

Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 17th Session
Item 7: International Decade of Indigenous Languages
Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation
Speaker: Putheany Kim

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Madame Chair and Distinguished Colleagues,

As I speak my mother tongue here, I am inherently presenting the history of my people, the Khmer Krom, to the international world. Khmer, the language used in Kampuchea Krom in the Mekong Delta, is the blood of our indigenous heritage and a connection to our ancestral knowledge. Our traditional ceremonies are passed down from generation to generation through Khmer, and cannot adequately be translated from another language as our culture would be lost from the core of our indigenous traditions. We lose our indigenous identity and succumb to indigenous erasure.

In order to preserve and maintain our unique indigenous identity and language, our Khmer Krom activists and spiritual leaders have taken the crucial role of educating the younger generation and offer assistance to those even older to reconnect with their mother tongue. Our people remain resilient in maintaining a connection to their mother tongue at all ages. The love and innate relationship with our mother tongue is not lost, but misguided due to the restrictive policies that Vietnam places on the way we exercise our free will to exercise our indigenous language.

Since Vietnam refuses to recognize our indigenous identities, we remain unable to effectively and meaningfully have Khmer applied in our indigenous spaces and other institutions like schools and government. We are mislabeled as “ethnic minorities” and forced to succumb to assimilation, just as many other indigenous peoples in Asia experience. Vietnam and other member states in Asia do not recognize Indigenous Peoples which in turn means that there is no recognition for our indigenous languages, thus these States infringe and do not uphold Article 13 of UNDRIP.

In regions where the Khmer language is taught in public schools, the sessions are often too brief, offering only 45 mins sessions twice a week, not enough to build a strong foundation for a quality education in our indigenous language. Likewise, our history is not being taught or included in the school curriculum. The Khmer-Krom people have been erased from the textbooks.

In order to protect and preserve our language, we recommend the following:

1. Seek the help of UNICEF to help develop education systems that are culturally sensitive in regions where our Khmer-Krom children live, including immediately developing a pilot project curriculum featuring indigenous curriculum for Khmer-Krom youth across the Mekong Delta.

2. Develop and implement a national action plan that acknowledges and recognizes the Khmer-Krom people as the indigenous people of the Mekong Delta and allow for Khmer Krom people to take part in the discussion for strategies to sustain our language.
3. Ask that indigenous peoples be included accurately in the census and its importance highlighted to ensure Khmer Krom peoples receive adequate resources and benefits in accordance with SDG 16.6.

We urge all member states to have an open dialogue with indigenous peoples that is safe, secure and meaningful in order to ensure the continuation of our indigenous language in all practices of religion, education, culture and policy. It is my dream to be able to see my language passed down from the many generations to come.

Thank you.