

# KHMER-KROM NEWSLETTER

N. 1

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2018

## MEET THE KHMER-KROM

Focus Point:

From Yesterday's History to  
Today's Reality

Latest News:

July and August 2018

Inspiring Initiative:

Khmer-Krom Youth



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ព្រះឥសាន លី មីន្ទា



Venerable Thach Thuol



Venerable Liu Ry



Venerable Ly C

## | 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: FROM YESTERDAY'S HISTORY TO TODAY'S REALITY

### Khmer-Krom Empire, French Colonisation and Vietnamese Occupation: A Brief History

From the **9<sup>th</sup>** to the **13<sup>th</sup>** century, the '**Khmer Empire**' rose to prominence in continental southeast Asia, through the conquest of current-day Thailand and Laos. However, the progressive decline of the Empire following this period was marked by **waves of 'Vietnamisation'**, with the Mekong Delta being at stake due its geostrategic location and resources. Ever since the 1600s, the Khmer-Krom have sought to defend their territory against their Vietnamese and Siam neighbours and enemies.

With this struggle reaching a peak in the **19<sup>th</sup>** century, Khmer King Ang Duong appealed to French Emperor Napoléon III, who was one of his allies at the time. **French troops** arrived in 1852 and, after taking power over the Vietnamese invaders, they colonised the area. It suddenly became '**French Cochinchina**'. French settlers used ethnic dissension in order to enforce their hierarchical domination, while overly exploiting the area and its economic resources.

In **1954**, after a century of colonial rule over the Kampuchea-Krom territory, **French**

**authorities arbitrarily gave this territory to Vietnam** despite Cambodian claims on the area. Even though this status was meant to be provisional, the **1954 Geneva Convention** officially incorporated this territory as part of South Vietnam. Since then, the **Vietnamese State has authoritatively ruled over the Khmer-Krom** people.



Throughout its history, the **Khmer-Krom's 'homeland' has thus been infringed upon, diminished and neglected.** Kampuchea-Krom today represents one fifth of the whole territory of Vietnam, with the Khmer-Krom being the majority ethnic group in the area. However, they keep suffering from constant intents of **assimilation** and **acculturation** by the Vietnamese government.



**Status:** Unrecognised indigenous group

**Population:** 7 million

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

**Area:** 67,700 km<sup>2</sup> (in Vietnam)

**Language:** Khmer, Vietnamese

**Religions:** Theravada Buddhism, Roman Catholic

## Ongoing Human Rights Violations Committed Against the Khmer-Krom

The long-lasting repression of the Khmer-Krom has been driven by the government's economic interests in the Mekong Delta region, the religious differences with the national authorities and the fear from the latter of seeing a divergent and meaningful political force arise.

### Political Liberties and Freedom of Expression

While the Vietnamese Constitution allegedly protects freedom of expression and information, many activists, bloggers and journalists who do not align with the Communist Party's official position are silenced, harassed and jailed. When they are arrested, the Khmer-Krom are sometimes victims of enforced disappearances, as exemplified by the cases of Venerable Thach Thuol and Venerable Lieu Ny and two of their Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers, disappeared on 20 May 2013.



Photo courtesy of [Heimkhemra Suy](#) @Flickr

### Linguistic Restrictions

With the intention of acculturating the indigenous peoples living in Vietnam, the government has promoted monolingualism, thereby fiercely restraining the use of the Khmer language in public spaces, schools and political forums. Frequently denounced by the Khmer-Krom as a violation of their collective rights, the enduring limitations imposed upon the use of their Khmer native language have threatened the transmission of their cultural identity.

### Freedom of Religion

Since 365BC, Buddhism has been at the heart of the Khmer-Krom's religious, spiritual and social life. As part of their self-identification, Theravada Buddhism has been constantly targeted by the

Vietnamese government. On 18 November 2016, the adoption of the Law on Belief and Religion worsened the situation as it requires all religious groups to officially register, while authorising the government to refuse certain registrations for undisclosed reasons.

