

U.S. Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
“Highlighting Vietnamese Government Human Rights Violations in Advance of the U.S. –
Vietnam Dialogue”
Hearing: April 11, 2013
Testimony from Anna Ksor Buonya, Spokesperson
Montagnard Human Rights Organization

The Honorable Christopher Smith
Chairman, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights

Mr. Chairman,

My name is Anna Ksor Buonya, and I am here on behalf of the Montagnard Human Rights Organization based in Raleigh, North Carolina. I represent the Montagnard indigenous people of the Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Brief Background

My parents, along with 10,000 Montagnards, struggled and suffered for over 12 years in the jungles of Vietnam and Cambodia as we fought to defend our freedoms and way of life from 1975 until 1986 when our family came to the U.S. as refugees. I feel privileged to have enjoyed many blessings of freedom, thanks to the sacrifice of my beloved parents and the Montagnard people.

Tens of thousands of Montagnards were recruited and trained by US Special Forces, and loyally served the United States during the Vietnam War. Their bravery in fighting against the communists was legendary. During the war years, it was estimated some 100,000 Montagnards fought alongside US troops and at any given time some 30,000 were actively serving. By the end of the war in 1975, it's estimated over 200,000 people, perished in the conflict.

The survivors were left to face the vengeance of the victorious communists. On taking over South Vietnam, the communists imprisoned and executed the Montagnard's political and religious leaders. The wider Montagnard population was subjected to forced relocations and thousands were condemned to live on some of the country's poorest cropland. The military also deforested the Montagnard's ancestral lands while expanding their logging operations into neighboring Laos and Cambodia. The Montagnards have been deliberately marginalized as losers of the war and survive today in a cycle of crushing poverty.

I would like to thank Mr. Chairman for the honor and opportunity to share our feelings and experiences about the ongoing human rights abuses in Vietnam and especially, persecution experienced by indigenous peoples. My organization has had the honor to testify at the first U.S. Congressional Hearing about Montagnards sponsored by former U.S.Senator Jesse Helms in 1998, as well as in subsequent U.S. Congressional Hearings in Washington.

My statement today will focus primarily on religious persecution and human rights violations that confronts the Montagnard indigenous people of the Central Highlands, along with similar issues that impact the Hmong, Khmer Krom, Cham, and other persecuted indigenous populations in Vietnam.

Religious Persecution

Human Rights Watch has published a detailed report in 2011 and 2012 on the continuing religious persecution of Montagnards in the Central Highlands and the extreme persecution of Hmong Christians in the northern highlands. During 2011, entire Hmong villages have been destroyed by the Vietnamese government. The Khmer Krom also suffers. They follow the Buddhist Theravada branch, but the Vietnamese government has forced them to become members of the government-sponsored Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha. These two different Buddhist orders have different ethnic practices that range from the color of their robes to the practice of the way they eat their meals. Because of this forced conversion, many of their temples are shut down by the government. Some Buddhist and Christian clergy are forced to work as informants for the Communist government.

Reminiscent of the Montagnards mass demonstrations of 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2008, the Khmer Krom Buddhist monks, some 200 of them, staged a mass sit-in in Feb 2007. They were brutally cracked down by the police. Approximately 60 monks were arrested, nine defrocked and five jailed.

Most recently, in 2012, Buddhist Hoa Hao groups were prevented by the Vietnamese local police from commemorating the anniversary of their founder, Huynh Phu So, by blocking roads and intimidating Buddhist followers. A Protestant pastor, Nguyen Trung Ton was arrested in January without any known charges. Three Catholic Montagnard activists were arrested in March. Two Buddhists activists were arrested in April and July. And about 15 Catholics were arrested in July, August, and September.

Another indigenous group, the Cham has experienced the destruction of their religious temples. What was once religious shrines are now functioning as tourist attractions. To add to the insult, none of the profits made from these tourist attractions are being put back into the Cham community.

I am very grateful that this country gives me the opportunity to worship in whatever way I choose. Freedom is a precious right that must be protected and fought for, but unfortunately for my people, that right continues to be restricted. They are persecuted for believing in God, with many tortured and facing long prison sentences. For Americans, "In God We Trust" is often times simply a motto, and something we take for granted, but for the Montagnard and other indigenous people, it is something they suffer for each and every day.

Prisoner Abuse

The religious persecution highlighted above also relates to numerous arrests regarding religious leaders. The Vietnam government is directly responsible for the cruel and terrible treatment of Montagnard Christians and other political prisoners. They discriminate against the Montagnard prisoners by not allowing them to have clean water, family visits or enough food to eat. The

prisons are long distances from the Central Highlands, making it very hard, if not impossible for family members to visit.

The Vietnam government continues to arrest, torture and jail Montagnard Christians. There are currently over 400 Montagnard Christians in prison for their religious or political beliefs up to 16 years. Between 2001 and 2004, over 4000 Montagnard house churches were destroyed, and hundreds of Montagnard were arrested and imprisoned for their participation in demonstrations that objected to the policy of land confiscation and religious rights. Most of these house churches remain closed and practically all Montagnard prisoners remain in prison to this day. Montagnard Christians are often forced to renounce their faith, they are beaten, and many put in prison to suffer long and terrible years in prison without enough food, medicine or even family visits. Many suffer solitary confinement and torture.

