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INDIGENOUS ISSUES

Written statement\* submitted by Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network (AITPN),  
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2003]

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\*This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## Persecution of the Indigenous Degar people of Vietnam

On 2-6 February 2001 in the Gia Lai and Daklak provinces, thousands of Vietnam's indigenous Degar people held demonstrations, demanding political autonomy, freedom to practise their Protestant faith, the return of ancestral lands confiscated for coffee plantations and population transfers of the majority Kinh into indigenous territories. The Vietnamese government violently cracked down on the protest, barred the entry of foreigners into the region and permanently settled military regiments in the area. Hundreds of Degar fled to Cambodia seeking refuge.

More recently, a group of Ede indigenous mountain people was arrested on 31 August 2002, Vietnam's National Day, for allegedly planning to hold a protest on 2 September 2002 in Sao village under Madrak district of Dak Lak province of the Central Highlands. The harsh sentencing of eight of those arrested, after a one-day trial by a court in central Daklak province on Christmas Day, 2002, indicates Hanoi's resolve to continue its repression of the indigenous peoples. They were accused of "organising illegal migration to Cambodia", "undermining state and Communist Party policy", contacting former members of the guerrilla group FULRO, who are now living in the United States, "sow[ing] disunity" among the hill tribes in the Central Highlands, and going to Daklak province to "propagandise, cheat, lure and force" ethnic minority people to fleeing Vietnam. Alleged group leader Y Thuon Nie, 30, was sentenced to 10 years in jail, while the other seven persons, identified as Y Pum Bya, 38, Y Tien Nie Kdam, 23, Y Boh Lieng, 32, Yaro Nie, 38, Y Lem Bkrong, 41, Y Ju Nie, 39, and Y Nai Mlo, 37, were given eight years in prison and a further four years of house arrest after the end of their jail terms.

Since the peaceful protest in February 2001 in Gia Lai and Daklak, hundreds of indigenous people have sought refuge in Cambodia. As the government of Vietnam refused to allow verification of the status of the returnees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the repatriation was stopped. While the majority of the asylum seekers were resettled in the United States of America under a tripartite agreement signed on 30 March 2002, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen announced that two UN refugee camps would be shut and that border patrols would check the entry of new asylum seekers. Cambodia has turned into a fortress. There are regular reports of asylum seekers being handed over to the Vietnamese authorities. On 24 September 2002, the authorities in Ratnakiri province of Cambodia confirmed that a Vietnamese delegation consisting of two governors and a military police chief had visited Cambodian officials in the area. The borders were closed once again.

At the heart of the indigenous peoples' discontentment is the population transfer and migration of ethnic Kinh to indigenous territories earmarked as New Economic Areas and State Farms. Since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, over a million ethnic Vietnamese have moved to the highlands, an influx which has left the region's indigenous hill tribes a minority in all four provinces. But calls from the region's provincial authorities for a slowdown in the migrant influx have gone unheeded. Rather, on 11 April 2002, the Deputy Head of the Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas Commission, Tran Luu Hai, defended the population transfer in the Central Highlands by stating that "[t]he government has a responsibility to move people to other areas if their current place of settlement can't provide them with the basic necessities of life... Every Vietnamese citizen has the right to reside in Vietnam. The

government will help people to settle down in places that are suitable for them and good for their development.”

In its report, Viet Nam: Agricultural Diversification Project, Draft: Ethnic Minority Development Plan, Working Document, 10 November 1997, the World Bank has stated: “In Dak Lak, the high potential of the agricultural environment and the development of coffee cultivation have allowed the majority of these to rapidly become rich. Currently, in a population of 1.2 million inhabitants, 900,000 are migrants, i.e. 75%, and the flow is still continuing today at an annual rate of 6 to 15%.”

“Of the 860,000 inhabitants in the province of Gia Lai, 42% are Kinh and 12% belong to the Thai, Nùng and Tàì ethnic minorities. The remainder is composed of 33% Gia-rai and 13% Ba-na. The current flow of spontaneous migrants into the province is following a dynamic similar to the migrations in Dak Lak, but with a time delay.”

