Threat

Unlike the majority of Vietnam's population, the Khmer-Krom speak Khmer, a 2500-year-old language with its distinct phonology and writing system. The Khmer language is one of the most cherished cultural artefacts of the Khmer-Krom's identity, a heritage of all the intellectual achievements of the Khmer Empires throughout history, the beating heart of an entire community.

Indigenous peoples living in Vietnam are systematically subjected to human rights violations as the case of the repression of people using the Khmer language illustrates. The Khmer-Krom in the Mekong Delta have been facing restrictions in learning and practicing their language for a while. This goes beyond forbidding the use of language in public spaces, as authorities even attempt to interfere into practice at home. Arrests are also common. For instance, Venerable Thach Thuol, a prominent Buddhist monk, has been under arrest since 2003 for speaking out against the repression facing the Khmer language in Vietnam, particularly towards children who constitute the potential future users of the language.

This year should be the opportunity not only to dive into the beautiful meanders of the Khmer language, but also to show our support to those who fight for the preservation and respect for this language. It is time to understand that language diversity does not go against modernity, but on the contrary, it illustrates the beauty and complexity of the human mind, and is one of the best examples of the most precious and unique aspects of humanity.
2019 Conference on Khmer-Krom’s Right to Self-Determination

A Second Symposium on the Khmer-Krom’s Right to Self-Determination

On Saturday 1 June 2019, the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF), the Hawai’i Institute for Human Rights (HIHR) and the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) will hold their Second Symposium on the Khmer-Krom’s Right to Self-Determination.

Ever since the transfer of Kampuchea-Krom by the French colonial power to the King Bao Dai government of Vietnam, the Khmer-Krom have been denied their collective rights, and their fundamental human rights have been relentlessly violated.

This event comes 13 years after a first symposium entitled “Self-Determination in International Law” where the three organizations successfully worked together in promoting and encouraging a greater respect for the rights of the Khmer-Krom.

The conference will consist in a moderated discussion focusing on the history of Kampuchea-Krom and the right to self-determination, including interventions from other nations and peoples having advocated for or seeking respect for their right to decide.
LATEST NEWS: JANUARY TO MARCH 2019

22 January 2019

Vietnam UPR in Geneva, Switzerland

The KKF sent a delegation of 3 representatives, Mr Joshua Cooper, Mr Alex Thach and Mr Sivette Lam, to the UN Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Vietnam.

This follows months of work from the KKF and UNPO in putting together a report aimed at this year’s UPR of Vietnam. The report draws attention to the human rights violations occurring in the country, highlighting the restriction of freedom of religion, the lack of recognition of indigenous communities and limitations imposed on legal and procedural rights.

9 March 2019

IWD in Philadelphia, United States

Every year on 8 March since 1975, the UN and the world celebrate International Women’s Day (IWD), a day on which various events and projects related to women’s rights take place. It is an occasion to highlight human rights violations and discrimination toward women, as well as celebrate womanhood and the improvements regarding equal rights between genders. It stresses the importance for women to take on roles in every field of society.

The KKF strives to make gender equality reality within the organisation. On 8 March 2019, it organised an event in Philadelphia to celebrate this day. The event honoured the women members of the organisation for their hard work and contribution to the Khmer-Krom cause, but also highlighted the struggles that Khmer-Krom women are facing in Kampuchea-Krom.

Like anyone in their community, they are being discriminated against due to their indigenous status, but also for being women. This double discrimination can be witnessed in the field of health as well as in education, where women from ethnic minorities represent the community with the lowest literacy rate.

While Khmer-Krom diaspora women are able to enjoy equal rights, one should not forget about those still fighting against double discrimination in Kampuchea-Krom.

11-12 March 2019

3rd review of Vietnam in the framework of the ICCPR

Vietnam being a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), it should be committed to respecting the right to life, freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, electoral rights and rights to due process and fair trials. 2019 marked the 3rd time Vietnam went through review regarding its respect of the covenant, 17 years after the last review.

The KKF sent a delegation to the review session to give their inputs, especially regarding the right to self-determination enshrined in article 1 of the Covenant. Mr Son Hua, KKF General Secretary, made recommendations to the Committee members, focussing on the Khmer-Krom’s indigenous rights in Vietnam, the recognition of the existence of indigenous peoples in the Mekong Delta, freedom of religion and the right to establish private Khmer-Krom media.
INTERVIEW: SOTHY KIEN, PRESIDENT OF THE KKFYC

With the Unrepresented Women campaign launched one month ago, it was only natural for us to interview a woman for this month’s newsletter. Ms Sothy Kien, a young and dynamic Khmer-Krom activist, has been a member of the KKF Board of Directors since 2013, as well as the president of the KKF Youth Committee (KKFYC).

