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Vietnamese Authorities Forbid Khmer-Krom Building a Religious Hall

Pennsauken, NJ, 15 July 2021 -- The Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF) condemns the Vietnamese authorities' unethical actions to forbid the Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers to build a religious Hall at the Tong Hung hamlet, Loan My village, Tam Binh district, Vinh Long province.

As the indigenous peoples who follow Theravada Buddhism in the Mekong Delta, the Khmer-Krom merely want to practice their religion in peace. The Tong Hung hamlet is the most remote hamlet in the Loan My village that can only be accessed via dirt roads. Thus, it is difficult for the Khmer-Krom elders to access and attend the religious services and for the Khmer-Krom children to learn their Khmer language at the Khmer-Krom temples in the other hamlets.

Due to the extreme poverty in this hamlet, the Khmer-Krom cannot afford to build a proper temple. They have accepted this and instead want to build a religious Hall in their hamlet to house a Buddha statue for worshipping, organizing religious services, teaching the Khmer language to the children, and preserving the Khmer-Krom identity.

A Khmer-Krom woman, Mrs. Thach Thi Sa Bach, donated her land to build the religious Hall. On February 30, 2020, Mrs. Thach Thi Sa Bach and seventy-six families in this hamlet applied for a building permit to construct the religious Hall (not to build a temple). Instead of empowering the Khmer-Krom to practice their religion and preserve their cultural identity by approving the application, the Vietnamese authorities have been suspiciously silent. The Khmer-Krom communities have not heard back from the local authorities regarding the building permit.

Because the religious Hall is spiritually and culturally crucial for the Khmer-Krom people, they could not keep waiting for approval from the authorities, so the Khmer-Krom Buddhist followers in the hamlet decided to start building it. Unfortunately, the authorities tactically used the leaders of the Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS), a Buddhist organization created by the Vietnamese government, to deny the Khmer-Krom community from building the religious Hall.

In this regard, the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF) urgently calls on the international community to request Vietnam to:

- Respect article 24.1 of its own Constitution. "*Everyone shall enjoy freedom of belief and of religion; he can follow any religion or follow none. All religions are equal before the law.*" Why are the Vietnamese authorities preventing the Indigenous Khmer-Krom from simply building a religious Hall?
- Stop using tactics to forbid Khmer-Krom from building the religious Hall at Tong Hung hamlet to freely practice and organize religious services, organize cultural events, and teach the Khmer language in the religious Hall that they are building.
- Respect the freedom of religion and the right to preserve the cultural identity that is enshrined in the treaties, especially in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Vietnam signed with the United Nations.