Population transfers and the discriminatory and repressive policies and practices of the authorities in Hanoi have contributed to the pauperisation, marginalisation and assimilation of the Degar people. A World Bank assessment of poverty in Vietnam found that in 1993 the poor made up 54% of the Kinh and 86% of ethnic minority groups. In 1998, the poor made up 31% of the Kinh and 75% of ethnic minority groups.

In addition, economic development projects have only benefited the Kinh settlers. In October 2001, the government of Vietnam allocated an outlay of VND 35 trillion (US\$2.36 billion) for the Tay Nguyen’s (Central Highlands region) 2001-05 five-year plan for socio-economic development. Of this amount, some VND 19 trillion have been allocated for investment in the industrial sector, including farm and forest product processing, post-harvest technology, mining and hydro-power plants. About VND 16.6 trillion have been allocated for the operationalisation of a bauxite-aluminum complex in Lam Dong province, a cotton-processing factory in Dac Lac, a pulp mill in Kon Tum and hydro-electric plants in Dai Ninh, Se San, and Bun Kop-Chu Pong at the end of the current five-year plan. The government has also proposed the establishment of specialised plantations, as well as farm and forestry product processing establishments, which is estimated to cost VND6 trillion. Old and low-yield coffee plants will be replaced with those of higher economic value.

The Vietnam government has also proposed the construction of seven hydro-electric power projects to be built in the central region and the Central Highlands. The Electricity Company No 3 in co-ordination with its partners completed the planning for these investment projects on 30 June 2002. Of these, five projects will be implemented at an estimated cost of VND 1,300 billion. They are H’Chan and H’Mun hydro-electric power projects with a capacity of 12 megawatts and 16 megawatts, respectively; a hydro-electric power project on the Ayun river in the Central Highlands province of Gia Lai; the Binh Dinh hydro-electric power project having a capacity of nine megawatts; the Ea Krong-Ron hydro-electric power project with a capacity of 34 megawatts, and the Dray H’Linh hydro-electric project in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak.

*As the World Bank stated, "In the context of the policy of resettlement and settlement of the populations of indigenous ethnic minorities started by the government in 1975, the greater and constant pressure exerted on the land by the migrants makes the production systems of the ethnic groups increasingly impracticable. The poorly educated indigenous populations, who in the main do not speak Kinh, are poorly placed to defend themselves and risk not benefiting fully from the national policy to develop the Highlands. In addition, the traditional way of life of the indigenous populations is gradually being supplanted by the dominant civilisation of the Kinh, giving rise to dangers of assimilation and marginalisation."*

Contrary to the Vietnamese government's depiction, the plight of the indigenous Degar people is not another remnant of the America's Vietnam war. The authorities in Hanoi need to look beyond the FURLO and its role in the war. The focus should be on the indigenous peoples' rights over land and natural resources, natural habitat, culture and tradition, and religious freedom that are under direct assault by the authorities in Hanoi and the majority Kinh settlers. Unless Vietnam addresses these root causes, the indigenous peoples will continue to vent their ire against the domination of the settlers.

International donors and agencies must also not contribute to programmes that make the indigenous Degar people a minority in their own lands, cause further pauperisation, displacement and marginalisation, and lead to exploitation of the ethnic minorities by the Kinh. Otherwise, the Central Highlands of Vietnam may soon come to resemble the conflict-ridden islands of the Indonesian archipelago that frequently witness conflicts between transmigrasis and the indigenous peoples, between Christians and Muslims. The alleviation of the plight of the indigenous mountain peoples of Vietnam goes beyond the recognition of 1,000-odd asylum seekers as refugees in the United States. While pressurising Vietnam to respect its international human rights treaty obligations, the government of Cambodia must also be impressed upon to abandon its policy of "no asylum" to the fleeing Vietnamese refugees.

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