



Khmer Krom



STATISTICS

Status: Unrecognised Indigenous Group

Population: 8,240,000

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

Area: 89,000km² (in Vietnam)

Language: Khmer

Religion: Theravada Buddhism

UNPO REPRESENTATION

The Khmer Krom are represented at the UNPO by the Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation. They were admitted to the UNPO as a member in November of 2003.

OVERVIEW

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Kampuchea Krom means "Cambodia Below" or "South Cambodia". "Krom" in Khmer also indicates "Southern." 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 South-western part of Vietnam, covering an area of 89,000 km² with 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 or 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 2000 years before Christ. 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 neighbours, and since 1949 their territory has been under Vietnamese administration, much to the detriment of the Khmer Krom. They are denied the right to freely practise their religion and pass on their culture, and are generally treated as second-class citizens.

The mission of the Khmer Krom 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 non-violent measures and the application of international law.



POLITICAL SITUATION

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Despite regional ties and a close relationship fostered with the peoples living in Cambodia over the years, the territory of the Khmer Krom was incorporated into Vietnam in 1949, rather than into Cambodia. As a result, the Khmer Krom peoples are viewed in Vietnam as Khmer and in Cambodia as Vietnamese. In addition, under the Presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem (1955 - 1963) all Khmer names were changed into Vietnamese, forever altering Khmer identity. Vietnam, until this day, does not fully recognize them as being the indigenous peoples of the Mekong Delta. Over the past decades, the Khmer Krom have suffered from religious persecution, ethnic discrimination and governmental policies taking away their ancestral lands. Khmer people wishing to enforce their rights as laid down by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights often face violence, arbitrary arrest and on occasion, torture.

UNPO PERSPECTIVE

The UNPO strongly supports the non-violent search of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation for their rights. Even though the Vietnamese government has incorporated key human rights into their national constitution, and even though it has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the implementation of these rights remains very poor. The UNPO believes that a lack of political will from the Vietnamese government inhibits the human rights of the Khmer Krom from being respected. More specifically, the UNPO believes in the need to put the settlement of land claims higher on the political agenda, and in the importance of drawing more attention to the issues of religious persecution, targeted violence and linguistic repression.



UNPO PERSPECTIVE

UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

The **Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF)** is an organization that represents over eight million Khmer Krom around the world, and has been a member of the UNPO since 2003.

The regional officers of the KKF act as representatives of the Khmer Krom people. The leaders of KKF are democratically elected by the officers of the federation. These officers are the presidents of various Khmer Krom Associations as well as community leaders from around the world, including Australia, Cambodia, Canada, France, New Zealand, and the United States. The objective of KKF is to campaign, with the principle of non-violence, for the recognition of the rights of the indigenous people in Kampuchea-Krom in accordance with international conventions.

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 sixth century, a series of civil wars broke apart what had been the Nokor Empire, comprised of modern-day Cambodia as well as Kampuchea Krom. After a brief occupation by Sumatran invaders, the Angkor Phom (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 Vietnam was caught up in a civil war between the Trinh Dynasty in the north and the Nguyen Dynasty in central Vietnam. In order to bolster their position, the Nguyen leader enacted a campaign known as “Nam Tien”, or “Southward Expansion”. Through intermarriage the Nguyens 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 Krom 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 Vien Te canal, designed to create a border between Kampuchea (Cambodia) and Kampuchea-Krom. Thousands

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UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



CURRENT ISSUES

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. Others who had dared to rebel were buried up to their necks and their heads used to support the kettles with which tea was boiled.

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 themselves, re-naming it Cochin-China. Under the French colonisers, the Khmer Krom were granted a temporary reprieve from outright persecution; however, the French heavily favoured the Vietnamese, utilizing them in the administration of the territory while prohibiting the Khmer Krom from rising above the status of labourers. In 1949, the French National Assembly met in Paris to make a decision regarding Cochin China. Disregarding the protestations of the Khmer Krom delegation, on June 4th 1949 the Assembly 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.

CURRENT ISSUES

1. Land ownership:

After 1975 the possession of land was made illegal as part of the Land Reform Acts, enacted to implement the Proletarian Revolution. Privately owned Khmer Krom land was confiscated, preventing the Khmer Krom from making a living. After the complete confiscation of the lands, the communist government gradually began selling off the land again, meaning the Khmer Krom were effectively forced to buy back their own land to ensure their survival.

