

Testimony before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing: Religious Oppression Against the Khmer-Krom Community

September 7, 2023

Most respected religious leaders, ladies and gentlemen:

My name is Venerable TT Dhammo. I am deeply honored to testify about the religious oppression faced by the Khmer-Krom community while practicing Theravada Buddhism. It is crucial to address this issue of religious freedom, share the challenges faced by the Khmer-Krom, and appeal for justice.

For centuries, the Khmer-Krom people have found solace and strength in Theravada Buddhism, a tradition inseparable from their identity since 365 BCE. Which may be seen in ancient temples, some standing for over a millennium, like the revered Sampua-Ransi temple, built in 373 CE in Preah Trapeang (Tra Vinh) province, signifying not only places of worship but also centers of education and culture preservation of Theravada Buddhism.

However, Vietnam's constitution, while guaranteeing the right to believe and worship (Article 24) and the right to associate (Article 25), has yet to be implemented to protect these religious rights of the Indigenous Khmer-Krom people. Post-1975, for example, Khmer-Krom Buddhist associations were disbanded, and their Buddhist monks were coerced into joining the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), closely linked to the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) through the Vietnam Fatherland Front Central Committee (FFCC).

In November 2016, Vietnam introduced the "Law on Belief and Religion," requiring religious groups to register and submit activities for state control approval. Far from promoting religious freedom, this law has been weaponized to stifle those who voice concerns about their religious rights being violated. Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks are pressured into joining the VBS, and refusal to comply resulted in threats of expulsion from the monkhood.

Significant incidents such as the attempted dismantling of the religious hall in Tong Hung hamlet, Loan My village, Tam Binh district, Vinh Long province, on October 12, 2022, showcased the Khmer-Krom's unwavering determination to protect their spiritual and cultural heritage. Courageous voices, led by Mrs. Thach Thi Sa Bach, stood their ground and defended their sacred site.

Today, the VBS exerts tight control over Khmer-Krom religious practices, dictating leadership, altering temple stamps, compelling participation in state-mandated workshops, and even imposing Ho Chi Minh's image and the Vietnamese flag on temple walls. The right to speak the Khmer language in discussions on Khmer-Krom Theravada Buddhism is restricted, and teaching curricula are monitored by the state authorities.

Imagine having to seek permission to express your faith. This is the reality for Khmer-Krom individuals aspiring to ordain as Buddhist monks. Venerable Duong Khai's 2023 ordeal, where bureaucratic hurdles nearly prevented his ordination in a different province, epitomizes the erosion of fundamental rights.

Moreover, Vietnam's authorities have gone to great lengths to micromanage Khmer-Krom religious practices. They mandate participation in workshops aimed at controlling temple operations. This

intrusion into the management of sacred spaces fundamentally violates the core principles of religious freedom.

Recently, the arrest of the Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers who were merely involved in distributing the U.N. documents advocating for their religious and indigenous rights now face reprisals and unjust detention. The individuals currently detained are as follows:

- Thach Cuong (born in 1987) and To Hoang Chuong (born in 1986) reside at Lac Son hamlet, Thanh Hoa Son village, Cau Ngang district, Tra Vinh province.
- Danh Minh Quang (born in 1987) and Dinh Thi Huynh (born in 1980) reside at Dai Nghia Thang hamlet, Dai Tam village, My Xuyen district, Soc Trang province.

The arrest and detention of Thach Cuong, To Hoang Chuong, Danh Minh Quang, and Dinh Thi Huynh represent the broader systemic human rights violations occurring within Vietnam, particularly affecting the Khmer-Krom community.

On July 31, 2023, Thach Cuong, To Hoang Chuong, and Danh Minh Quang were apprehended under the accusation of "abusing democratic freedoms." This blatant violation infringes upon their fundamental right to advocate for the indigenous rights of their community. These activists have dedicated their lives to raising awareness about religious freedom and crucial documents such as the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) while also striving for the implementation of the U.N.'s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals to ensure the Khmer-Krom are not left behind. Instead of acknowledging their commitment, the government has unlawfully detained them. They now face the alleged crime of violating Article 331 of the Vietnam Criminal Code. If the gavel falls unjustly, sentences from six months to three years await.

The plight of Mrs. Dinh Thi Huynh, a Khmer-Krom women Buddhist follower, compounds the situation. Her plea for assistance on social media before her arrest paints a picture of desperation experienced by those battling injustice. Even after her tireless efforts to assert her rights, the demolition of her ancestral family home on February 22, 2022, underscores the system's disregard for fundamental land rights. Her arrest on August 3, 2023, just days after Duong Minh Quang's detention from the same village, raises alarming concerns. She was taken into custody under the alleged crime of "Failure to serve a judgment," per Article 380 of the Vietnam Criminal Code. She may face a sentence of three months to two years in prison if convicted.

Today, I appeal to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom to implore Vietnam, a member of the Human Rights Council, to take action:

1. Release Thach Cuong, To Hoang Chuong, Danh Minh Quang, and Dinh Thi Huynh without condition. Vietnam must stop using the Penal Code to silence the Khmer-Krom activists advocating for their religious and indigenous rights.
2. Respect the religious freedom of the Khmer-Krom people. Allow them to establish their own Theravada Buddhist organizations and practice their faith without state interference, ensuring they can peacefully practice without fear.
3. Revise the "Law on Belief and Religion" to ensure genuine religious freedom. Remove undue regulations that stifle religious expression and practice.

4. Stop the threats to demolish the religious hall in Tong Hung hamlet, respecting its cultural and spiritual significance.
5. Allow Khmer-Krom Buddhist monks to teach the Khmer language without government interference.
6. End the use of violence against Khmer-Krom monks when defending their religious rights or sacred sites.
7. Remind Vietnam that religious freedom is a fundamental right, not a privilege. The Khmer-Krom should not have to ask for permission to ordain as Buddhist monks.

Thank you again for giving me this opportunity to testify today. Let us unite to eliminate religious oppression, safeguard the Khmer-Krom people's religious freedom, and preserve their cultural heritage. Together, we can build a world founded on respect and dignity for all. Thank you.