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**VIETNAM: INDIGENOUS MINORITY GROUPS
IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS**

By An Independent WriteNet Researcher

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**WriteNet is a Subsidiary of Practical Management (UK)
E-mail: writenet@gn.apc.org**

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United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
CP 2500, CH-1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland

E-mail: cdr@unhcr.org
Web Site: <http://www.unhcr.org>

1 Introduction¹

In February 2001 an unexpected and well-coordinated series of demonstrations and uprisings took place in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, taking the authorities of Vietnam and international observers alike by surprise. Access roads to some of the major provincial and district towns like Buon Ma Thuot and Pleiku were blocked by large groups of people belonging to the indigenous minorities of the region, and local leaders of the Communist Party of Vietnam were chased by groups of minority people in the cities themselves. Riot police responded with force, but apart from such skirmishes, few people were reported injured during the relatively non-violent protests. The protests revolved around three issues. The first issue concerns ownership of and access to ancestral lands in the context of large-scale in-migration of settlers from the north of the country. The second issue relates to religious freedom in a situation where large portions of the indigenous communities are abandoning their traditional religious beliefs and practices of spirit worship and are converting to evangelical Christianity, seen as oppositional by the authorities. The third issue concerns the aspiration for political autonomy among indigenous leaders in the Central Highlands and beyond, touching a sore point in the recent history of the region. The Vietnamese authorities responded to what they considered an illegitimate and foreign-supported threat to their hold on this strategic part of Vietnam by calling in military and security reinforcements and suppressing the protests with force. The resulting fear of arrest and torture caused hundreds of Highlanders to flee, some to Cambodia, which brought other countries like Cambodia and the USA as well as international organizations such as UNHCR into play. All three issues mentioned above, as well as the follow-up to the protests have local, national and transnational dimensions, as will be explored below.

After a section providing some background information on the geography, history and ethnography of the Central Highlands, this paper will in turn address the following issues: FULRO (Front Unifié de la Lutte des Races Opprimées) and the question of Montagnard autonomy; Vietnam's ethnic policy in the Central Highlands after 1975; The events of February 2001 and their immediate aftermath; and finally offer a concluding section addressing future prospects and options.

2 Geography, Ethnography and History of the Central Highlands

2.1 Geography

In connection with the political vicissitudes in the region the Central Highlands have undergone some name changes in recent history. In precolonial times, the area was known in the Vietnamese Lowlands as Rung Moi (or the Forests of the Savages). In early colonial times when the area had not yet been fully explored, French documents referred to the Hinterland Moï, then later Pays Moï, or simply the Hauts-Plateaux. During World War II, the label Montagnard, which had been applied to mountain minorities in the northern part of Vietnam (or Tonkin), became fashionable to denote the indigenous population of the Central

¹ Many of the works cited in this study are unpublished papers, reports, project documents, etc., that can often be accessed through the Internet. In most cases specific locations are given in footnotes and in the bibliography, but in addition the following web sites could be mentioned as locations of useful collections: <http://www.mekonginfo.org>; <http://www.undp.org.vn>; <http://www.vdic.org.vn>; <http://www.worldbank.org.vn>; <http://anulib.anu.edu.au/clusters/ap/subjects/sea/viet.html>.

Highlands, and the French delineated a Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois (PMSI), which was meant to counter Vietnamese nationalist claims to the area as part of a sovereign Vietnam – and a name that remained popular among a number of indigenous leaders. During the brief (1955-1975) existence of the Republic of Viet Nam (South Vietnam, below the 17th parallel), the area was known in Vietnamese as Cao Nguyên (High Plateau) or Miền Thuong (Highland Region), while Americans referred to it as the Central Highlands. After 1975, the area was rebaptized Tây Nguyên, or “Western Plateau”. Currently, Tây Nguyên officially consists of the four provinces of Kontum, Gia Lai (Pleiku), Dak Lak or Dac Lac (Buon Ma Thuot) and Lam Dong (Da Lat), but many of the Truong Son or Annam Cordillera upland areas and their indigenous populations are located in other provinces bordering these four. In the English language, the area is most commonly known as the Central Highlands, which is the name that is used here.

The Central Highlands of Vietnam or Tây Nguyên makes up some 55,000 km² and contains a rapidly expanding population of roughly four million people. The region is an upland area located between the 17th parallel to the north, the Annam Cordillera (Chaîne Annamitique, Truong Son) running along the South China Sea to the east, the Mekong Delta to the south, and the Valley of the Mekong River to the west. The area is characterized by rugged mountainous terrain crossed by deep river valleys, and a number of fertile high plateaux made up of red basaltic soils, which include the Plateau of Kontum and Pleiku; the Plateau of Darlac/Dac Lac; and the Plateau of Djiring and Blao (or Di Linh and Bao Lôc). The Annam Cordillera rises up steeply from the coastal strip of Trung Bô (Central Vietnam or Annam), with peaks of up to 2,598 metres. To the west the relief becomes more undulating, gradually sloping down to the Mekong Valley. Most of the area waters into the Mekong River, major exceptions being the Sông Ba and the Đông Nai rivers and tributaries that empty themselves into the South China Sea. To the west the Vietnamese Central Highlands area reaches the national boundaries with Laos and Cambodia. Like Vietnam, those lowland states have their roots in civilizations based on wet rice agriculture, characteristic of tropical monsoon Asia, with most of the annual rain falling between April and November.²

Even though there has always been long-distance trade in the area (forest products like precious woods, rhino horns, elephants and elephant tusks were traded for cloth, salt, jars and bronze gongs and other goods which the mountain communities needed), it was the French who opened up the area with the construction of roads linking the major administrative centres of Dalat, Buon Ma Thuot, Pleiku and Kontum with the coast and with Saigon and the Mekong Delta. In the 1930s the cool hill station of Dalat was connected with the north-south railway running along the coast of Vietnam. The First Indochina War (1946-1954) and Second Indochina War (also known as Vietnam War or American War, depending on the perspective, 1960-1975) saw the construction of a huge military infrastructure which included airfields. The towns grew with the influx of lowlanders and highlanders alike. After 1975, migration into the Central Highlands was stimulated by the establishment of so-called New Economic Zones and by the development of cash-crop plantations like tea, rubber, pepper and especially coffee.

Most of the highland topography and soil is not suitable for permanent irrigated rice cultivation, the preferred agricultural method in most of lowland South, Southeast and East

² See Hickey, G. C., *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1982; Saleminck, O., *Beyond Complicity and Naiveté: Contextualizing the Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, PhD Thesis, University of Amsterdam, 1999

Asia. Therefore many indigenous communities traditionally engaged in rotational shifting cultivation (or swidden farming), an agricultural system whereby farmers decide on the clearing and burning of fields in the jungle belonging to the village territory, and leave these fields fallow when the productivity diminishes after two to three years. They will then clear a new field which in time will be abandoned as well. This clearing process will be continued until they return to the original field whose fertility has been restored, and a rotational cycle is thus completed. For centuries this system has been sustainable and compatible with the existence of healthy primary and secondary forests, the more so because ecologically important sites were often considered “sacred” and left untouched. But many outsiders did not understand the rationale of this agricultural system, and – calling it “slash-and-burn” – confused it with pioneering shifting cultivation and with a nomadic lifestyle, even though villages tended to remain in one place for decades and were only moved during calamities like war and epidemics. Indeed, during colonial and postcolonial times the indigenous “guardians of the forests” were blamed for the deforestation by those who looked at timber as the primary or only source of value of forests. Nevertheless, with the growing population density because of natural growth and in-migration, the traditional system of shifting cultivation is no longer sustainable in most places, because of lack of suitable land and fallowing times that are too short to allow the forests to return and restore the fertility of the soil.

2.2 Ethnography and Ethnic Classification

Like the geographic region itself, the indigenous population has undergone many name changes, both in terms of distinct “tribal” or “ethnic” identities and as a generic category. In pre-colonial times, they were called Moi by lowland Vietnamese, Kha by the Lao and Phnong by the Khmer. All these three words can be glossed as “savage”, but with servile connotations added by the slave trade that was concentrated in the Highlands. In early colonial times, the French would simply adopt those pejorative labels or would call them *sauvages* (“savages”), until more respectful ethnic labels became politically expedient in the 1940s. They tried and rejected political labels like Pémsiens (from the acronym PMSI – a political construct) and scientific labels like Proto-Indochinois (conveying the notion that this was the indigenous population of Indochina), and finally stuck with the term Montagnards (literally “mountain dwellers”). The word Montagnard was adopted by most Americans after 1955, shortened to Yard by many US Special Forces personnel. Other Americans translated Montagnard into Highlander, the term preferred by the scholar Gerald Hickey. The South-Vietnamese regime coined the official label *đông bào thương* (“highland compatriot”) but the compatriots quickly became *người sắc tộc*, or “coloured people”. Communist scholars and politicians rejected the latter label as racist, and prefer to use *dân tộc thiểu số*, or “ethnic minorities”. In line with Stalinist national theory, there is no distinction between “nation” and “ethnic group” in current Vietnamese idiom. Contrary to previous regimes, the current regime has no generic label for the indigenous population of the Central Highlands; instead, it distinguishes between the Kinh or Việt ethnic majority and the 53 officially recognized ethnic minorities. Political dissidents in the USA striving for autonomy for the Central Highlands have started to adopt the ethnic label of Dega or Degar (alongside Montagnard) but until recently its use has not been widespread in Vietnam. In October and November of 1999, a group of international scholars engaged in a hot debate in the e-mail discussion list of the Vietnam Studies Group of the Association for Asian Studies over the acceptability of the ethnonym Montagnard which some found an honourable or neutral label but which others

found unacceptable as a colonial invention.³ In this study I will mostly use the neutral term (Central) Highlander when referring to the indigenous population of the Central Highlands in Vietnam, and Montagnard when referring to those who themselves have adopted this label, like the Montagnard communities in the USA.

Just like the name of the region and the generic label for the indigenous population, the ethnic classification has changed over time. Typically, each new political regime started a new process of ethnic classification. Some of the best-known anthropologists of the region, notably Georges Condominas and Gerald Hickey, have suggested that tribal boundaries were fluid and permeable and ethnic identities were not fixed prior to the establishment of colonial rule.⁴ Condominas used the word “tribalization” to denote this process of construction of tribal identities in the interface between indigenous groups and the colonial and postcolonial state.⁵ The Dutch anthropologist Oscar Salemink claimed that the ethnonyms were partly the result of historical contingency, but that they hardened in the interface between the state and its minorities to acquire a certain reality.⁶ After 1975 Vietnamese ethnologists embarked on a process of ethnic identification based on language, costume and self-identification. According to Dang Nghiem Van the resulting classification was more scientific than the previous ones.⁷ Yet, the result was not uncontested, as is revealed in an article in the Party newspaper *Nhan Dan* by Census officer Ha Quoc Thach, who complained of the fact that many ethnic minority people did not know their correct ethnic label for census purposes.⁸

Despite continuing confusion over ethnic identities, the official ethnic classification based on ethno-linguistic differences as developed by Vietnamese ethnologists and adopted by the Vietnamese state is now the most current classification, with the most impact on the situation of the indigenous communities in the Central Highlands. If the Truong Son region below the 17th parallel is included then 20 different indigenous groups can be distinguished in this part of Vietnam, with a total indigenous population of over 1,625,000, according to a 1999 census of Vietnam’s Committee on Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA). The indigenous population of the four Tay Nguyen provinces proper can be estimated at approximately one million out of a total population of over four million.⁹ The Jarai (Jörai,

³ See the email discussion at Vietnam Studies Group, The Great Montagnard Debate, 1999, <http://www.lib.washington.edu/southeastasia/vsg/Elist.html> [accessed 24 January 2002] as well as the article by Icelandic anthropologist Hjorleifur Jonsson dedicated to this debate; see Jonsson, Hj., French Natural in the Vietnamese Highlands: Nostalgia and Erasure in Montagnard Identity, in J. Winston and L. Ollier (eds.), *Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue*, New York: Palgrave, 2001. pp. 52-65

⁴ Condominas, G., Classes sociales et groupes tribaux au Sud-Viêtnam, *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*, Vol. 40, 1966, pp. 161-70; Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*, p. 4

⁵ Condominas, p. 168

⁶ Salemink, O., Ethnography as Martial Art: Ethnicizing Vietnam’s Montagnards, 1930-1954, in P. Pels and O. Salemink (eds.), *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, pp. 282-325

⁷ Dang Nghiem Van, *Quan hệ giữa các tộc người trong một quốc gia dân tộc* [The relations between ethnic groups in one nation state], Hanoi: NXB Chính trị quốc gia, 1993; Dang Nghiem Van, *Ethnological and Religious Problems in Vietnam*, Hanoi: Social Sciences Publishing House, 1998.