Those families or communities that could not afford to buy back their farms became tenants on their own land. However, the government officials or their families kept back the most fertile land for themselves, leaving the Khmer Krom communities to starve.

The economic status of the Khmer Krom has largely shifted from land-owners to physical labourers, who are paid on average less than 1 US\$ per working day. They are living ten times below the poverty level.

2. Environmental problems:

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

The destruction of the mangroves due to flooding is an intensifying factor to this problem, which also kills sizable numbers of the population as well as destroys the 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 leads to the loss of lives, harvests and the mangrove swamps.



3. Linguistic restrictions:

The KKF 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, scores of Khmers-Krom have been harassed, jailed, and generally persecuted for speaking, learning or teaching the Khmer language. The Vietnamese authorities severely restrict the publication of books or documents in Khmer.



During the presidency of the Republic of South Vietnam (1955-1963), Ngo Dinh Diem ordered that all Khmer names be changed to Vietnamese. As a result of this decree, some of those who worked for the government, including military officers, lost their Khmer identity.

4. Religious restrictions:

In the 1970s virtually all traditional religious activities ceased, due to government restrictions and the harsh poverty endured by the community. The Vietnamese government sought to limit the impact of the traditional Khmer Theravada Buddhism by imposing a long series of restrictions. For example, the government banned the restoration of existing temples as well as the construction of new ones.

This posed a serious problem as a vast number of temples had been damaged or destroyed during the Indochina wars, and these temples had functioned as the centre of traditional Khmer village life and culture. Other restrictions included an age limit for ordination into the priesthood and government controls over monetary donations given to the religious institutions by the public. Such actions are readily identifiable as a sophisticated campaign to decentralize, fractionalize and reduce the influence of Theravada Buddhism on the Khmer Krom in Vietnam.

Today, the current authorities have lifted these restrictions to a certain extent, and have allowed the Khmer Krom to resume their religious practices and renovate their temples. However, the Vietnamese authorities still 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. One notable case is that of abbot Tim Sa Khorn, who was arrested in Cambodia in July 2007, deported to Vietnam, and sentenced to prison in November 2007. He had fled Vietnam in 1979 to avoid persecution, and campaigned for Khmer Krom rights from Cambodia, before receiving political asylum in Sweden in July 2009.



KEY QUESTIONS

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1. What are the guiding principles of the Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation?

The guiding principles of the peaceful struggles of the Khmer Krom people have been very consistent throughout history. They seek to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To take appropriate measures, based on the principles of non-violence, to assure the rights of the Khmer Krom people to fundamental freedoms, human dignity, and self-determination according to the Charter of the United Nations.
- b) To protect the culture, religions, traditions and identity of the Khmer Krom people from assimilationist forces.
- c) To advocate for the conservation of the natural resources of the Khmer Krom, such as farmland and forests, in the face of illegal and deceitful deprivation.
- d) To promote social, economic and intellectual development of the Khmer Krom, both in Vietnam and abroad.
- e) To develop peace, harmony, respect, understanding and cooperation between the Khmer Krom people and others, including the Vietnamese people.



2. How has the UN assisted the Khmer Krom in their pursuit of human rights?

Recently, the UN (United Nations) officials at Geneva have been made aware of the religious oppression of the Khmer Krom people in Vietnam, a violation of one of their major human rights. The Khmer Krom are glad that the mountain of sufferings their people have experienced has been recognized for the first time. 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.

3. What are the goals of the Khmer Krom?

The Khmer Krom are the indigenous people of the Mekong Delta. They do not expect anything more than recognition of their legitimacy as a people. Their rights have been decreed by the Charter of the United Nations and by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and they demand no more than the rights granted them in these documents.

4. Are the Khmer Krom pursuing an independent state or self-government?

Given the historic interactions between the Khmer Krom and the Vietnamese government, the Khmer Krom would welcome an independent state. However, the Khmer Krom recognize the reality of the modern international situation. Since one of their major objectives is "to develop peace, harmony, respect, understanding and cooperation between the Khmer Krom people and others, including the Vietnamese people", the Khmer Krom people embrace other forms of self-determination. One option would be to self-govern with the involvement of the international community.



5. Are the Khmer Krom under threat from assimilation and loss of identity?

If the current situation persists, the eventuality of total assimilation into Vietnamese culture is not a threat, but a reality.

