



Celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples

Vientiane, 10 August 2009

Remarks by

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Your Excellency

Distinguished guests

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to join you here today to celebrate the International Day of the World's Indigenous People.

As you are aware, it was in 1994 that the United Nations General Assembly decided to set aside a day in August each year to celebrate the International Day of the World's Indigenous People.

Since then, this important Day has been celebrated internationally both as a symbol of hope and a practical demonstration of the international commitment to the human rights of indigenous peoples.

The aim of the celebration is to bring attention to indigenous peoples and to 'further strengthen international cooperation for the solution of problems faced by indigenous people in such areas as culture, education, health, human rights, the environment, and social and economic development'.

Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen,

For the Lao PDR, the International Day for Indigenous Peoples is particularly significant because as a nation, Laos has no less than 49 ethnic groups and tribes. Together, all the ethnic groups represent the rich human diversity and the cultural heritage of the country.

The International Day of the World's Indigenous People's is an opportunity to celebrate ethnicity in the Lao PDR. But it is also an opportunity to take a closer look at all the ethnic groups in the country to focus on the challenges that confront them in the development process.

From large ethnic groups to small ethnic groups; from the ethnic groups of the lowlands to those in the most remote mountain regions. From the Hmong to the Yae, Yang, and Yumbri ethnic groups, the celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples provides an assurance of an international commitment to respect for the culture, spirituality, social and economic organization and their identity. All these elements constitute essential foundations for the enduring nature of ethnicity in this country.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me take this opportunity to draw attention to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Declaration was adopted by an overwhelming majority of the members of the United Nations including the Lao PDR. The Declaration gives formal expression to the international commitment to respect cultural diversity and the right to be different.

An essential feature of the Declaration is the obligation to ensure that no person is subject to discrimination because of his or her ethnic heritage. Above all, there is an international obligation for each country to promote an environment that allows citizens to practice their culture.

In this regard, it is encouraging to note that the Constitution of the Lao PDR recognizes that all ethnic groups have the right to protect, preserve, and promote the fine customs and cultures of their own tribes and of the nation.

More importantly, the Constitution prohibits acts of discrimination against any ethnic group and enshrines the duty of the state to gradually 'upgrade' the socio-economic development of all ethnic groups in the country.

On this International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples, it is an excellent occasion to take account of these important constitutional duties and to reaffirm the country's commitment to all ethnic groups, large and small.

His Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

As with most other nations, there are important challenges that confront some ethnic groups particularly in the remote mountain regions that must be acknowledged.

These challenges include access to education and health facilities. Lack of access to these fundamental facilities undermine their equal participation in the national life of a multi ethnic Lao PDR. The acknowledgement of these challenges allows the nation to look for sustainable solutions to promote national unity and social justice as the foundation for a prosperous Lao nation.

His Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to see the Khoun Radio volunteers participating in today's celebration. These people are from one of the poorest 47 districts in Laos, but they have had a chance to speak in their own voices, and participate in their own development through the radio.

Initiatives like Khoun Community Radio for Development, along with farmers and community based organizations, can make a difference for ethnic people in Laos.

Lao PDR, with the new Civil Association Decree, has an opportunity to help ethnic people to help themselves out of poverty. It will also assist ethnic groups in very remote areas and those with smaller populations to find their voice and to participate actively in the national life of this multi ethnic county.

His Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

As you may be aware, the Lao PDR is actively preparing to submit its National Report for the United Nations Universal Periodic Review. It is also finalizing its draft report on the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, and the International Covenant on Economic Cultural and Social Rights.

I am also aware that the country is actively considering the ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. All these activities clearly indicate the determination of the Lao PDR to meet its international obligations particularly in the field of human rights.

Each of these activities also present the Lao PDR with an excellent opportunity to develop and enhance national strategies that are inclusive of all people of Laos, encompassing the 49 ethnic groups consistent with the Constitution of the country.

As its partner in development, the United Nations stands ready to assist the Lao PDR within its mandate to achieve these goals.

His Excellency, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me take this opportunity to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Lao Front for National Constitution, the Lao Women's Union and indeed all the many ethnic groups that have helped to organize today's activities.

To the 49 ethnic groups of this country, and particularly to the small ethnic groups, I am pleased to say that this is indeed your Day. On behalf of the United Nations, I am pleased to join you here today.

I know from the agenda that there will soon be a cultural dance and displays to highlight the multi ethnic character of the Lao PDR. I am looking forward to that and joining in the celebration of ethnicity in the Lao PDR.

Thank you.

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