Montagnard Refugee Protection

Because of all the issues I have described earlier, the Montagnard and Vietnamese asylum seekers are seeking protection in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand or other countries. This in itself, is another problem.

The UNHCR site in Phnom Penh, Cambodia closed in Feb. 2011. Montagnard asylum seekers now have no place to find sanctuary. Asylum seekers have fled to Thailand, been arrested and put into detention. We know of Montagnards rights now who are hiding in the jungles of Vietnam because they have no safe place. They have no safe place and they are desperate. .

There are hundreds of Montagnards who try to flee persecution in Vietnam and they are hunted down by the police, beaten and put in jail.

There is no safe haven for asylum seekers in Vietnam so they escape to Thailand where they face rejection by the UNHCR and are later arrested and put in immigration detention. One Montagnard refugee recently arrived in Raleigh, NC, after years in a Bangkok detention center. This young Montagnard was a Christian youth leader who was tortured and imprisoned in Vietnam. He twice received prison sentences, and has told us the details of his torture. He spent 5 years on the run with a small group of other Montagnard refugees, hiding in the jungles of Laos and Thailand, separated from his wife and two children, all with the hopes of finding freedom and the right to worship as a Christian.

Sadly, he was rejected by the UNHCR in Cambodia and later in Thailand. It took many advocates to finally win his freedom. The situation in Thailand becomes desperate for refugees who often cannot register with UNHCR or who have their claims denied by UNHCR.

There is another very recent case I want to highlight. As of this moment, there are two Montagnard individuals, who are hiding in a Central Highlands province. They have experienced persecution and physical beatings by the Vietnam police. For the last year, they have struggled to obtain an interview with the U.S. consulate. Finally after a year of waiting, they went through three separate interviews, all the while still in hiding. They were told by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), within this past week, that they now need a passport from the Vietnam government or their refugee application would be abandoned.

Vietnam's Assimilation Policies

The Montagnard indigenous peoples of Vietnam are crying out to keep our ancestral land, our language and our culture. We've asked for help from the U.S. government, the United Nations and the world community to help us. Many of our ancestral lands have been seized by the Communist government for rubber or coffee plantations.

Our languages are being lost, and our children shamed into believing they are not worthy. Even Montagnard prisoners in Hanoi's prisons are not allowed to write letters in the Montagnard language. The Montagnard names of our rivers, forests, mountains, and provinces have been altered into Vietnamese names. We believe this is a policy of quiet genocide and ethnic cleansing targeting our Montagnard people. The reason behind this being, that the Vietnamese Communist government wants our precious land of the Central Highlands and their goal is complete assimilation.

Recommendations

In the latest USCIRF Annual Report for 2012, the Commission again recommended that Vietnam be returned to the list of countries of particular concern. We have also called on the U.S. government to reinstate Vietnam's designation as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) for extreme violations of religious freedom. We agree with their recommendation and we urge the U.S. Congress and the U.S. government that the release of all Montagnard prisoners be negotiated and their release obtained before any more U.S. government defense and trade treaties with Vietnam go forward.

In light of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, which was adopted by the General Assembly on September 13, 2007, and which the U.S. administration and President Obama recently endorsed on December 2010, we also recommend that the U.S. government continue its dialogue with Vietnam to recognize the Montagnards, Khmer Krom, and Cham as its indigenous peoples. Vietnam has shown support of the United Nations Declaration and we urge the U.S. Congress to put pressure on Vietnam to implement the principles of this declaration, especially since religious persecution is being experienced by all of the indigenous groups.

We hope that the U.S. State Department will consider re-opening its Refugee Program within Vietnam by acknowledging that there continues to be many claims of well-founded persecution in Vietnam. There is concern for individuals in Vietnam who have experienced persecution, but have difficulty obtaining an interview with a U.S. official at a U.S. consulate. When they finally do get an interview, they may be refused refugee status because there is now the requirement to obtain a passport, which must be requested from the Vietnam government. For people facing the fear of police brutality and persecution, this makes the task almost impossible. We recognize that there is not an official U.S. refugee program currently in Vietnam, but the current mechanism is not effective. We recommend that the U.S. consulate have some formal arrangement with Vietnam to allow an "exit visa" or other process, for individuals who qualify for refugee status.

Mr. Chairman, it has been my privilege to come here today to tell you the truth about the Montagnard human rights abuse that the Montagnard Indigenous Peoples are facing right now in

Vietnam's Central Highlands and in other areas of Vietnam. We Montagnards are treated like enemies in our own homeland. Hundreds of prisoners in Ha Nam prison are suffering terrible abuse and isolation, and other Montagnard men, women and children quietly suffer in their villages under constant fear and police surveillance.

I come to you today, not only as a Montagnard, but also as a U.S. citizen. I'm grateful to have a voice because I know the voice of my people has been silenced for over a century. I'm grateful to speak on behalf of those who suffer in prison and who can't see their families all because they spoke out for freedom or the right to be a Christian. I've had the opportunity for education in America, but I'm saddened that my Montagnard people have been denied education and development assistance in Vietnam for so many years.

We hope that with these continuous hearings, the U.S. government and the world will hear our prayer and plea for help.

Thank you for your time and for letting me share the plight of the Montagnard people along with the struggles of other indigenous groups of Vietnam.

Respectfully,

Anna Ksor Buonya, Esq.