In 'A History of Southeast Asia' (1981), D.G.E. Hall's describes how: *"The Saigon area, the Water Chen-la of the ancient Khmer Kingdom, was a tempting field for Vietnamese expansion. It had a population of [...] about 40,000 families"*.

From this we see that there was a significant number of Khmer Krom families in the areas around Saigon before the arrival of Vietnamese settlers. These families disappeared completely. Originally, there were about 700 Khmer Buddhist temples all over South Vietnam. However, under the Vietnamese government's hostile policies of assimilation, many temples were destroyed, as were the Khmer communities surrounding them. The number of remaining Khmer Buddhist temples is now reduced to between 460 and 500. The Khmer Krom temples are constantly scrutinized by the agents of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (a branch of the Vietnamese communist government). They strictly limit religious practices and attempt to change the character of Khmer cultural expression in order to assimilate them into Vietnamese culture.



6. What programmes are in place to protect and preserve the culture of the Khmer Krom?

The teaching of the Khmer language and the cultural heritage is still against the law in Vietnam, resulting in the harsh treatment of the Khmer Krom under the Vietnamese government. Consequentially, 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 histories offer inadequate explanations to fundamental questions related to the Khmer Krom such as *'How did Vietnam encroach on the Khmer's land?'* The children of the Khmer Krom, generation after generation, have been misled by Vietnam's educational systems 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 has also submitted a report about Vietnam's human rights violations to the UN via the Universal Periodic Review Mechanism, and hosts conferences to raise awareness about their plight.



DATES OF SPECIAL INTEREST

As the Khmer Krom generally do not use the Gregorian calendar, holidays fall on different dates each year.

Bonn Chaul Chhnam

New Year; usually celebrated around April 13th.

Visak Bochea

Commemoration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha; celebrated in May.

Chol Preah Vasa

The beginning of the three-month monks' retreat; celebrated in July.

Bonn Pechum

The Feast of the Dead; celebrated in September/October.

Bonn Phka

The Flower Festival; celebrated in November.



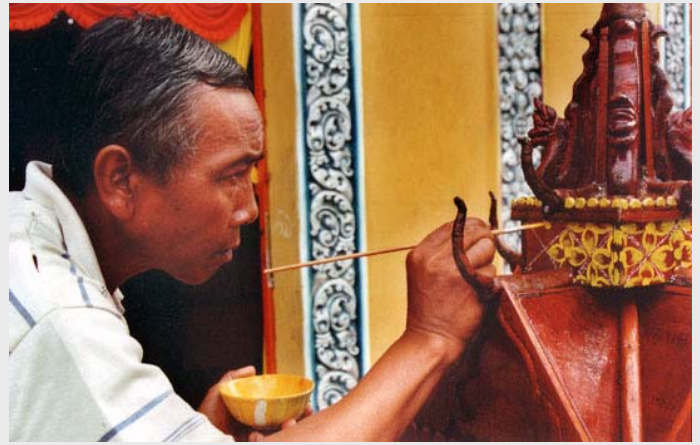
INTERESTING FACT

When two Khmer decide to marry, marriage dates are often set according to astrological signs.

CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Religion

Approximately 95 percent of Khmers-Krom are Buddhists. They practice Theravada Buddhism, whereas the majority Vietnamese population practice Mahayana 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 Khmers Krom, Theravada Buddhism influences all aspects of life to a much greater extent than do religions in the West.

The Khmer Krom sees 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 580 temples and more than 10,000 monks throughout Kam-puchea-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, 450 in the delta of Mekong, 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% of Khmer Krom speak and write Vietnamese correctly. Its use is highest in rural zones, and it 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 governments. 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.



Agriculture

Agriculture is very important in Vietnam. 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 then dried to preserve them. Some Khmer Krom are also engaged in trade, selling such items as home-made brooms.



RELEVANT LINKS:

The Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Foundation

<http://khmerkrom.org/>

Voice of Kampuchea-Krom (Radio)

<http://vokk.net/>

KI Media - Independent Cambodian Reporting

<http://ki-media.blogspot.com/>

Khmer Kampuchea-Krom Federation Youth Committee

<http://www.kkfyc.org/>

Tra Set Mekong Lifeways - Smithsonian Project on the Khmer Krom

<http://www.folklife.si.edu/resources/mekong/ECpage.html>



All pictures courtesy of the Tra Set Mekong Lifeways project and stock.xchng

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