

## **Kok Ksor and the Struggle for Cultural Survival, Human Rights, and Religious Freedom for the Montagnards of the Central Highlands**

*By Joe P. Dunn\**

*Kok Ksor devoted his entire life to the struggle for human rights and religious freedom for the Montagnard people of the Central Highlands in Vietnam and Cambodia. The story of the dramatic history of these tribal peoples caught in the midst of war and its aftermath and the continuing oppression of a largely forgotten people is conveyed through the career of this extraordinary military warrior, activist, international human rights spokesman, and religious leader. Maligned by the government in power in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, Kok Ksor is totally opposite of how the regime characterizes him.*

### **Introduction**

The conflict that the U.S. refers to as the Vietnam War was far more complex and broad. The Vietnam theatre was only one part of the multiple venues that included the long military struggles of the several ethnic and political constituencies in Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. While the saga has been told in various degrees about the Lao, Hmong, various Cambodians, including the Khmer Rouge, and Thai elements, another constituency, virtually a war within the war in Vietnam itself, has received lesser treatment. The Central Highlanders of South Vietnam considered themselves autonomous from the Republic of Vietnam (RVN), and the RVN deemed the Highlanders outliers from the Vietnamese people (*Kinh*). The two dozen ethnic groups and some thirty tribes that constituted the Degar peoples of the Highlands, popularly known as the Montagnards, allied themselves with the Americans early in United States involvement. Many of the tribesmen worked with U.S. forces in various military capacities, including CIDG and FULRO; others simply were caught in the middle of the warfare that devastated their villages and lives. The Montagnards suffered heavy costs, and the U.S. abandoned them when it departed. Nor did the war end for the Degar when the American involvement ceased. It continues today.

This story of the overlooked war and the ongoing persecution and cultural annihilation of the Highlanders is told through the vehicle of the life of the legendary, but little-known today, Montagnard warrior turned international human rights spokesman Kok Ksor. Kok was arguably the most ubiquitous of all the Montagnard military warriors, with a career extending in the field from 1961

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when the fourteen-year old left his schooling to go with his uncle to fight in Cambodia until his death in January 2019, when he was a peace activist and international human rights spokesman. The former combat warrior decorated for bravery became a quiet man of humanity, humility, dignity, and non-violence. Kok's military exploits are dramatic but his peace work, much of it as the founder and voice of the Montagnard/Degar Foundation, Inc., may be even more impactful.

As the ethnographic bibliography in the footnote below indicates, the Montagnards include approximately two dozen ethnic minorities and some thirty tribes across several provinces in Vietnam known as the Central Highlands. The peoples have distinct origins, languages, linguistic backgrounds and cultures. Historically most followed thousand-year's old traditional patterns of agriculture, governance, and social life with little outside contact beyond their individual villages and communities. The French colonial regime lumped the different ingenious ethnic peoples of the region together as the Montagnards (mountain dwellers), and the Americans adopted the name. The people of the coastal and lowland areas of Vietnam are a mixed racial people who refer to themselves collectively as *Kinh* to establish a distinction between themselves and the tribal highlanders. Of the country's 54 officially-designated ethnic peoples, 87% of Vietnam's population today is considered *Kinh*.<sup>1</sup>

During America's involvement in the Indochina Wars, the collective Degar peoples constituted approximately a million inhabitants of the region. An estimated 200,000-220,000 died during the conflict, and the peoples have suffered grievously since. Small groups of refugees were brought to the United States in 1988, 1992, and 2002 and resettled in North Carolina. They were sponsored primarily by American Vietnam War veterans who had worked with the Montagnards during the war. Several Montagnard organizations emerged that focused on resettlement and integration into American society while maintaining Montagnard culture and religious identity.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Gerald C. Hickey is the authoritative ethnographer of the region, author of four celebrated books: *Window on a War: An Anthropologist in the Vietnam Conflict* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2002); *Shattered World: Adaptation and Survival Among Vietnam Highland Peoples During the Vietnam War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993); and *Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); *Sons of the Mountains: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands to 1954*. See also Oscar Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders: A Historical Contextualization, 1850-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013), and the original classic, Georges Condominas, *We Have Eaten the Forest: The Story of a Montagnard Village in the Central Highlands of Vietnam* (NY: Kodansha America, 1994), published in French in 1957; available in English in 1977.