⁸ *Nhan Dan*, 18 March 1999

⁹ United Nations Development Programme and Vietnam, Committee on Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA), Project VIE96010 Strengthening Capacity in Policy Formulation and Management of Ethnic Minority Development in Viet Nam, *Ethnic Minorities Populations in Vietnam 1979, 1989 and 1999*, <http://www.undp.org.vn/projects/vie96010/cemma/vie96010/populations.htm> [accessed 24 January 2002];

Giarai), Ede (Rhade), Raglai and Churu ethnic groups belong to the Austronesian language family which makes their languages related with Malay and the various Indonesian and Polynesian languages. The Bahnar (Bana), Sedang (Xodang), Hre, Koho (Coho), Mnong, Stieng (Xtieng), Bru-Van Kieu, Katu (Cotu), Gietrieng, Taoi, Ma, Cor (Co), Chrau (Choro), Brau, Rmam (Romam) belong to the Austro-Asiatic language family, as do the ethnic Vietnamese (Kinh or Viet). Many groups have sub-groups which could be classified differently (the Mdhur group has been classified as Ede and as Jarai), or which previously have been classified as separate ethnic groups (like the Sre, Nop, Chil and Lat which have been merged in one ethnic group). The biggest groups are the Jarai (around 320,000), Ede (over 257,000), Bahnar (181,000), Sedang (128,000), Hre (124,000), Koho (121,000), Raglai (95,000), Mnong (89,000), Stieng (around 66,000) and Bru/Van Kieu (53,000). The smallest groups are the Rmam and the Brau (both around 300, but there are many more Brau across the border in Laos and Cambodia).¹⁰ The biggest ethnic groups tend to be associated with particular provinces. Thus, most Bahnar and Sedang can be found in Kontum province; the Jarai dominate Gialai province; the Ede and Mnong are concentrated in Dac Lac province; and many Koho and Ma can be found in Lam Dong. Besides these indigenous groups, there are many more or less recent settlers, including Kinh or Viet lowlanders as well as ethnic minorities from the more densely populated and less fertile northern highlands of Vietnam. Such groups include the Nung, Tay, Hmong, Dao, and Muong. In Lam Dong, Dac Lac and Gialai provinces the indigenous groups are already outnumbered by people who are not autochthonous to the region.

Surrounded by “hinduized” and “sinicized” states on all sides,¹¹ many anthropologists insist that the Central Highlands constitute one “culture area” which has kept outside cultural influences at bay for a long time – hence my use of the term “indigenous population” for the ethnic communities that have lived in the area since precolonial times. Yet, it is difficult to identify a common culture in a situation of extreme cultural diversity, the more so because there have been so many changes over the last century. Before the French arrived in the nineteenth century, the Central Highlanders were mainly agriculturalists, growing wet rice where they could, but more often dry rice intermixed with other crops by the method of rotational shifting cultivation. Subsistence was based on agriculture and hunting and gathering in the abundant forests. Villages contained not more than a few hundred people, and most people lived in extended families in longhouses. The image of longhouses on stilts is dominant, but some groups like Mnong and Stieng built their houses on the ground. Village life was dominated by clan elders who were respected because of their knowledge of an exceptionally rich oral literature as well as of orally transmitted customary law which regulated relations between individuals and groups of people, between people and the natural environment and between people and the omnipresent spirits. Kinship systems varied between matrilineal, patrilineal and cognatic among the various groups, but in the public imagery the matrilineal systems of Ede and Jarai were often confused with matriarchy and seen as tokens of their essential primitiveness and difference from Viet culture. Highlanders had little political organization beyond the village level in the sense that there were no formal tribal institutions, but sometimes villages forged alliances and talented and charismatic individuals could dominate a number of villages. Despite this political decentralization, there had always been commercial and political contacts among

Vietnam, National Administration of Tourism, *Vietnam: Country and People: Provinces*, http://www.vietnamtourism.com/e_pages/vietnam/province/province.htm [accessed 24 January 2002]

¹⁰ Đặng Nghiêm Van, Chu Thái Sơn and Lưu Hùng, *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1993

¹¹ Cf. Coedès, G., *Les Etats hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948

the different groups living in the valleys, the slopes and the plateaus of the Annam Cordillera, as well as between Highlanders and the lowland civilizations. Although there was a formal recognition of the overlordship of the Khmer, Cham, and the Viet courts through tributes, the Highlanders maintained an autonomous social and cultural space until the nineteenth century.

2.3 Colonial History

This report concentrates on the upland area within present-day Vietnamese territory, even though the borders between Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are of relatively recent making, and were until recently not undisputed. This is an important detail because part of the current conflict is about the legitimacy of Vietnam's sovereignty over the Central Highlands – a question which is wound up with the question whether there was any Vietnamese political or cultural influence over the Central Highlands before the establishment of a French missionary presence there. Ethnohistorians like Henri Maitre, Gerald Hickey and Oscar Salemink have suggested that there had been a loose Vietnamese administrative system in parts of the Central Highlands and a recognition of the Vietnamese court's suzerainty (nominal overlordship) in other parts of the Central Highlands, Laos and Cambodia.¹² This administration crumbled during Vietnam's gradual collapse facing the combined threat of the French colonial conquest and the Siamese expansion to the East during the second half of the nineteenth century. Thus, when the French took possession of the Central Highlands during the first decades of the twentieth century, that region was no longer part of the Vietnamese polity, and relations between Vietnamese traders doubling as tax collectors and indigenous communities were strained. The French colonial regime tried to limit Vietnamese access to the Central Highlands and attempted to keep the region apart from the Vietnamese polity until their departure in 1954.

In 1850, a French Catholic mission station was established in Kontum among the Bahnar group. Missionaries were successful in acquiring political influence in the region but not very successful at conversion; only a few local Bahnar and Rengao groups converted to Christianity. Many other groups resisted conversion and French colonial rule. Only after World War I were the French colonial authorities successful in establishing an administration, most notably among the Ede (Rhadé) of Dac Lac (then Darlac) where the charismatic administrator and ethnographer Léopold Sabatier opened up the Highlands using mainly local resources. During the rubber boom of the 1920s French investment groups rushed to claim the fertile basaltic red soils of the plateaus of Pleiku, Djiring and especially Dac Lac. Local communities lost their ancestral land to plantation owners, and Kinh labour was brought in, albeit cautiously and strictly separated from the indigenous population for political reasons. After a revolt and a millenarian movement in the 1930s, French political and military leaders started to toy with the idea of a separate Moi region under direct French rule but with recourse to local customary law. During World War II the colonial administration of French Indochina was associated with the pro-Nazi Vichy-regime and hence allied with Japan which used Indochina as a supplier of natural resources and as a military base. After the liberation of metropolitan France by the Allies the Japanese took full control over French Indochina in March 1945. The Japanese capitulation in August 1945 strengthened the hand of the communist Viet Minh movement which had waged a guerrilla war against the French and Japanese, but it also fanned the aspirations of De Gaulle's France to restore the French colonial empire.¹³

¹² Maitre, H., *Les Jungles Moï: Mission Henri Maitre 1909-1911, Indochine sud-centrale*, Paris: Larose, 1912; Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*; Salemink, *Beyond Complicity and Naiveté*

¹³ Hickey, *Sons of the Mountains*; Salemink, *Ethnography as Martial Art*

3 FULRO and the Question of “Montagnard” Autonomy¹⁴

3.1 Before 1975

In the Central Highlands many of the Montagnard intellectuals (school teachers, clerks) chose to follow the Viet Minh, but during their reconquest of Indochina the French counted on the assumed ethnic antagonism between Montagnards and Viet in order to create a friendly base in the Central Highlands. During negotiations in 1946 the French proconsul in Indochina, Admiral Thierry D’Argenlieu, established the Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois (PMSI) which was separated from Annam/Vietnam, but both the Viet Minh and France’s Vietnamese allies protested against this dismemberment of their country. In 1949, therefore, the PMSI was partly reintegrated into Vietnam as the “crown domain” of Emperor Bao Dai, but ruled by French administrators. The French attempts to keep lowlanders and highlanders (Vietnamese and Montagnards) apart were militarily defeated in Dien Bien Phu in the Northern Highlands and in An Khe in the Central Highlands (1954). Just as the precolonial relations between Highlanders and Viet lowlanders have been ignored by historians, the role of indigenous Central Highlanders in the struggle for independence against the French has been ignored by those who sought to legitimate the existence of a separate, French-controlled zone, thereby assuming a “natural” antagonism between Kinh and Highlanders.¹⁵

In 1954 many thousands of Highlanders who supported the Viet Minh went north with the troop separation in anticipation of the planned election and reunification which never materialized. The Central Highlands became part of South Vietnam which was ruled by the anticommunist President Ngô Đình Diêm, a close ally of the USA. Diêm abolished the “separate status” (*statut particulier*) for the Central Highlands, and alienated the Highlanders by a policy of assimilation and discrimination, and by the resettlement of tens of thousands of Vietnamese Catholics from the North. In 1957 Montagnard leaders reacted to Diêm’s assimilation policy with a movement to restore the special status for the Central Highlands. That movement was called Bajaraka, an acronym for the four major “tribal” groups in the Highlands (Bahnar, Jarai, Rhadé, Koho). The response of the Diêm regime was to arrest and jail all the leaders, most of whom were civil servants and military men. When in 1960 the communist guerrilla war against the Southern regime broke out, many Highlanders joined the Highlander Autonomy Movement within the communist National Liberation Front, led by an Ede leader of Bajaraka, Y Bih Aleo. In response, American Special Forces were deployed in the Central Highlands in 1961 in order to organize Highlander counterinsurgency militia in the villages. In September 1964 a revolt broke out against the South Vietnamese regime in the ranks of these “Citizen’s Irregular Defence Groups” led by American and South-

¹⁴ Much of this section is based on Hickey, G.C., *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976*, New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1982 and Salemink, Beyond Complicity and Naiveté. Other sources on FULRO are Y-Bham-Enuol, *Extraits de l’Histoire des Hauts-Plateaux du Centre-Vietnam (Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois)*, Phnom Penh, 1965 (unpublished document); Jaspán, M. A., *Recent Developments among the Cham of Indochina: The Revival of Champa*, Hull: Centre for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1969; LaBrie, N. C., *FULRO: The History of Political Tension in the South Vietnamese Highlands*, M.A. Thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1971; Dassé, M., *Montagnards, révoltes et guerres révolutionnaires en Asie du Sud-Est continentale*, Bangkok: DK Bookhouse, 1976; Thayer, N., *The Forgotten Army: The Rebels Time Forgot*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 September 1992, pp. 16-22; Po Dharma, *Le FULRO: Moment de l’histoire ou tradition de lutte des peuples du sud de Champa*, in P.V. Pozner and O.V. Ribina (eds.), *Deuxième Symposium Franco-Soviétique sur l’Asie du Sud-Est*, Moscow: Présentation Sonat, 1993; Christie, C. J., *A Modern History of Southeast Asia: Decolonization, Nationalism and Separatism*, London; New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996

¹⁵ See Salemink, *Primitive Partisans*; Salemink, *Ethnography as Martial Art*

Vietnamese Special Forces. The revolt which signalled the birth of FULRO (Front Unifié de la Lutte des Races Opprimées) was quickly crushed, but it did not destroy the aspirations for autonomy among those Montagnards working with the American military. The leader of FULRO was Y Bham Enuol, an Ede leader of Bajaraka who had sought refuge in Cambodia, and was to stay there until his execution in Phnom Penh by the victorious Khmer Rouge in April of 1975. Up to 1975, FULRO split up in separate factions that sought different alliances, some with the NLF and North Vietnamese forces. The surprise North Vietnamese attack on Buon Ma Thuot which heralded the collapse of the southern regime was aided by FULRO forces.