### Economic and Social Rights

The Khmer-Krom have been noticeably marginalised and excluded from economic and social benefits. Not only do they endure high levels of structural poverty, but they are also often denied access to basic health or education services. In comparison with the average population, they experience disproportionate rates of grave diseases, like blindness due to water contamination.

### Land Rights

As an indigenous people, land is considered of the utmost importance for the Khmer-Krom. In addition to providing them with agricultural and economic resources, land is also a precondition for their cultural and spiritual preservation. However, since the Proletarian Revolution of the 1970s and the expropriation of many communities from their territories, the Khmer-Krom have never been returned their original lands.

### Khmer-Krom Resistance

In the face of repression and discrimination, the **Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation** (KKF) has sought to defend the principle of self-determination and the implementation of international law regarding the rights of indigenous peoples. Through the use of non-violent measures, they have intended to represent and protect the Khmer-Krom people.



Photo courtesy of [Heimkhemra Suy](#) @Flickr

[Read more](#) about the Khmer-Krom

## LATEST NEWS: JULY & AUGUST 2018

Jul 16, 2018

### Khmer-Krom: Vietnamese Restrictions on Freedom of Religion

Even though the Vietnamese Constitution formally recognises the right of all minorities to freely exercise their own faiths, the restrictions imposed in practice pose a **serious threat to the freedom of communities to practice their religions**.

The complex system of permissions designed by the Vietnamese legislation represents a considerable obstacle for these communities, which often adds to the **harassment** and **violence** committed by the State apparatus against religious activists and figures.

🔍 [Read the full article](#) by spectator.org.



Photo courtesy of [maxpixel.net](#)

Jul 17, 2018

### UNPO Submitted Report to the 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Universal Periodic Review

On 12 July 2018, the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), in collaboration with the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF), submitted a **report to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights**, on the occasion of the 32<sup>nd</sup> session of the Universal Periodic Review, during which Vietnam is under consideration.

This report draws attention to **human rights violations** occurring in the country with a particular focus on violations derived from the restriction of Freedom of Religion, the lack of recognition of indigenous communities by the Vietnamese government and the limitations imposed on legal and procedural rights.

🔍 [Read the full report](#) by UNPO.



Photo courtesy of [UN Geneva @Flickr](#)

## INSPIRING INITIATIVES: EMPOWERING KHMER- KROM YOUTH

Khmer-Krom activists have highlighted the importance of being **proud of their identity, history and culture**, especially face to Vietnam's attitude of denial and neglect. The **Khmer-Krom children and young adults** are particularly affected by assimilation policies that infringe upon their basic human rights. Not only are they forbidden to study their history in their native language, but they also have no access to magazines or booklets in Khmer language. Khmer-Krom students also face a lack of educational opportunities, often resulting in restricted access to universities as well as public forums to express their political opinions. **Empowerment through education has thus become a decisive challenge for the Khmer-Krom youth**, especially since they are the future leaders and potential representatives of this indigenous people.

### Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Youth Committee (KKFYC)

The **Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Youth Committee** (KKFYC) was originally created as an answer to this decisive challenge. This Committee of the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF) gathers numerous young people in order to develop advocacy strategies, while advancing the promotion of Khmer-Krom culture and history among the youth.

Both **material and immaterial communication tools** have been widely used to raise awareness among the Khmer-Krom youth. The *Khmer-Krom Youth Quaterly* is a journal published by the KKFYC with the intent to **revalorise the history, culture and education** of the indigenous group, which is not offered by public institutions. Facebook has also become a powerful and convenient tool to

gather the youth and spread out a **sense of belonging**, especially among the Khmer-Krom diaspora.

Every year the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation also sends a **delegate of young Khmer-Krom individuals** to take part in the **United Nation's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues**. This initiative allows young leaders to connect with NGOs, to better understand the UN system and to learn advocacy strategies that can benefit their people.