2. See Thomas Pearson, *Missions and Conversions: Creating the Montagnard-Dega Refugee Community* (NY: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2009); Cecily Cook, *Montagnard-Dega Community of North Carolina* (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, 1994; and Etsuko Kinefuchi, "Finding Home in Migration: Montagnard Refugees and Post-Migration Identity" *Journal*

## The Montagnards' Struggle for Autonomy

When the French entered the area in the mid-nineteenth century, they made agreements with existing Montagnard tribal leaders allowing them local autonomy, but the French *colons* began economic exploitation of the region's resources. When they formally assumed authority over the Central Highlands in 1893, the French built roads and provided other "improvements" to support their investments in lumber and coffee and rubber plantations. Ho Chi Minh's declared Democratic Republic of Vietnam in September 1945 included the highlands. In 1946, the French colonial authorities created a special status for the highlands, the *Pays Montagnard du Sud-Indochinois*, separate from the Vietnamese Annam state in central Vietnam. Other than continued exploitation of its resources, the area received little attention. However, consistent with their practices in the other parts of their colonial domain, the French provided schools for a limited number of highlands people, who then became an elite that the French employed to serve them administratively.

The Franco-Vietnamese War, 1946-1954, in Montagnard territory affected the inhabitants lives. Although some Montagnards sided with Ho and the communists during and after the war, most preferred the French. Both the French and Ho promised autonomy, but religion played an important role in the Montagnards general commitment against the communists. Catholics had made inroads into the highlands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and had followers, but it was evangelical Protestants' focus on the region that gained greater Montagnard allegiance.

Problems for the highland minorities increased after the French departed. The new South Vietnamese government, first under Emperor Bao Dai and then the Republic of Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem, had visions for Montagnard territory. Bao Dai saw the highlands as a royal private preserve, called the Crown Dominion, where he loved to hunt and camp. He maintained good relations with the various tribal chiefs and he was open to their territorial autonomy.

Diem followed a policy that all others in the ensuing decades, especially the communists later, would pursue--cultural assimilation: to build a nation, minority cultures must be subordinated to a common nationalism and national development strategy. As early as 1956, Diem began to confiscate Montagnard lands and support lowland Vietnamese efforts "to develop" the region. When the Second Indochina War between North Vietnam and South Vietnam and its American allies ensued, the Montagnards were in the center of a major combat theater. The Ho Chi Minh Trail ran through Montagnard land, and throughout the war the North Vietnamese envisioned taking over the highlands and splitting South

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of *International and Intercultural Communication* 3 #3 (2010): 228-248. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2010.487220>; and Raleigh Bailey, compiler, *The Montagnards—Cultural Profile*, Center for New North Carolinians, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, undated. <http://www.culturalorientation.net> > file > Montagnards+CP.

Vietnam in two. The tribes could not escape the conflict. The ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*), whether in the North or the South, considered the indigenous peoples as inferiors, whom they referred to as *moi* (savages), and they had no qualms about exploiting them. From the earliest days, the communists drafted Montagnards as *corvee* slave labor porters, and South Vietnam's rapacious land exploitation was little better.<sup>3</sup>

In May 1958 a French-educated civil servant from the Rhade tribe, Y Bham Enuol (the Y in Rhade names loosely translates as "Mr.") and several other intellectuals established Bajaraka (from Bahnar, Jarai, Rhade, and Koho—the four main ethnic tribes), an organization that sought autonomy for the minorities in the Central Highlands. Bajaraka condemned the racial discrimination against the tribes and called for France, the United States, and the United Nations to intervene to secure independence for the minority peoples of the region. In August and September 1958, Bajaraka led demonstrations in Kontum, Pleiku, and Ban Me Thuôt that were quickly suppressed and the leaders were jailed.