The Second Indochina War was particularly violent in the Central Highlands which was one of the major battlefields – the end station of the Ho Chi Minh trail by which the communist forces in the South were supplied. The indigenous populations of the Highlands were simultaneously wooed and distrusted by all the warring parties. Young males were recruited as soldiers, militia or guerrilla, and became alienated from the village community and kinship group still influenced by custom. The vast majority of villages were at least once resettled in one of the many resettlement schemes aimed at separating the guerrillas from the population. Large tracts of forests were declared “free strike zones” and were defoliated by the spraying of “agent orange”. In the words of the American anthropologist Gerald Hickey, the Highlanders were caught in the middle, and their social, cultural and ecological worlds were shattered. On the other hand, not all the Highlanders were innocent victims of the war around them, but willing participants pursuing their own political and economic aims.¹⁶

3.2 After 1975

After reunification, the victorious communist regime reneged on promises of autonomy for the Central Highlands, and instead resettled many lowlanders in numerous New Economic Zones. Many Highlanders, distrusted because of their erstwhile association with the US Special Forces, were summoned to the notorious “re-education camps”. These actions alienated the new communist regime from much of the Highlander population. Thousands of Highlanders responded by going underground and reconstituting the FULRO movement which aspired to restore the “special status” bestowed in 1946 by the French High Commissioner D’Argenlieu. This movement waged a small guerrilla war, which did not have any chance of military success because of its isolation. In the early 1980s a number of FULRO groups surrendered to the Vietnamese authorities, while some other groups - totalling 212 people - made it to Cambodia and eventually to the USA, where they were received and supported by their erstwhile allies, the Special Forces veterans in North Carolina. In 1992 the last group of over 400 guerrillas (men, women and children) surrendered to officials of the UN Transitional Authority Command in Cambodia. Through the Orderly Departure Program the Montagnard community in the USA has grown to about 3,000 since 1992. In this diaspora community in North Carolina the dream of an autonomous homeland was kept alive, aided by Special Forces veterans, evangelical organizations and right-wing groups.¹⁷

¹⁶ Hickey, *Free in the Forest*; Hickey, G. C., *Shattered World: Adaptation and Survival among Vietnam’s Highland People during the Vietnam War*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993

¹⁷ See the websites of the Montagnard Foundation, <http://www.montagnard-foundation.org/> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Vietnam Highlands Assistance Project, <http://www.montagnarddega-develop.org/index.html> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Save the Montagnard People, <http://www.montagnards.org/> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Montagnard Dega Association, <http://www.angelfire.com/mo/mdadega/index.html> [accessed 24 January 2002]. For a Vietnamese view, see Thành Tín, *Đập nát công cụ hậu chiến CIA: FULRO* [Smashing the CIA’s Post-War Instrument: FULRO], Ho Chi Minh City: NXB TP Hồ Chí Minh, 1983

During the consecutive Indochina wars, the Central Highlands had an important strategic status. In the American War (Second Indochina War, 1960-1975) the Central Highlands linked the southern part of Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail with the North through Laos and Cambodia which were both hot spots in the Cold War themselves. During the Third Indochina War which ended with the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia (1979-1989), the Central Highlands was not only a theatre of low-intensity guerrilla war between the Vietnamese state and FULRO, but also a military base for operations in Cambodia. Since then, the Central Highlands have lost their strategic importance in military terms, but have grown in demographic, economic and ecological importance for Vietnam.¹⁸ Demographic, because the area is still seen as “empty” and “underdeveloped” in comparison with the more densely populated lowlands, and hence capable of absorbing “excess” population from other parts of Vietnam. A telling example of this is the official suggestion to relocate tens of thousands of people who will be displaced by the Son La hydropower project in Vietnam’s North-West mountainous zone to the Central Highlands. Economic, because the Central Highlands have become a production zone of (more or less lucrative) cash crops as well as other natural resources (mineral, timber, water and energy). Ecological, because the Central Highlands still contain (rapidly dwindling) forest reserves and biodiversity, and because soil and water management in the area is the key to the protection of surrounding lowlands against floods. In recent years, flooding has become more frequent in the Mekong Delta and the central coastal area, while the rapid deforestation and the use of water for irrigation and coffee production has lowered underground water tables in the Central Highlands at the risk of desertification.¹⁹

The diminished military significance of the Central Highlands does not compromise the extreme prejudice on the part of the Vietnamese authorities – and indeed a large part of Vietnam’s population – against perceived attempts to undermine national integrity and sovereignty. There is pride in the history of defence of the homeland against foreign domination against three powerful enemies (France, USA, China) and – one could add – one “fraternal” ally with imperial designs (the former Soviet Union). Given this legacy of preoccupation with national sovereignty based on national solidarity between ethnic groups (*dai đoàn kết*), confrontational methods are likely to backfire and will worsen the predicament of the groups that are the objects of such methods. Confrontational international pressure will obscure the domestic development dimensions of the February 2001 uprising in the Central Highlands and their aftermath, and will cast the issue as a security problem of defence of the homeland first and foremost. There is an enormous amount of official suspicion against what is considered foreign – especially American – interference in internal affairs, as is clear from such concepts as “peaceful evolution” used to denote “imperialist” designs to undermine stability and socialist rule by peaceful means and by seduction rather than force. On the other hand, the recent history of Vietnam shows the willingness of its leadership to engage in dialogue over the course of its development – even over sensitive issues – with international partners (international and regional organizations, bilateral donors and non-governmental organizations) provided that this is based on recognition of Vietnam’s political integrity.

¹⁸ Evans, G. and K. Rowley, *Red Brotherhood at War: Indochina since the Fall of Saigon*, London: Verso, 1984; Chanda, N., *Brother Enemy: The War after the War: A History of Indochina since the Fall of Saigon*, San Diego; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986; Saleminck, *Ethnography as Martial Art*; Saleminck, *Beyond Complicity and Naiveté*

¹⁹ Central Highlands Provinces Grapple with Soil Erosion Woes, *Viet Nam News*, 22 April 1999

4 Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands after 1975

4.1 General Ethnic Policy

In contrast to a neighbouring country like Thailand where ethnic minorities often do not have citizenship and the Thai state is directly related to the Thai nation, Vietnam considers itself a multi-ethnic and multicultural country, with respect for diversity enshrined in the Constitution and in legislation. In a country with 54 officially recognized ethnic groups, the Kinh or Viet lowlander majority constitutes 87 per cent of a population of almost 80 million. The Viet civilization is undoubtedly the cradle and the cultural core of the Vietnamese nation, but politically, minorities are considered full citizens of the Vietnamese state. As if to underscore this policy of formal ethnic equality, the Communist Party elected an ethnic Tay, Nông Đức Mạnh, as its leader during the Ninth Party Congress of April 2001, making a member of an ethnic minority the most powerful man in the country. Besides formal recognition, Vietnam is investing considerable resources in the provision of social services in remote, mountainous areas where most of the ethnic minority population and most of the country's poverty are concentrated. Hunger and poverty, problems over land and resources, defective medical services and illiteracy are most persistent in remote areas. As many observers have pointed out, the main reason for the failure of upland development policy is the tendency to impose models that are reasonably effective solutions for lowland problems but that do not work well in the highlands.²⁰ In other words, such policies betray an ethnocentric attitude towards development. However, this should not be taken to mean that Vietnam is a fully centralized country, for the various levels of government interpret and implement the never-ending stream of central directives in different ways. The policies, decisions and plans of the Government indicate the consensus and the will at the centre of power, but do not say much about the procedures and capacity for realizing these programmes in local practice.

Vietnam is a poor country with an annual GDP of around US\$ 400, but which prides itself on the provision of inexpensive social services to large parts of the population.²¹ In the era of Doi Moi or "renovation" and market-based economic reforms, the provision of social services is no longer fully subsidized, leading to a situation where clients have to pay for services in the fields of health and education. This puts the already substandard social services in remote areas out of reach of the poor, many of whom are ethnic minorities. Education is a particularly good example of this mechanism. Vietnam is in general a highly literate country, and puts much emphasis on education for all, but literacy statistics show that literacy tends to be much lower among ethno-linguistic minorities. As prescribed in Article 36 of the Constitution, the state invests heavily in education and supports various preferential

²⁰ Rambo, A. T., R. Reed, Le Trong Cuc [et al.] (eds.), *The Challenges of Highland Development in Vietnam*, Honolulu: East-West Center, 1995; Jamieson, N., *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam: A Country Profile*, Hanoi: Winrock International, 1996 (unpublished paper prepared for the World Bank); Salemink, O., *The King of Fire and Vietnamese Ethnic Policy in the Central Highlands*, in D. McCaskill and K. Kampe (eds.), *Development or Domestication? Indigenous Peoples of Southeast Asia*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1997; Jamieson, N., Le Trong Cuc and A. T. Rambo, *The Development Crisis in Vietnam's Mountains*, Honolulu: East-West Center, 1998; Walle, D. van de and D. Gunewardena, *Sources of Ethnic Inequality in Viet Nam*, *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 65, No 1, 2001, pp. 177-207; Đặng Nghiêm Vạn, *Tây Nguyên trên đường phát triển* [The Western Highlands on the road of development], Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 1989; Rerat, P., *Les Montagnards, peuples autochtones des Hauts Plateaux du Vietnam central*, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, Vol. 54, No 214, 2001, pp. 157-78

²¹ Even though a variety of statistical data are collected to serve various development programmes, it should be noted that figures tend to be notoriously unreliable, and that there is an incentive for officials to report favourable results to higher levels of Government.

programmes for ethnic minorities, like ethnic minority boarding schools, lower entry requirements and quota for minorities. However, the results have been limited because of the low quality of educational services offered in remote areas like the Highlands.²² Even though education in the mother tongue is enshrined in Article 5 of the 1992 Constitution of Vietnam, primary education for linguistic minorities is offered almost exclusively in the Vietnamese language. Multilingual education has hardly gone beyond the point of experimentation, despite the legally granted right to the use of the pupils' own ethnic language and script; despite evidence that teaching in Vietnamese causes many minority children to drop out of school early; and despite international evidence that bilingual education is much more effective at combating illiteracy among linguistic minorities. An additional complication is that it is hard to find (lowlander) teachers who are willing to live in difficult conditions in remote areas where they do not speak the local language. The result is that most indigenous minority children in the Central Highlands do go to school but often drop out early or remain functionally illiterate. As girls tend to be the first to drop out or not attend school at all, women have more chance of being illiterate and are often least able to participate in society, as Jamieson observed on the basis of the 1989 Census data. A statistical analysis performed on the Vietnam Living Standard Surveys of 1993 and 1998, and of a three per cent sample of the 1999 Census brings out that primary school attendance is good among indigenous children in the Central Highlands, but the lower secondary school enrolment rate is on (very crude) average 11.3 per cent for minority children against 64.8 per cent for Kinh children nationwide.²³