Photo courtesy of [KKMYC @Facebook](#)

🔍 Check out the [KKFYC Facebook page](#)

### Interview of Conduct Hang, Coordinator at KKFYC

*Conduct Hang is a youth coordinator for the Khmers-Kampuchea Krom Federation. She is a first-born Khmer-American, who was raised within the Khmer-Krom diaspora. She is currently a medical secretary at a family practice outside the Philadelphia area and will eventually be pursuing a Master's degree in Health Policy.*



#### 1-Why did you decide to get involved in KKFYC?

I struggled understanding my ethnic identity growing up in the United States. My parents raised me speaking the Khmer



language and partaking in a lot of festivities/observances at the Buddhist temple. When I had learned about religious oppression of the venerable monks at the Buddhist temple I attend, I inquired more about their journey here to the United States and what they have gone through. They actually were the ones to recommend getting into contact with members a part of KKFYC.

**2- How would you define KKFYC in one sentence?**

We are authentic in our indigenous identity by accepting our lived realities.

**3-What are KKFYC's main goals and how do you organize to reach them?**

The main goal of the KKFYC is for the Khmer-Krom youth, from those living in the Mekong Delta to those representing the Khmer-Krom diaspora, to recognise their indigenous identity. It is important for our organisation to advocate for the fundamental rights of the Khmer-Krom people. We train youth a part of the KKFYC to identify the human rights mechanisms that they can apply and utilise back home.

**4- In your opinion, how important is it for you to work with Khmer-Krom youth?**

We want the youth to actively carry the traditions and values of Khmer-Krom people for generations to come. We want the youth to be proud of who they are and where their descendants originate from. The mobilisation of the youth in the field of advocacy and indigenous human rights is vital to mitigate cross-generational issues and loss of identity.

**5- To which extent do you consider your work as influential?**

I am a youth coordinator from the North American chapter, so I do a lot of outreach throughout the United States and Canada through KKF workshops and events. Through these events, it's really refreshing to see youth in the communities asking questions specifically about the KKF and the Khmer-Krom people. These "formal" events turn into personal conversations - relating to each other as Khmer-Krom youth and also sharing our own knowledge of the

Khmer-Krom language and history. I have been told by some youth that have partake in our KKF events and activities that our work really strengthens their character and makes them appreciate who they are as indigenous youth.

I would really say the work we do is impactful because it continues to shape our lives. The youth living in North America can actively express their own individualities while acknowledging that they are indigenous Khmer-Krom. An obstacle we all face is decreasing the generational gap by learning more of the Khmer language. Conversations are always a bit awkward between youth and the elders in the communities we live in, but through patience and determination, I can assure that it is always a learning experience for everyone.

**6- Could you tell us about one specific project that you find truly relevant?**

A specific project that our organisation is working on is to create an interactive map of the Khmer-Krom villages in the Mekong Delta. We want to identify the specific Khmer-Krom villages that are in need of resources in relation to the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals]. Vietnam had its Voluntary National Review during the 2018 United Nations High Political Forum, in which the authorities recognised some of the challenges the country faces in achieving the SDGs such as funding and monitoring. This map would supplement the monitoring of how the government and civil society can work together to achieve those goals.

**7- How has KKFYC contributed to your personal and collective empowerment?**

It has shaped a lot of the reality I live. I feel absolutely grounded in my identity as a Khmer-Krom woman. It is something that no one can deny is a part of me. Through the work that I have done, I only hope to inspire more youth to participate in the organisation and contribute to the unabated advocacy for the Khmer-Krom people of the Mekong Delta.

## FIND OUT MORE

- [UNPO Report on Human Rights Abuses Towards Khmer-Krom in Vietnam \(June 2017\)](#)



## UPCOMING EVENTS

- Review of Vietnam by the Committee Against Torture (12 November-7 December 2018)



- Every Tuesday on Instagram: **#KhmerKromTuesday**



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