

## Statement for Third Session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues

ORGANIZATION: **The Montagnards Foundation**  
AGENDA ITEM: **III Sustainable Livelihoods**  
DELIVERED BY: **Mr. Kok Ksor (Exec Director)**

*kksor@degar.org*

---

Thank you Madame Chairman. Ladies and Gentlemen:

We, the Indigenous Degar People, also known as the Montagnards of the Central Highlands of Vietnam face significant obstacles to effective engagement in the economic life of the country.

Firstly, our people have some of the lowest socio-economic indicators in all of the country. On the most basic level, poverty, hunger and malnutrition prevents our children from attending school. However, our region is also neglected - national initiatives to improve access to quality education are rarely implemented in the Central Highlands. As a result, we have the highest rates of illiteracy in the country and few of our students finish school. Low literacy rates are then exacerbated by widespread discrimination in local towns which minimalises our ability to access gainful employment.

Secondly, we note that the level of corruption in Vietnam is one of the highest in the world. By corruption's very nature impoverished minority groups have neither the capacity to buy-in to the system, nor the political power to stamp it out.

Thirdly, and this is most relevant to this agenda item, we face daily challenges related to access to quality land that can sustain our families and generate any income. When the current government took power in 1975 we found our ancestral farmlands confiscated and conferred upon new incoming migrants and corporations. We then found ourselves forcibly relocated to infertile areas. The UNDP have reported our limited access to land, and the US State Department have noted that the ongoing resettlement programmes have sidelined resident populations in favour of ethnic Vietnamese migrants and state owned plantations.

Our traditional farming practices, called swidden farming which we have used in a sustainable manner for centuries was deemed not acceptable to the new government. This provides a case study for Paragraph 8 of the Draft Paper. In addition our communal land ownership system was not recognised by authorities and therefore easily confiscated.

We have tried to use domestic channels to voice our concerns and grievances, but we are regularly silenced, allegedly for national security reasons.

We welcome this Forum as an international mechanism through which to voice our concerns. We have seen small gains - following the visit of the Independent Expert on Minority Issues to Vietnam this year, we have been able to start using our own language in our schools. We welcome paragraph 25 of the Draft Paper which requests equal access to education for all, and mother-tongue education. We hope that the UN will continue its focus on safeguarding mother-tongue-education. In East Turkestan, the Chinese government is endangering the survival of the Uyghur language with a policy that is making Mandarin the medium of instruction in all schools.

The Montagnards face difficult challenges. If the recommendations in this draft paper were to be implemented in the Central Highlands of Vietnam we would see enormous positive change. We truly hope not just for the serious consideration of the paper by governments around the world, but for their sincere efforts to put it into practice.

Thank you and God bless.

*(Geneva, Switzerland December 14, 2010)*