Most statistics and reports (Government, World Bank, UNDP and others) indicate that Vietnam's economy has grown tremendously over the past ten years, cutting back the percentage of poor households by 20 per cent from 1993 (55 per cent nationwide) to 1998 (36 per cent nationwide), according to the Vietnam Living Standards Surveys. However, the percentage of poor households among indigenous groups of the Central Highlands has remained high (only moving from 92 to 91 per cent). Whereas in 1993 the per capita expenditure of Central Highlanders (US\$ 72) was 50 per cent of that of the general population, which also includes other poor minorities (US\$ 145), in 1998 it was only 39 per cent (US\$ 77 and US\$ 196 respectively).²⁴ The 2001 *National Human Development Report*, on the other hand, claims that income inequality (measured by GINI index) within the Central Highlands has decreased from 1995 to 1999 against an increase nationwide, but that the level of inequality there remains much higher than the national average.²⁵ It is relevant to note that this lack of progress occurred right at the time when the economy in the Central Highlands became integrated into the world market, and boomed through the export of cash crops like coffee, that propelled Vietnam to second place in the global coffee export market. In

²² United Nations Development Programme and Vietnam, National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, *National Human Development Report 2001*, Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 2001

²³ Jamieson, Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam; Theis, J., *Ethnic Minority Education: Problem Analysis and Programme Strategy*, Hanoi: Save the Children UK, 1999; Baulch, B., Truong Thi Kim Chuyen, D. Haughton [et al.], *Ethnic Minority Development in Vietnam: A Socio-economic Perspective*, Hanoi: MPI-World Bank, 2001; Neeffjes, K. [et al.], *Poverty Reduction Amongst Ethnic Minorities in the Mountainous Areas of Vietnam – Reaching Targets*, Hanoi: UNDP Poverty Task Force, 2001

²⁴ Cf. Baulch [et al.]; Neeffjes

²⁵ United Nations Development Programme and Vietnam, National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, pp. 45-6

Vietnam, the Central Highlands were known as a kind of Eldorado where quick fortunes could be made.²⁶

Also in terms of the human development index, the Central Highlands region is lagging behind the rest of Vietnam.²⁷ Despite the Constitution's prescription of preferential treatment in health care for ethnic minorities, in 1989 life expectancy for the Jarai group was 54.4 years, more than 13 years less than the life expectancy of Kinh people. The reasons are manifold, but include deficient nutrition (hunger and malnutrition are widespread among indigenous minorities); the persistence of endemic diseases like malaria, goitre, cholera, dysentery and viral encephalitis; the difficult access to and low quality of health care services in the Central Highlands; and the linguistic and cultural differences which hamper access to services. Between 1993 and 1998 the average household size of the indigenous Central Highlanders grew to become the largest of any statistically relevant group in Vietnam (6.68, almost two points higher than the national average) at a time when Vietnam was commended by UNFPA for successfully bringing down the speed of its population growth with its family planning programme of a maximum of two children per family. Despite the household size, infant and child mortality in the Central Highlands are the highest in Vietnam and actually increased between 1989 and 1994, which might be linked to the introduction of user fees in the Vietnamese health system.²⁸

Accusations of forced sterilization found on some of the websites of the Montagnard/Dega diaspora in North Carolina have not been substantiated or independently confirmed, and do not match any known Vietnamese policy in this regard. On the contrary, Vietnam has been much more relaxed with its two-child family planning programme with regard to upland ethnic minorities out of respect for cultural difference. This does not mean that (female) sterilization does not occur in Vietnam; incidentally, it might be performed in conditions and with a level of information that is not sufficient, but there is no known policy of forced sterilization. Some websites go as far as to accuse the Vietnamese government of committing genocide by imposing strict birth control measures on the Montagnard population, claiming that the Montagnard population has decreased since 1975 and will be extinct by 2019. However, Vietnam's Census statistics tell a different story. From 1979 to 1999 the overall population of Vietnam increased by 50 per cent from 52.7 million to 79 million. Vietnam's ethnic minority population increased by 68 per cent from 6.6 million to 11.1 million, and the indigenous ethnic population of the Central Highlands and Annam Cordillera below the 17th parallel grew by 76 per cent from 925,000 to 1,625,000 in twenty years time. In other words, there is a "healthy" growth of the indigenous population in the Central Highlands, which refutes the assumption of a systematic policy of forced sterilization and genocide in Vietnam.²⁹

²⁶ Hardy, A., A History of Migration to Upland Areas in 20th Century Vietnam, Ph.D. Thesis, Australian National University, Canberra, 1998; Junker, B., Forest, People and Policies in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, *Indigenous Affairs*, Vol. 4, 2000, pp. 56-65; Fortunel, F., Comment s'approprié un territoire en plantant des caféiers sur les plateaux du centre Vietnam?, *Cahiers d'Outre-Mer*, Vol. 54 (No 214), 2001, pp. 123-36; United Nations Development Programme, *The Dynamics of Internal Migration in Vietnam*, UNDP/VIE/95/004, 1998

²⁷ United Nations Development Programme and Vietnam, National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, pp. 47 ff.

²⁸ Cf. Jamieson, Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam; Baulch [*et. al.*]; Neefjes

²⁹ For relevant websites of the Montagnard/Dega community in the USA, see <http://www.montagnard-foundation.org/news.html>; Save the Montagnard People, *Montagnard Population in Vietnam - Rapidly Vanishing*, 5 June 2001, http://www.montagnards.org/Crisis/Crisis_Genocide.html [accessed 24 January 2002].

Nevertheless, policies that seem right for the majority in Vietnam in terms of combating poverty and improving quality and delivery of social (education, health) services did little to improve the situation for the indigenous population of the Central Highlands, and increased the income and welfare gap with the Kinh (ethnic Vietnamese) and Hoa (ethnic Chinese) communities in the deltas and cities. Neefjes uses the concept of social exclusion which means that social groups are wholly or partly excluded from full participation in society; the exclusion can have political, social, cultural as well as economic dimensions which typically reinforce each other.³⁰ This growing gap is acknowledged and a source of concern for the Communist Party which rose to power on the promise of social equality. In order to fulfil its promise of socialist solidarity while implementing market reforms, Vietnam is collaborating with international donors on a nationwide Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction programme (HEPR). A sister HEPR programme targets remote rural areas – especially highland areas with large concentrations of poor ethnic minorities. This programme became known as Programme 135 which targets the 1700 poorest communes (a commune is the lowest administrative unit comprising of several villages and hamlets) in the country. This programme combines investments in local infrastructure and productive capacity with income support and subsidized social services. While the general HEPR programme is managed by the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, Programme 135 targeting remote areas is handled by the Committee on Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA), an inter-ministerial agency which is supposed to coordinate policies with regard to ethnic minorities and upland areas. Starting in 1999, articles began to appear in the Vietnamese press about the lack of effectiveness and the large-scale corruption in the HEPR projects handled by CEMMA in a number of northern upland provinces.³¹ In December 2000 the head of CEMMA, Minister Hoang Duc Nghi, had to report to the National Assembly about the corruption, and was severely reprimanded, but whereas provincial level culprits were arrested, central officials went free. Despite experiments with “grassroots democracy” that should promote greater transparency and curb corruption after massive protests in 1997 against corruption and land grabbing in the lowland provinces of Dong Nai and especially Thai Binh, the response to the CEMMA scandal does not bode well for the realization of transparency in the Central Highlands. The major points of contention in the Central Highlands, however, is not the HEPR programme but land rights and religious freedom.

4.2 Land Tenure

In a 1997 article the anthropologist Oscar Salemink articulated precisely the two main issues facing the Central Highlands: land tenure and religion.³² Since the 1960s the Vietnamese communist government has assumed that shifting cultivation is a primitive and backward agricultural technology which wastes rich forest resources. The official response came in 1968 with the Fixed Cultivation and Settlement programme which attempted to resettle “nomadic tribes” in larger villages under state control, and to introduce permanent

For the basis for the population figures above see United Nations Development Programme ... *Ethnic Minorities Populations*

³⁰ Neefjes, pp. 17-19

³¹ *Viet Nam News*, 26 October 1999; *Dai Doan Ket*, 17 June 2000, 8 July 2000, 30 September 2000, 7, 11, 14, 18, 21, 25 and 28 October 2000, 1 and 26 November 2000, 6, 9 and 10 December 2000; *Thanh Nien*, 1 October 2000, 7 and 9 December 2000; *Lao Dong*, 1 December 2000, 8 January 2001; *Tuoi Tre*, 11 January 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 7 February 2001

³² Salemink, *The King of Fire*

agriculture. After the reunification of the country in 1975, agriculture in the south was collectivized in agricultural cooperatives. In addition, in the Central Highlands forest land and plantations were appropriated by state enterprises which attracted people who migrated to New Economic Zones under a state-sponsored transmigration programme. Traditional land rights of indigenous groups were not recognized because they were thought to be rooted in archaic technology. The collectivization was not successful, and in 1986 the state began the economic reforms known as Doi Moi, which proclaimed the household to be the main economic unit in agriculture. With the adoption of the Land Law in 1993, the state started allocating agricultural land rights to households, first in the lowlands where families typically received back the irrigated lands which they had brought into the cooperative. In the Central Highlands the process of land allocation was much slower and much more complicated. Only permanent agriculture was recognized, and the scarcity of land suitable for permanent wet rice cultivation turned the attention to cash crops like coffee, rubber, tea and pepper. The high price of coffee in the early and mid-1990s made it possible to make fortunes with relatively small coffee gardens. When the organized transmigration slowed down, so-called “spontaneous migration” picked up and took on massive proportions because of the attraction of growing coffee – the “brown gold”. Between 1976 and 2001 the population of the four provinces of the Central Highlands more than tripled from 1.2 million to over 4 million, with the indigenous population growing from 600,000 to approximately one million.³³ Both ethnic Kinh farmers and ethnic minority groups from the northern highlands settled in the Central Highlands, often leading to conflicts over land with the indigenous population.³⁴

Both indigenous and migrant households were eligible for land use rights embodied in so-called “red books”. Very often, however, indigenous households lacked the knowledge, skills and capital to grow demanding and resource-intensive cash crops. In a situation where land became commoditized they lacked the concept of individual land ownership, being accustomed to the communal land ownership with periodic reallocation of land by clan elders in their traditional system of shifting cultivation. To make things worse, the coffee price fell steeply from January 1999, bankrupting many of the poorest and least skilled farmers.³⁵ Indigenous households were often lured or forced to sell off their lands to newcomers or to rich farmers. For their survival they had to return to shifting cultivation by clearing fields in the forest. But the availability of forest land diminished as a consequence of the massive immigration and clearing of forests by migrants for coffee and pepper gardens as well as for swidden farming. The agricultural conversion of forests to coffee gardens turned Vietnam into the world’s No. 2 coffee exporting country, but came at the price of an annual loss of

³³ Jamieson, N., *Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*; United Nations Development Programme and Vietnam, Committee on Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA); World Bank and MARD Forest Protection and Rural Development Project, *Ethnic Minorities Development Plan*, Hanoi, 1997 (unpublished document); Vietnam, National Administration of Tourism