Interview of Sothy Kien, President of the KKFYC

1- Introduction to your people: who are the Khmer-Krom and what are the issues they are facing?

Although Vietnam supported the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, Vietnam has not taken any steps to recognise our people as an indigenous people of Vietnam. They continue to face a range of human rights issues from a lack of freedom of religion and association to limited access to education in their indigenous language and land confiscation. Because of the poverty and lack of job opportunities at the provincial level, many of our Khmer-Krom have been forced to relocate to already crowded cities and accept low-paying jobs.

2- What work or activism are you engaged in?

To help amplify the voices of the Khmer-Krom people, we work diligently to create an awareness of the issues facing our people by submitting reports and delivering speeches and recommendations at different human rights mechanisms and conferences such as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), the UPR, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) and the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

As the youth president of the KKFYC, my mission is to inspire and motivate our Khmer-Krom youth to learn about their identity and roots and help create more leaders to help KKF achieve its goals.

3- What or who inspired you to become an activist?

In order to know where we want to go in the future, I believe it is important to know our past and where we come from. My journey started in 2000, when I googled the word “Khmer” and the term “Khmer-Krom” came up. Curious, I asked my dad and he said that we were Khmer-Krom and what is currently Southern Vietnam used to be part of Cambodia. Upon further research, I found a website called the Khmer-Krom Network and learned about the work of the KKF. In 2005, I had the opportunity to visit my parent’s hometown and was amazed that the stories he told me were true. I had the opportunity to meet my relatives and witness the daily struggles of our people. I remember asking one lady about her child and if she went to school. She said no because they had nothing to live on and...
couldn't afford to send her to school. That made me sad. In the same year, I had an opportunity to meet members of the KKF and attend the UNPFII as well as conducting my first ever peaceful demonstration to protest against the visit of Vietnam's President to Washington, DC.

4- What are some of the challenges you have experience in your work and life?

As an activist living abroad, I face challenges that are different from the ones faced by those who live inside Kampuchea-Krom. One of the biggest challenges is finding time to do things that matter to me, such as working on the Khmer-Krom issue. As a working mother of four young children, finding time to write an article or travelling to a conference is difficult because it takes a lot of coordination and effort. I think it's important to recognise that we have phases in our lives that lead us to prioritising different things and that is okay. Recognising that there will be a time, when the kids are older, when I can participate more fully and make a greater impact. While these challenges are real, I feel it pales in comparison to the challenges that our people face daily in Kampuchea-Krom such as poverty, restricted freedom of religion and expression and lack of access to education and job opportunities.

5- Do you experience additional challenges as a woman? Are women treated differently compared to men in your society?

While we are fortunate to live in a democratic society that promotes equality, there are still traditional culture values and expectations that bring additional challenges to me. For example, I work full time but am still expected do the majority of the house work and cooking.

I believe that women are treated differently because of the values and social expectation placed upon them by tradition and customs. A woman is valued and respected, but her voice may not be heard. In the community, there are very few if any Khmer-Krom women who hold leadership positions because they are often the ones responsible for taking care of the family. These traditional roles are changing because many of us are forced to work in order to make ends meet.

6- What do the words “self-determination” and “independence” mean to you?

They mean different things to different people. For me, self-determination means having the ability to determine your future without fear of persecution and to fully enjoy and exercise your rights as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the national constitution of the country you live in. For the Khmer-Krom, 2019 marks 70 years in which the people has been under the colonisation of Vietnam. It is truly time for the Khmer-Krom to learn and explore what self-determination means to them as individuals and as a collective unrepresented and unrecognised group, as stated under UNDRIP.

Independence to me means being free from control by someone or some country. It is about having the power to think and act freely without being subjected to unfair bias, harassment or receiving punishment because of who you are and what you believe in.

7- What does “empowerment” mean to you?

To empower someone is to make them strong so that they are able to control their own destiny and claim their rights and freedoms. When you empower women, you inspire them to participate beyond the confines of the kitchen walls and contribute to society as teachers, scientists and leaders within the community. It is important to empower to be inclusive and promote equality for all.
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- 2019 Vietnam UPR Report

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Second Symposium on the Khmer-Krom's Right to Self-Determination

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