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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Stichting Global Human Rights Defence, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[5 February 2024]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Religious Oppression and Urgent Appeal for Human Rights Council Intervention: The Plight of the Khmer-Krom in the Mekong Delta

The Stichting Global Human Rights Defence urgently calls attention to the profoundly alarming situation of religious oppression faced by the Khmer-Krom people, the indigenous population in the Mekong Delta, Southern Viet Nam. This written submission aims to illuminate the various forms of religious persecution endured by the Khmer-Krom community and earnestly appeals to the Human Rights Council for immediate intervention.

Historical Context:

The Khmer-Krom community, deeply rooted in Theravada Buddhism with a history spanning over a thousand years, has been a stronghold of cultural preservation and religious practice. Temples such as the Sampua-Ransi temple, dating back to 373 CE in Preah Trapeang (Tra Vinh) province, serve not only as places of worship but also as educational centers fostering language study and cultural preservation. Despite constitutional assurances of the right to form associations (Article 25) and freedom of religion and belief (Article 24), the Khmer-Krom cannot organize independent religious organizations.

The Law on Belief and Religion:

The enactment of the "Law on Belief and Religion" on November 18, 2016, has become a tool for suppressing fundamental rights, particularly freedom of religion and belief. This law mandates religious groups to register with authorities and report their activities, but the registration process is subject to arbitrary refusals. Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks face coercion to join the government-controlled Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), with refusal resulting in threats, intimidation, and expulsion from monkhood.

Control and Restrictions:

The VBS exerts significant control over the Khmer-Krom's religious practices, including appointing abbots, altering temple stamps and Buddhist identifications to exclude the Khmer language, and mandating attendance at government-sponsored workshops. The suppression extends to language, with Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks restricted from speaking Khmer in conferences on Khmer-Krom Theravada Buddhism.

Censorship and Monitoring:

Authorities closely monitor and control the teaching curriculum in Khmer-Krom temples, restricting the freedom of Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks to educate their community. Moreover, the government denies Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks the right to publish books freely, issuing textbooks with numerous grammatical errors. This censorship impedes intellectual and spiritual growth within the Khmer-Krom community.

Incidents of Violence and Harassment:

In July 2021, authorities prohibited Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers from building a preaching Hall in the Tong Hung hamlet, Loan My village, Tam Binh district, Vinh Long province. Strategic use of the VBS denied the Khmer-Krom community the right to build a place for worship and cultural preservation.

On March 23, 2022, authorities resorted to violence by cutting down a sacred 700-year-old tree at a Khmer-Krom temple in Dai Tho hamlet, Loan My village, Tam Binh district, Vinh Long province. The Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks resisted, resulting in physical violence against one of the monks.

Escalation of Violence:

On November 28, 2022, Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks were arbitrarily stopped by the police in Dai Tho hamlet, Loan My village, during their routine trip to collect food offerings. The arbitrary stop, accompanied by threats of arrest and fines, was documented through a Livestream on their Facebook page. This harassment is suspected to be linked to their support for building a Religious Hall, an endeavor consistently under threat by authorities.

The violence reached a disturbing escalation on November 22, 2023, when non-uniformed authorities, accompanied by local gang members, disrupted a Khmer language class at the Tro Nom Sek temple. Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks requesting them to leave were subjected to a violent attack, leading to injuries to the Abbot and two Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers.

Resilient Responses:

In response to continual injustice and constraints on practicing Theravada Buddhism under the control of the VBS, the Abbot of Tra Nom Sek temple publicly declared on December 31, 2022, that the temple would no longer operate under VBS influence. Additionally, a Khmer-Krom activist, previously apprehended for distributing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), chose to be ordained as a Buddhist monk on January 5, 2023, finding refuge in the Tro Nom Sek temple.

Urgent Appeal for Human Rights Council Intervention:

In light of these egregious violations of religious freedom, the Stichting Global Human Rights Defence urgently appeals to the Human Rights Council to intervene and seek justice for the Khmer-Krom community:

1. Enable the Khmer-Krom to re-establish an independent religious organization free from government interference, as they were able to do before 1975.
2. Cease the intimidation of Khmer-Krom villagers and allow them to complete the construction of the religious Hall without oppression.
3. Grant Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks the freedom to teach the Khmer language in their temples without government interference.
4. Condemn the use of violence against Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks defending their religious rights or safeguarding sacred sites.
5. Strongly denounce the actions and demand respect for Khmer-Krom's rights to practice their religion without government interference.
6. Call on the concerned authorities to immediately cease the use of non-uniformed authorities and gangsters to assault Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks.
7. Stop using tactics of not recognizing Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks who stand up for religious freedom so that the authorities can defrock them.

The situation faced by the Khmer-Krom community in the Mekong Delta is dire, with severe violations of their fundamental human rights, particularly their right to freedom of religion and belief. The Human Rights Council's prompt intervention is crucial to ensuring the protection of religious liberty and upholding the rights of the Khmer-Krom community. We implore the Human Rights Council to act swiftly to address this urgent matter and contribute to promoting human rights in the Mekong Delta.