³⁴ Hardy; Sikor, T. and Nguyen Trong Binh, *Forest Land Allocation in Dak Lak: An Initial Assessment*, Dak Lak: GTZ/Mekong River Commission, 2000 (consultancy report); Junker, B., *Traditional Natural Resource Management of the Jarai in Easol Commune, Eahleo District, Dak Lak Province*, Dak Lak: Mekong River Commission/GTZ, 1999; Junker, *Forest, People and Policies*; Fortunel; Vuong Xuan Tinh, *Changing Land Policies and Its Impact on Land Tenure of Ethnic Minorities in Vietnam*, Honolulu: East West Center, 2001

³⁵ Average price paid to producers for 1 lb. of robusta coffee in Vietnam slumped from US\$ 0.65 to US\$ 0.16 from January 1999 to December 2000, according to statistics from the International Coffee Organization, <http://www.ico.org/asp/statschoice2.htm> [accessed 24 January 2002]

30,000 hectares of forest in Tây Nguyên, soil erosion and depletion and pollution of water resources.³⁶

Simultaneously, most of the forest land remained in the hands of State Forest Enterprises or was classified as national parks or nature reserves. Also, while forest land is supposed to be allocated to individual households, this process is even slower than the allocation of agricultural land, especially for those forests which still contain valuable timber. Besides, the benefits of allocation of barren land to be reforested under Programme 327 (Decree 327 was issued in 1992) were limited, because households were supposed to protect “their” forest for a fee (US\$ 3-4 per hectare per year) and not exploit forest land – let alone clear it for swidden farming. Programme 327 was superseded by the Five Million Hectare Programme which aimed to induce peasants to reforest “barren hills” in return for certain usufruct rights contained in “blue books” but which are far from certain. An additional problem is the allocation of land use rights to men – considered as household heads under Vietnamese law – in communities that traditionally have been matrilineal, thereby disenfranchising women. Many indigenous farmers in the Central Highlands do not wish to participate in this programme, and instead move away to remote areas to continue swidden farming outside of the control of the authorities. But given the massive in-migration, the rapid rate of deforestation, and the degradation of land and water resources, this swidden farming is no longer the rotational shifting cultivation system, which used to be sustainable in areas with low population densities, but a pioneering shifting cultivation system which will contribute to the degradation of the natural resources in the area.³⁷ Despite these setbacks and despite the lack of results of the Fixed Cultivation and Settlement programme, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development reported in May 2001 that “nomadic lifestyles” (the reference is to shifting cultivation, not to migration) are to be phased out by 2005.³⁸

Relief through support from the state, for instance through the Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction programme, may not be very effective as it is typically channelled through sedentarization (Fixed Cultivation and Settlement) programmes which indigenous communities are trying to avoid. One Vietnamese anthropologist has described a typical case of a number of Ede villages that had been *in situ* for five generations but which were “sedentarized” (relocated) in a new village in order to “stabilize” and “develop” their lifestyles. In the process, however, Kinh in-migrants have become the most enthusiastic participants in the resettlement and attendant poverty alleviation programmes because it allows them legitimized access to lands that once were considered Ede property.³⁹ In the second half of the 1990s, many Vietnamese researchers and some officials changed their ideas about swidden farming and customary law, with the mounting evidence that a number

³⁶ Central Highlands Provinces Grapple...; Free Migration Poses New Socio-economic Difficulties, *Viet Nam News*, 3 September 1999

³⁷ Sikor; Junker, Forest, People and Policies; Salemin, O., Customary Law, Land Rights and Internal Migration, *Vietnam Social Sciences*, Vol. 2 (No 76), 2000, pp. 65-79; see also Berg, C. van den, Environmental Problems and Gender Issues: Experiences of Indigenous Communities in Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia, *Indigenous Affairs*, No 4, 2000, pp. 40-7

³⁸ *Viet Nam News*, 5 May 2001. In the same article, state investment in “sedentarization” programmes over the last ten years was estimated at US\$ 86 million.

³⁹ Truong Huyen Chi, Socio-economic Transformation in an E-de (Rhade) Commune in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington DC, 1997; Government Pledges to Help for Cash-starved Tây Nguyên, *Viet Nam News*, 12 January 2000; Vietnam, Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs, *Poverty Alleviation Strategy 2001-2010*, Hanoi, 2001

of well-meaning policies were rooted in cultural misconceptions. New ideas resulted in a number of experiments with different natural resource management practices based on local knowledge and local, communal institutions in the highland areas in general and the Central Highlands in particular.⁴⁰ It remains to be seen whether such experiments which delegate management authority and decision-making power to communities in ways that are culturally alien to Kinh concepts, can be sustained in the present climate of distrust and concern over national sovereignty in the Central Highlands.

4.3 Religion

Traditional religious beliefs and practices among indigenous groups in the Central Highlands have often been described as “animist”. People worshipped a pantheon of higher and lower spirits – spirits that we would call “gods” like the “god of thunder”, spirits connected with particular places (forests, rivers, mountains, rocks), spirits associated with particular animals (e.g. pythons) which are taboo for consumption, spirits of ancestors. Some persons with special skills and knowledge became spirit mediums and shamans. Religious beliefs were closely connected with behaviour which was regulated by a system of customary law governing the relations between people, nature and the spirit world. Customary law specialists were called in to reconcile in case of conflict, sickness or misfortune, impose sanctions and conduct rituals that often involved sacrificial slaughter of animals. Through a policy of “selective preservation” of culture, the communist government has actively suppressed the traditional religious beliefs and practices which were branded “superstitious”, “unscientific”, “wasteful” and “unhygienic”. Besides, these religious practices were closely linked with the natural and cultural environment, with a lifestyle based on swidden agriculture and with the availability of certain resources for making sacrifices. Combined with the changes in the socio-cultural environment, the government policy of selective preservation made observance of traditional religious requirements no longer a viable option for many.⁴¹

Since 1980, many indigenous ethnic families and communities (Stieng, Mnong, Koho, Ede and Jarai in the Central Highlands, H’Mong in the north) have converted to evangelical Christianity, like many minority groups in other countries in Southeast and East Asia. Before 1975, American protestant missionaries of the Christian and Missionary Alliance had been active in the Central Highlands since 1929 but were never very successful, just as their French Catholic colleagues, despite the considerable financial resources at their disposal. After their departure in 1975, conversion to Christianity became much more widespread, aided by radio broadcasts in ethnic minority languages from the Philippines by the Far Eastern Broadcasting Company which aimed at spreading the gospel. Using the linguistic research by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and supported by evangelical groups in the USA, Canada and Australia, the broadcasts turned out to be quite effective.⁴² As in other

⁴⁰ Jamieson [et al.], *The Development Crisis*; Ngô Đức Thịnh and Phan Đăng Nhật (eds.), *Luật tục và Phát triển Nông thôn hiện nay ở Việt Nam: Kỷ yếu hội thảo khoa học* [Customary Law and Present-day Rural Development in Vietnam: Conference Proceedings], Hanoi: NXB Chính Trị Quốc gia, 2000; Hoàng Xuân Tý and Lê Trọng Cúc (eds.), *Kiến thức Bản địa của Đông bào Vùng cao trong Nông nghiệp và Quản lý Tài nguyên Thiên Nhiên* [Indigenous knowledge of highland compatriots in agriculture and natural resource management], Hanoi: NXB Nông Nghiệp, 1998; Bui Minh Dao, *Trong trot Truyền thống của các Dân tộc tại cho ở Tây Nguyên* [Traditional agriculture of ethnic groups in the Central Highlands of Vietnam], Hanoi: NXB Khoa học Xã hội, 2000

⁴¹ Salemink, *The King of Fire*

⁴² See Far East Broadcasting Company, *People Group Information (Our Audiences)*, [accessed 24 January 2002]; Far East Broadcasting Company, *Nguồn Sống*, <http://www.vietchristian.net/nguonsong> [accessed 24

Asian countries, the political authorities in Vietnam consider Protestantism as oppositional to their political system and the religious mainstream (a syncretistic mix of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and ancestor worship) and try to counter conversion. Why, then, would ethnic minorities convert to a religion that brings so many challenges? One anthropological analysis holds that it is precisely this oppositional quality which makes Christianity attractive for indigenous groups, because it allows them to abandon old lifestyles and beliefs and embrace new ones that are in line with the moral and behavioural requirements of modern life (the moral precepts of evangelical Christianity and communism are remarkably similar) while maintaining strict ethnic boundaries between ethnic minorities and the majority Kinh.⁴³

Although Vietnam has an official policy of freedom of religion, that freedom is qualified by concerns of state security and law and order. In practice this means that privately people can do what they want but that public gatherings, rituals and services have to be conducted in one of the religious associations officially recognized by the Bureau of Religious Affairs, and hence condoned and controlled by the Fatherland Front of the Communist Party. For instance, the majority of people in Vietnam practise some form of Buddhism and are free to visit the pagoda of their liking, but the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam which rejects any official recognition and political interference by the Fatherland Front is actively suppressed. Yet, during the period of Doi Moi (Renovation) the control of the Party and state became much more relaxed than it had previously been. A telling example is that the Evangelical religion in Vietnam, usually called Tin lành (Gospel), which owned a number of church buildings in which regular church services took place, was allowed to hold a national conference in Ho Chi Minh City in February 2001, and was officially recognized by the Bureau of Religious Affairs in April 2001. A posting on the *Christianity Today* website hailed the recognition as “miraculous” but noted the irony that this happened simultaneously with the demonstrations in the Central Highlands, which were partly motivated by concerns over alleged harassment of Christians there. It remains unclear whether the house churches of Protestant minorities are included in the official recognition.⁴⁴

Since the mid-1990s there have been regular reports of harassment of Christians among tribal groups in the Central Highlands and adjacent provinces. Thousands of Stieng, Mnong, Koho, Ede, Jarai, Hre and other indigenous people have converted to Christianity in provinces as far apart as Kontum, Gialai, Dac Lac, Lam Dong and Binh Phuoc. Lacking resources and permission to build regular churches, congregations usually held church services in so-called house-churches. Reportedly local Party cadres and security forces often took measures like destroying such house-churches; harassing, arresting, “re-educating” or mistreating pastors; and pressuring believers to abandon their new faith. In various publications, Vietnamese officials and researchers expressed their dismay at this conversion movement to a religion which is considered not only as illegal and foreign to Vietnam, but as a tool in foreign hands

January 2002]; Open Doors International, *Country Information: Vietnam*, <http://www.gospelcom.net/od/vietpro.htm> [accessed 24 January 2002]; <http://www.christianitytoday.com> [possibly exclude – hard to find vietnam parts; Vietnamese Christian Broadcast, <http://www.tinlanh.org/> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Izenorde, J., *New Hope for Vietnamese Christians*, May 2001, <http://www.geocities.com/wspublications/vietnam.html> [accessed 24 January 2002]

⁴³ Salemink, *The King of Fire*

⁴⁴ See Vietnam Protestants Call Conference ‘Miraculous’, *Christianity Today*, 14 February 2001, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/107/36.0.html> [accessed 24 January 2002]; *Viet Nam News*, 9 February 2001, 6 April 2001

to stir up discontent with the communist regime and discord among ethnic groups.⁴⁵ In 1999 and 2000 a number of secret documents of central and provincial authorities and party agencies were leaked, which contained analyses and recommendations dealing with the spread of evangelical Christianity in Vietnam. It is evident from these documents that Christianity is seen as antithetical to Vietnam's religious traditions and national security, and the foreign support for conversion as an attempt to undermine Vietnam's security.⁴⁶ For the Central Highlands, the evangelical movement was associated with "evil influences", "manipulations" and "intrigues" by American missionaries associated with the US intervention and with FULRO.⁴⁷ Reasons cited for the conversion of minorities are the resources of missionary organizations, the weakness of the political apparatus in the highlands, and – especially - the persistent poverty and hardship among minorities, which would then point to a communist counterstrategy of propaganda, exposing evil schemes and permission for "sincere" believers, combined with economic development.⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that some documents advocate a return to the traditional religious beliefs which had been suppressed as "superstitious" before.

5 The Events of February 2001 and Their Immediate Aftermath

Before describing the events immediately before, during and after February and March 2001 in Vietnam's Central Highlands, it is important to make clear that the author of this report was not in the region in February or March 2001, and therefore has to rely on reports provided by others (which cannot be referenced for reasons of protection of informants) and on accounts in the public domain. It is obvious that opinions vary widely among the various parties. Given the lack of access to the area during and immediately after the demonstrations, and the security measures taken by the Vietnamese authorities, a truly objective and impartial account of the events will not be possible. It is not the intention of this background paper to deal in detail with individual cases of human rights abuse; others are better equipped to do that. Instead, a balanced reading of available documents combined with in-depth knowledge of the region and with honesty about what is not certain will allow the author to formulate a plausible account in the following sections on the events and immediate causes themselves; on the responses by Vietnamese authorities and local communities; and on international dimensions caused by the presence of refugees in Cambodia and the actions of human rights organizations, evangelical groups and individuals and institutions in the USA.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Nguyễn Xuân Nghĩa, Thiên chúa giáo và đạo Tin lành ở các dân tộc thiểu số Tây Nguyên [Catholicism and Protestantism among the ethnic minorities of the Central Highlands], *Tap chí Dân Tộc Học*, Vol. 4, No. 64, 1989, pp. 59-68; *Phap Luat* [Law Review], January 1999; Hajari, N., God vs. the Cadres, *Time Asia*, 13 September 1999, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/99/0913/vietnam.html> [accessed 24 January 2002]

⁴⁶ English translations of a number of such documents have been posted on the Internet at Freedom House, Center for Religious Freedom, *Vietnam: Secret Documents Reveal Religious Persecution Plan*, <http://216.119.117.183/religion/country/index.htm#vietnam> [accessed 24 January 2002]. It is impossible to verify the authenticity of these documents.

⁴⁷ See Vietnam, Steering Committee 184, Development of Policy on Protestantism in Some Provinces and Cities, Hanoi, 5 March 1999, http://216.119.117.183/religion/pdfdocs/vietnam_doc2.pdf [accessed 24 January 2002]

⁴⁸ See Vietnam, Steering Committee 184, Developing the Economy and Culture, Normalizing Society and Building Political Infrastructure in the Mountainous Regions Where the Minority Peoples Are Christian Believers, Hanoi, 3 May 1999, http://216.119.117.183/religion/pdfdocs/vietnam_doc3.pdf [accessed 24 January 2002]

5.1 The Events

On Friday, 2 February 2001, 3,000 – 4,000 Jarai people marched on Pleiku, the provincial capital of Gia Lai, and staged a protest before the provincial headquarters of the Communist Party and the government. The next day, thousands of mostly Ede people marched on Buon Ma Thuot, the capital of Dac Lac province, from various directions. Most were stopped before they reached the city, and blocked the main roads into the city including National Highways No. 14 (North-South) and No. 28 (link with the coast), but some 400 made it into the city and staged a protest there. In various outlying districts of Gia Lai (Chu Se) and Dac Lac province (Ea H'Leo, Ea Sup), protests were staged and demonstrations held until things quieted down by Tuesday 6 February. Initial counts spoke of 20 arrests in Pleiku alone, 20 police officers wounded and hundreds of demonstrators injured.⁴⁹ Footage that was aired much later – on 28 March 2001 – on Vietnam Television showed crowds of people throwing rocks at riot police.⁵⁰ Additional sources reported that crowds also protested in front of private homes of provincial Party officials, and that representatives of political agencies were chased and sometimes mistreated. While this had not been the first incident or violent conflict in the region, what was remarkable was the degree of apparent coordination between localities that are far apart, as well as the fact that this organization had been hidden from the view of the local authorities and local security and intelligence forces.

Initial reports in the government-controlled Vietnamese press appeared after international news agencies began to report on the protests. Regarding the causes or grievances, the first account mentioned the arrest on 29 January of two ethnic minority men for illegal actions (an apparent reference to evangelization activities). This reportedly sparked the anger of people from their locality who converged in Pleiku town in protest and were joined there by others. According to this reading, the two men admitted to their wrongdoings, signed an apology and were released by the authorities who proceeded to explain the situation to the crowd which dispersed to their hamlets without further incident. Another issue reported by Vietnamese authorities was complaints about land disputes (a frequent occurrence in the Central Highlands with its frontier society). In this first official reading the events in Buon Ma Thuot and other localities in Dac Lac were instigated by an “incorrect understanding” of the previous events in Pleiku. These demonstrations were then infiltrated and exploited by “extremist elements” bent on creating trouble.⁵¹ A variation of the interpretation that land disputes and land tenure were at the root of the protests was the suggestion that it was caused by fear over an influx of 100,000 to 300,000 new settlers into the Central Highlands from the areas that will be inundated and affected by the construction of the Son La hydropower dam.⁵² International media (whose journalists did not have direct access to the region) tended to highlight land and religion as the main issues, and reported that the demonstrators were protesting against land evictions by authorities as well as against harassment of evangelical pastors.⁵³ Evangelical groups in the USA and elsewhere reporting on the events tended to portray the protesters as Protestants and the protests as demonstrations for religious

⁴⁹ Reuters, 6 February 2001; Viet Nam News Agency, 8 February 2001; *Viet Nam News*, 9 February 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 7 and 12 February 2001

⁵⁰ *The Nation* [Bangkok], 29 March 2001

⁵¹ Viet Nam News Agency, 8 February 2001; *Viet Nam News*, 9 February 2001

⁵² International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, *Indigenous World 2000-2001*, Copenhagen, 2001, p. 392

⁵³ Reuters, 6 February 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 7 and 12 February 2001; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 February 2001; *Time Magazine*, 2 April 2001; *The Economist*, 7 April 2001

freedom.⁵⁴ Finally, there were rumours (ostensibly based on eye-witness reports) among Kinh intellectuals – including people who tend to be critical of the Government – that protesters were paid to appear at demonstrations, with specific amounts paid for specific actions (holding a banner, throwing stones). The *Lao Dong* newspaper of 22 March 2001 carried a story about promises of money for bus tickets at the demonstration site.⁵⁵ Foreign observers tend to dismiss such stories as fabrications or as obscuring the deeper causes of the protests.

This leads to another actor in this equation who so far has not been mentioned. That is the Montagnard Foundation of Kok Ksor. Born in 1945 in what is now Gia Lai province, Kok Ksor was a Jarai member of the FULRO movement who left Vietnam in 1974 to study in the USA. Kok Ksor claims that he was commissioned by the mythical FULRO leader Y Bham Enuol to represent FULRO there.⁵⁶ One among a number of Montagnard/Dega organizations in North-Carolina, the Montagnard Foundation and Kok Ksor rose to prominence in the context of the recent events in the Central Highlands. He gave out press statements, was interviewed by the BBC on 8 March 2001, and appeared to have been in contact with people in the Central Highlands before and during the events – until telephone communications were cut by the Vietnamese authorities – and with refugees in Cambodia from April onward. Kok Ksor associated the demonstrations with the FULRO dream of creating an autonomous homeland, and spoke of an autonomous Dega state that he was supposed to lead.⁵⁷ This association of conflicts over land and religion with political autonomy put the political authorities in Vietnam on high alert, especially when the issue of human and religious rights was put on the agenda of the US Congress. A plethora of articles in the Vietnamese press began to stress that Vietnam is one unified, multi-ethnic and multicultural nation and that the desire of FULRO and its “successor” organizations in North-Carolina to break the Central Highlands away from Vietnam was supported by hostile foreign forces and against the will of the Vietnamese people. In these articles Kok Ksor is belittled as someone who has not even participated in FULRO’s guerrilla movement after 1975. He is compared unfavourably with Naria Ya Duck, the erstwhile “Vice-Premier” of FULRO who surrendered to the Vietnamese authorities in 1983, made a political u-turn and is now the Vice-Chairman of the Fatherland Front in Lam Dong province. In a half-page interview in the *Lao Dong* daily, Ya Duck sees his former subordinate Kok Ksor as of little importance.⁵⁸

Yet, the diaspora Montagnard organizations could not so easily be ignored. Rejecting the interpretation of the demonstrations as spontaneous, the Vietnamese security forces started an investigation into the causes, the extent and the hidden organization of the protests that had seemed so well-coordinated. In March and April of 2001 a number of articles appeared in the Vietnamese media about the “disruptions” or “provoked troubles” (*vu gay roi*) in the Central Highlands. Typically, such reports would consist of interviews with local persons in authority (village elders, village leaders, police officials, factory managers) juxtaposed with interviews

⁵⁴ See, for instance, Vietnam Protestants Call Conference ‘Miraculous’

⁵⁵ Personal communication; *Lao Dong*, 22 March 2001

⁵⁶ This claim cannot be contradicted because Y Bham Enuol was executed in 1975 by the victorious Khmer Rouge. However, he had been under house arrest in Phnom Penh under the control of Les Kosem, an ethnic Cham Colonel in the Cambodian Army, and of Lon Non, the brother of President Lon Nol, since at least 1972, and was hardly in a position to command or give orders then.

⁵⁷ See the websites of the Montagnard/Dega community in the USA, <http://www.montagnard-foundation.org/> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Save the Montagnard People, <http://www.montagnards.org/Crisis/NewsReports-Archive.html> [accessed 24 January 2002]; *Nhan Dan*, 15 March 2001; *Viet Nam News*, 21 March 2001

⁵⁸ *Nhan Dan*, 15 March 2001; *Viet Nam News*, 21 March 2001; *Lao Dong*, 7 April 2001

with people who participated in the demonstrations but admit to their wrongdoing; this is presented against the backdrop of a eulogy of Vietnam's ethnic/national solidarity and of the benefits of development under the leadership of the Party. What is interesting in this standard propaganda is 1) identification of the locations, or "hotspots"; 2) the timeline; and 3) the organization. In terms of the locations, a wide variety of locations with troubles are mentioned, from Kontum via Pleiku, Chu Prong and Chu Se districts in Gia Lai province, to Buon Ma Thuot, Krong Buk, Ea H'Leo, Ea Sup, and Yok Don in Dac Lac province. This is an indication that support for the protests has been much more wide-spread and massive than the authorities would want to make us believe, but primarily limited to the Jarai and Ede ethnic groups which have historically been the most politicized. In terms of the timeline, the troubles did not start on 2 February 2001, but started much earlier. In places like the village of Plei Lao, in Chu Se district, Gia Lai province, the problems and protests leading up to the 2 February demonstrations in Pleiku started as early as October 2000. In terms of organization, the reports relate that groups of "troublemakers" went around villages inciting people to protest and to create a separate "Dega space" in the villages by refusing to send children to school, refusing to work and refusing to let outsiders into the village. They reportedly held meetings where meals and clothes were handed out and promises were made for more aid and money to come forth, and where pressure was exerted on the participants to contribute to the construction of a chapel. These people have reportedly been in contact with Kok Ksor by telephone. According to these reports in the state media, many younger people were duped into participating and are now regretting it.⁵⁹ What is interesting in these reports is the geographic extension and the length of time with which a network could operate undetected – or at least without response from the security agencies.

5.2 The Responses

One of the first actions on the part of the Vietnamese authorities was to strengthen the security forces in the entire region and increase the intensity of patrolling in the villages by calling up army and police forces from elsewhere. Dozens of people thought to have fomented or participated in the "disruptions" were arrested and interrogated about their "network" and their contacts with Kok Ksor and other members of the refugee Dega community in the USA. Relevant documents were found and used to trace the identity of other leading members of the putative network. Refugees and overseas Montagnard, evangelical and human rights organizations have put forward allegations of physical abuse, torture and excessive violence on the part of security forces. There have been reports that "illegal" churches were again destroyed and that one person died in the skirmishes.⁶⁰ Telephone communications with hotspots were cut and the entire region barred to foreigners including the then US Ambassador "Pete" Peterson, so it was difficult to have access to unbiased reports. Much of the present-day international discussion is about the truth in such allegations in order to answer the question whether the human rights of detainees have been abused and whether they can expect a fair trial or not. The initial response of the Vietnamese authorities was indeed focusing on security as a domestic affair and responding to international queries with a reference to national sovereignty and integrity. When Ambassador Peterson finally was granted access in July 2001, he called on the authorities of Gia Lai province to treat the events as development issues rather than security issues, and on

⁵⁹ *Nhan Dan*, 16 March 2001; *Lao Dong*, 22, 27 and 29 March 2001; a special nation-wide television programme on the "ethnic issue" was aired on 15 April 2001. For the temporary closure of Yok Don National Park, see *BBC Asia-Pacific*, 7 February 2001

⁶⁰ *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 22 February 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 27 March 2001; *BBC Asia Pacific*, 28 March 2001.

the central government to keep provincial leaders in check.⁶¹ In recent years Gia Lai province has been more hard-line and less open to experimentation and reform than the other hot spot, Dac Lac province.

Immediately after the February events many Vietnamese intellectuals and people knowledgeable about the Central Highlands privately expressed their concern that authorities would focus their resources on a crackdown only without looking at the deeper causes of the protests and the legitimacy of the grievances. However, the Vietnamese authorities did look beyond the security and sovereignty questions and developed a wide array of measures to both counter the protests and address the underlying causes. The first of such measures was propaganda. Immediately after the troubles a spate of newspaper articles and other media programmes was released with such titles as “Dac Lac marches forward with socio-economic developments”. Typically, such articles would highlight the policy challenges, the investments by the state and the results achieved, against the backdrop of “ethnic solidarity” governing Party and state policies and attitudes.⁶² Other articles would highlight cultural features (rituals, music, dance) of indigenous groups in ways that seem to convey respect for cultural difference, or histories that would underscore solidarity between minorities and the Revolution, including the artistic talents of a Jarai cultural official in Pleiku who reportedly was mistreated by protesters during the protests.⁶³ After the “events” in February, a research project for collecting, studying and publishing the extremely rich indigenous oral literature of the Central Highlands was approved after it had been prepared and proposed for some time. With a total budget of 22 billion VND (almost 1.5 million US\$), this project will be Vietnam’s biggest self-financed social science research project ever.⁶⁴

While this propaganda is targeting an audience outside the Central Highlands, a more intensive, coordinated propaganda effort is being conducted within the Central Highlands themselves, involving high-ranking Party officials, the Fatherland Front, the Ministry of Public Security and provincial cadres. A common perception is that Party and state officials have been too far removed from “the masses” and – in the words of the Politburo member and President of the Fatherland Front, Pham The Duyet – cadres need “to be more down-to-earth so as to better understand the people’s desires and aspirations” in order to be able to “thwart sinister plots and moves by enemies to drive a wedge between ethnic groups for their eventual target of peaceful evolution”. This finding was pre-empted by the decision in Dac Lac to send cadres to remote villages between 15 March and 31 December “to develop production and consolidate social order and security”.⁶⁵ A meeting of “mass organizations” (including the Party, Youth Union, Women’s Union, Farmers’ Union, Fatherland Front) found that they had been lax in training ethnic minority cadres and in paying attention to specific cultural needs of local ethnic minorities. *Nhan Dan* reported on the expansion of Tay Nguyen University in Buon Ma Thuot as a training ground for local leaders and intellectuals.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Agence France Presse, 14 July 2001

⁶² See, for instance, *Viet Nam News*, 9 February 2001, 12 March 2001, 29 July 2001, 5 and 19 August 2001; *Nhan Dan*, 13, 20 and 31 March 2001, 5 May 2001; Viet Nam News Agency, 17 March 2001.

⁶³ See, for instance, *Viet Nam News*, 11 and 12 March 2001, 6 and 10 May 2001, 5 August 2001; *Nhan Dan*, 14 February 2001, 20 March 2001

⁶⁴ *Lao Dong*, 28 February 2001; *Nhan Dan*, 21 March 2001; *Tuoi Tre*, 19 April 2001

⁶⁵ *Viet Nam News*, 2 April 2001; *Nhan Dan*, 13 March 2001

⁶⁶ *Viet Nam News*, 17 May 2001

Communication methods became more innovative, too. Lam Dong province invested in the purchase of thousands of radios to be distributed to village leaders in order to more effectively provide information about “guidelines and policies of the Party and State”. Almost simultaneously, Viet Nam Television started broadcasting programmes in the Jarai and Bahnar languages for the first time.⁶⁷ The Ministry of Education and Training announced increased investment in education in Tay Nguyen, while another report announced the introduction of as pilot project in bilingual (Jarai-Viet) education in Chu Se district, one of the hot spots of the unrest.⁶⁸ To be sure, bilingual education textbooks had been developed in the 1980s by the Department of Education and Training of Gia Lai province, but hardly been used. Earlier bilingual education programmes had been developed under French colonial rule and in the 1960s by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The degree to which education is seen as a tool in the propaganda war and hence as contentious is brought out by reported incidents of poisoning in a number of schools in Dac Lac. The Vietnamese authorities accused the people behind a boycott of schools of deliberately poisoning students in order to frighten their parents and induce them to keep their children home. The Montagnard Foundation of Kok Ksor and other Montagnard groups in the USA accuse the Vietnamese authorities of poisoning Dega children as part of its “genocidal policy” against Montagnards.⁶⁹

On 15-17 July 2001 a three-day conference on the socio-economic development of the Central Highlands took place in Buon Ma Thuot in the presence of Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and two Deputy Prime Ministers, resulting in a decision to diversify crops, raise living standards and set up a system to collect information from the grass roots level in order to make development more effective. The most important decision relating to the question of land ownership and tenure was to accelerate allocation of land to ethnic minority households that do not have sufficient land, thus directly addressing one of the main grievances that sparked the unrest.⁷⁰ An article in *Nhan Dan* reports that Dac Lac province set up a “land fund” of around 13,800 hectares for ethnic minority households possessing less than the average 0.73 hectare per household. The article explained that land was taken from districts and from state farms and state forest enterprises, and would be purchased from large private plantations.⁷¹ This measure does not address one of the key shortcomings of the land allocation programme in the uplands, namely that many upland groups lack the concept of private land ownership and may lack the knowledge, skills and institutions to manage private land permanently, profitably and sustainably.

Such positive gestures towards addressing some of the grievances of the protesters were taken simultaneously with – what is described as – a crackdown on participants in the protests throughout the Central Highlands, which might undo any gains for the indigenous population. In March 2001 security forces came into the villages in force and began to arrest people who were seen as leaders of the protests. By that time, the official interpretation of the

⁶⁷ *Nhan Dan*, 23 February 2001

⁶⁸ *Tuoi Tre*, 10 April 2001; *Nhan Dan*, 15 March 2001

⁶⁹ *Lao Dong*, 6 and 7 April 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 7 April 2001; Agence France Presse, 6 April 2001; Deutsche Presse Agentur, 10 April 2001; Save the Montagnard People, *Religious Oppression of Montagnards*, 30 April 2001, http://www.montagnards.org/Crisis/Crisis_Religious_Oppression.html.

⁷⁰ *Viet Nam News*, 17 July 2001; Agence France Presse, 14 July 2001

⁷¹ *Nhan Dan*, 13 August 2001

events had shifted from a series of (more or less legitimate) protest against loss of ancestral lands and religious harassment to an attempt to set up an autonomous Dega state. This reinterpretation was reinforced by the public and outspoken involvement of Kok Ksor's Montagnard Foundation (which has such a political aim) and his apparent connections with people in the Central Highlands, as well as with public American concern over the issue. Such an association with an attempt to break up the sacrosanct sovereign state is regarded as a much more serious crime in Vietnam than simply protesting, and therefore potentially damaging for the protesters.⁷² Also in March, groups – sometimes even whole families – of indigenous Central Highlanders crossed the border with Cambodia where they sought asylum. Their stories, told to UNHCR and Human Rights Watch officials as well as to representatives of Montagnard organizations in the US, paint a bleak picture of arrests, beatings, appropriation or destruction of goods, torture, and even of disappearances. The Montagnard Foundation, which on its website speaks of a “wave of terror” in the Central Highlands, has posted detailed lists of people who have been arrested or mistreated by the Vietnamese security forces, but it is impossible to verify this information independently.⁷³ It is not clear whether people have actually been executed by Vietnamese security forces during arrests or clashes when attempting to arrest protesters.

Vietnam regularly applies the death sentence for serious crimes like murder, drug smuggling or large-scale corruption. High treason – and an attempt to undermine the government and set up a separate state can be considered as such – is a serious crime for which a death sentence can be given, but this in itself does not make Vietnam much different from other countries that still apply the death penalty, like the USA. On 26-27 September 2001, the first trials were held against 14 people suspected of “inciting separatist protests” in the provincial courts in Pleiku and Buon Ma Thuot. They were sentenced to prison terms ranging from six to twelve years for being the “masterminds”. It is important to note here that prosecutors mentioned the defendants’ association with Kok Ksor’s Montagnard Foundation, and Vietnam’s state-run media stated that they were convicted of “destabilizing security” under Article 89 of the Criminal Code for organizing demonstrations in support of a separate Dega state. No mention was made of the land issue and only passing reference to the religious question. In individual cases other charges (illegal possession of military weapons, founding an illegal organization) were brought as well. The trials were conducted in just one day (Buon Ma Thuot) and two days (Pleiku) respectively, with no foreign observers allowed. Officials of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch commented that they feared that the defendants had not received a fair trial, and that the trials may represent an effort by the Vietnamese government to “stifle freedom of expression, assembly and association”.⁷⁴ However, it is important to note that no capital punishment has been imposed on those considered the leaders of the movement. So far Vietnam is not known to have executed political prisoners and political surveillance has relaxed over the last ten years. The legal system, however, is far from flawless, with ambiguous laws, political control over the judiciary, and lack of guarantees for adequate legal defence. Refugees who are returned to Vietnam without proper safeguards are likely to be tried in unfair manners as well.

⁷² See *The Nation* [Bangkok], 27 March 2001

⁷³ See Human Rights Watch [various], <http://www.hrw.org/asia/vietnam.php> [accessed 24 January 2002]; <http://www.montagnard-foundation.org> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Save the Montagnard People, [various], <http://www.montagnards.org/Crisis/NewsReports-Archive.html> / [accessed 24 January 2002]

⁷⁴ See Human Rights Watch, Vietnam: Harsh Sentences for Montagnards, 28 September 2001, press release, <http://www.hrw.org/press/2001/09/viet0928.htm> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Vietnamese Government Imposes Harsh Sentences on 7 More Montagnard Protestors, 28 September 2001, http://vietpage.com/archive_news/politics/2001/Oct/1/0059.html [accessed 24 January 2002]

5.3 International Dimensions

The affair has been internationalized by the arrival of groups of refugees in Cambodia. Vietnam does not recognize the label of “refugee” attached to the people who came to Cambodia, and persistently calls them “illegal emigrants”. In their reasoning, all actions to receive, help or support these people who illegally crossed the border are acts of interference in internal Vietnamese affairs.⁷⁵ According to a number of reports, Cambodian officials were not pleased to receive the refugees and have sent back a number of groups already. Under pressure from human rights groups (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and the UN, which determined that the groups should be granted refugee status, Cambodia’s Prime Minister Hun Sen defied his Vietnamese allies and decided to allow one of the first groups of refugees to receive asylum in the US, referring in an interview to his own status in 1977 as a refugee in Vietnam fleeing the Khmer Rouge.⁷⁶

But the affair does not sit well with the Cambodia authorities for a number of reasons. First, the influx of asylum seekers creates trouble in the close relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam. Second, Cambodia has its own indigenous ethnic population in the north-eastern provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri. These groups are culturally and linguistically close to ethnic groups in Vietnam, and Ratanakiri even has its own Jarai population. Third, in the north-eastern provinces of Cambodia there are similar problems around land ownership between indigenous groups and powerful groups that appropriate land. On 23 March 2001, a Ratanakiri law court ruled against Jarai and Tampuan ethnic people who brought a lawsuit against a Cambodian military general for dispossessing them from their ancestral land by fraud – a grievance which has similarities with what is happening across the border in Vietnam.⁷⁷ Fourth, the presence of refugees in Cambodia has incited Vietnamese security forces to try to arrest them within Cambodia. There have been reports that Vietnamese forces have actually entered Cambodian territory on occasion in order to catch refugees and bring them back. There are also reports that Vietnam has put a bounty of US\$ 300-400 on each refugee returned to Vietnam, thus inciting corrupt Cambodian officials to go against the decisions of their own government. It has been reported that on various occasions groups of refugees – even some registered with UNHCR – have been returned to Vietnam by Cambodian police officials.⁷⁸

This affair has also contributed to the straining of the relationship between Vietnam and the USA. The Vietnamese authorities have pinpointed the Montagnard Foundation of Kok Ksor as the mastermind of the uprising, and the official media have noted its location in the USA and have commented on the support and funding it receives from Special Forces veterans. In addition, the Far Eastern Broadcasting Company’s radio programmes in ethnic languages

⁷⁵ *Viet Nam News*, 28 March 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 11 April 2001; *Nhan Dan*, 14 April 2001

⁷⁶ *Viet Nam News*, 28 March 2001; *The Nation* [Bangkok], 11 and 26 April 2001; *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 10 May 2001

⁷⁷ International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, pp. 379-86; Human Rights Watch, Cambodia: Verdict A Setback for Indigenous Land Rights, 30 March 2001, press release, <http://www.hrw.org/asia/cambodia.php> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Berg; Colm, S., Sacred Balance: Conserving the Ancestral Lands of Cambodia’s Indigenous Communities, *Indigenous Affairs*, Vol. 4, 2000, pp. 30-9

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch, Cambodia: Deportation of Montagnard Refugees to Vietnam, 20 May 2001, press release, <http://www.hrw.org/asia/vietnam.php> [accessed 24 January 2002]; montagnard Foundation, Fleeing Refugees Sold for Bounties, <http://www.montagnard-foundation.org/> [accessed 24 January 2002]; Regan, C., Montagnard Refugees from Vietnam in Cambodia, 26 July 2001, <http://www.montagnards.org/Cambodia/carlsreport.html>. [accessed 24 January 2002]

have not escaped the attention of Vietnam's security forces. In evangelical communities in the USA the recent conflicts are depicted as suppression of the Christian faith. Within America, many sympathizers with the Montagnards, evangelical and fundamentalist Christian groups and enemies of communist Vietnam are seen as taking this opportunity to raise the issue of human rights and religious freedom again and take it to another arena, namely the US Congress. There, two laws pertaining to Vietnam are on the table. One is the Bilateral Trade Agreement that would normalize trade relations between the two countries (but which is opposed by large sections of the population in both countries). The second is the Viet Nam Human Rights Act which takes Vietnam to task for human rights abuses, especially with regard to freedom of religion and oppression of ethnic minorities (Article 6 deals with the Montagnards), and which seeks to prohibit non-humanitarian assistance to Vietnam and to increase support for freedom and democracy. The Act, prepared during a meeting on 25 July and adopted by the House on 5 September 2001, has not yet been adopted by the Senate, but already infuriates the Vietnamese leadership.⁷⁹ Within Vietnam, the efforts of former Ambassador "Pete" Peterson to gain access to the Central Highlands were repeatedly rebuffed before he was finally admitted in July 2001. Finally, the decision by the US Government to offer political asylum to a first group of 38 Montagnard refugees from Cambodia was called US interference in Vietnam's internal affairs by the spokeswoman of Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.⁸⁰

Obviously, human rights and refugee protection are not exclusively bilateral issues between Vietnam and America. Vietnam has vigorously criticized international human rights organizations for meddling in Vietnam's internal affairs, and the UNHCR for being overly influenced by the United States. But on 4 October 2001, the European Parliament also adopted a resolution calling on Vietnam to end human rights abuses, and called on the European Commission and the member states to respect the fundamental rights of "indigenous Montagnards" in their programmes and projects.⁸¹

6 Conclusion: Future Prospects and Options

There are many different perspectives from which the saga – or better: sagas – of the Central Highlanders have been told, and these perspectives tend to be diametrically opposed. Beneficiaries of development or colonized, dispossessed and disenfranchised people; heroes of the Revolution or victims of communist rule; citizens of Vietnam or America's brave allies; pawns of "peaceful evolution" or Christian martyrs. The indigenous communities of the Vietnamese Central Highlands are caught in a predicament which is not uncommon for indigenous minorities around the world. Their ancestral territories have been integrated into national states, and "their" resources are appropriated by others – in-migrants from the lowlands and from the northern highlands – under the banner of development. Their cultures were adapted to a particular natural and social environment, but this environment is changing

⁷⁹ For the text and progress of the legislation see references from the website of the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, http://www.house.gov/international_relations/leginfo.htm [accessed 24 January 2002]

⁸⁰ *Nhan Dan*, 16 April 2001, 2 October 2001; *Viet Nam News*, 14 February 2001, 11 April 2001; *The Nation* [Bagkok], 28 March 2001, 4 April 2001

⁸¹ See *Nhan Dan*, 2 October 2001, 28 March 2001; *Viet Nam News*, 29 March 2001, 1 June 2001. For the EU Resolution, see European Union, Parliament Resolution on Violations of Human Rights in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, *Bulletin of the European Union*, <http://europa.eu.int/abc/doc/off/bull/en/200110/p102008.htm> [accessed 24 January 2002]

rapidly following the imposition of colonial rule, three successive wars ravaging the area and socialist development oscillating between collectivization and market reforms. While their traditional forms of subsistence and political authority are called backward and wasteful and their cultural and religious practices labelled primitive and superstitious, these cultural practices are increasingly incompatible with the requirements of state, market and a globalizing world. The main issue for most communities – access to and ownership of land and natural resources – is likely to become exacerbated by the ongoing in-migration and appropriation of land and resources by (equally poor) people from the north. The so-called “spontaneous” migration is out of control for the central authorities and the receiving provinces, while sending provinces are still encouraging families and communities to leave. The degradation of the ecological environment, which is starting to have disastrous effects in the highlands and in the surrounding lowland areas, will compound the situation and may increase tensions further.

In response to the events of February and March 2001 the Vietnamese authorities are taking steps to stabilize the land and resource situation for indigenous minorities by reserving land for indigenous communities. In the recent past, however, minority households have been allocated or offered plots of agricultural and forest land which many could not manage sustainably and profitably and consequently sold to rich farmers or (poor) migrants. Already before February 2001 Vietnamese researchers and enlightened officials advocated recognition of communal land ownership based on traditional institutions, but this requires a radical change in the discourse about ethnic minorities in Vietnam who are said to be in need of sedentarization. Minority leaders themselves have little influence over this discourse. Minority leaders in the Party and government tend to get to their positions by adopting the official view, including the official disparaging discourse about minorities – though this has been changing somewhat of late. In the slowly expanding space to address these issues more freely before 2001, indigenous minorities had very little voice to speak up, and there were few Kinh intellectuals with the sympathetic insight and the courage to speak up for them.

The space that many indigenous families and communities are creating for themselves is religious, if they convert to evangelical Christianity. However, this choice associates them directly with a legacy of three Indochina wars and the role played by many (but certainly not all) Montagnards against the communist regime. This observation is even more pertinent when it comes to an association with diasporic organizations overseas that harbour the political ambition of establishing an autonomous Dega political entity apart from Vietnam. This will not be acceptable to the present communist regime in Vietnam, and if the history of the Republic of Viet Nam (South-Vietnam, 1955-1975) is any indication, neither for any alternative political regime in Vietnam. The current suppression of protesters and their conviction in law courts with explicit reference to the Montagnard Foundation in the US speaks volumes. In trying to stabilize and improve the situation for the Central Highlanders it should be borne in mind that a confrontational approach is not likely to work. A de-politicization of the conflict would allow the various partners to focus on the issues that really matter for the indigenous population: land and religion.

For the future, much will depend on the question whether Vietnam’s authorities will prioritize a security approach that seeks to punish protesters, or a development approach focusing on entitlements in order to diminish the grounds for protest. As of now (January 2002), both currents have been present in Vietnam’s policy, and it is not clear which approach will prevail. Given Vietnam’s historical preoccupation with national sovereignty and integrity, the attitude of the international community will definitely influence the outcome. If the security

approach were to prevail, then it is likely that Vietnam will become an inhospitable place for its indigenous population. Given the strength of the security apparatus in Vietnam, and the demographic dominance of the ethnic Kinh even in the Central Highlands, this might not lead to a sudden, large-scale uprising or exodus but rather to a persistent trickle of refugees. In migration, “push” factors must be distinguished from “pull” factors. A likely pull factor would be the expectation of migration to America which has offered political asylum to refugees arriving in Cambodia. If this were to be the pattern for the future, then it would become known throughout the Central Highlands, and many more people might be induced to move to Cambodia for a variety of political, religious or economic reasons.

For the international community different policy options with different scenarios could be sketched, depending on whether one chooses to emphasize the rights of individual refugees or the situation of indigenous communities within the Central Highlands. Vietnam has clearly indicated that it wants the refugees (“illegal border crossers”) returned to Vietnam, ostensibly in order to reunite them with their families. The methods that Vietnam applies in Cambodia to force the refugees back to Vietnam combined with the reports of abuse coming out of the Central Highlands make an involuntary return to Vietnam undesirable at present. In this context it might be useful to refer to the experience of the joint EC-Vietnam project for the repatriation and reintegration of boat people (1989-1996). This programme was based on dialogue, mutual respect, investment in the reintegration of migrants and in the receiving communities, and tight monitoring. Repatriation with development investment and international monitoring would definitely be beneficial both for the refugees and especially for the indigenous population in the Central Highlands. If based on dialogue, such a solution might be acceptable to Vietnam as well as its international partners. The days of Montagnard political autonomy are over, but whether the indigenous population of Vietnam’s Central Highlands will be able to have the resources and the cultural space to lead satisfying and meaningful lives within their ancestral area will depend on many factors.

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