Beginning in 1961, U.S. "Green Berets" Special Forces dispatched to Vietnam as advisers against the threat from the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, began working with the Montagnards in the Central Highlands. The Americans organized Montagnards into the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDG) and provided training and weapons to fight the communists. President Diem was quite concerned about arming the highlanders since he did not consider them part of the Vietnamese (*Kinh*) nation, and he foresaw longer term conflict with them. After the fall of Diem in November 1963, the new South Vietnamese leaders made overtures to the minority peoples. Released from jail, some Bajaraka leaders were given political positions. However, the sense that the highlanders were not really part of the Vietnamese nation remained strong on both sides throughout the war.<sup>4</sup>

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3. On the role of the Trail, see John Prados, *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War* (NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1993), with particular attention to the early years, 1-42.

4. The many sources on the CIDG include the official government's *U.S. Army Special Forces in Vietnam 1961-1971: Official US Army History of the CIDG Militia in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center for Military History, republished by Red and Black Publishers, 2013); Shelby L Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia 1956-1975* (Novato, CA: Presido, 1985); D.W. Carr, *The Civilian Irregular Defense Group in Vietnam: Civil Defense Forces in Counterinsurgency* (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: Master's thesis, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2019). Personal accounts of U.S. Special Forces who worked with the Montagnard include Roger Donlon, *Outpost of Freedom* (NY: McGraw Hill, 1965); Jim Morris, *War Story* (NY: Dell, 1979); and Daniel Ford, *Cowboy: The Interpreter Who Became a Soldier, a Warlord, and One More Casualty of Our War in Vietnam* (Durham, NH: Warbird Books, 2018). The latter book is the story of Y Kdrui Mlo, a Rhade tribesman, who in fighting with the French earlier took the name Phillippe Drouin, and became one of the most famous/infamous Montagnards warriors with CIDG and FULRO.

The U.S. was instrumental in bringing together the Montagnards and other ethnic minorities into the Central Highlands Defense Force in 1964. But another ethnic alliance founded in Cambodia in the same year, *Front uni de lutte des races opprimées* (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races--known by the acronym in French, FULRO), would be more important. In September 1964 the so-called Montagnard Revolt against the South Vietnamese government and U.S. Special Forces at several camps elevated FULRO's prominence. The revolt stemmed from Vietnamese contempt for the Montagnard forces and FULRO's assertion that the Vietnamese were stealing Montagnard land. Dissident FULRO forces took hostages at one camp, Vietnamese Special Forces were killed, and Montagnard Strike Force members threatened to march on Ban Me Thuot. South Vietnamese premier General Nguyen Khanh blamed the Americans for arming the Montagnards in the first place. Several South Vietnamese generals openly expressed racist condescension toward the Montagnards as "children that needed to be managed." Negotiations finally brought an end to the revolt, but FULRO leader Y Bham Enuol and 2000 followers who had participated in the revolt moved to Cambodia and established a headquarters at Mondolkiri, which remained the center of the organization through the rest of the 1960s.

After South Vietnamese Generals Nguyen Cao Ky and Nguyen Van Thieu seized power in a coup in 1965, relations between FULRO and the Saigon government improved. Six highlanders were elected to the National Assembly and an ethnic Bahnar was named as a Cabinet officer responsible for the minorities. However, another FULRO rebellion erupted in December 1965 over the Vietnamese failure to fulfill agreements made in 1964. Thirty five Vietnamese were killed in one district. Enoul considered returning to Vietnam to lead the revolt, but did not. He did emphasize that Americans were not to be harmed. The government crushed the revolt, executed four leaders, and imprisoned fifteen others. In October 1966 some FULRO returned to Vietnam, and in December 1968 Enoul concluded an agreement with the Republic of Vietnam for others to repatriate. In January 1969, 1300 FULRO officers and families returned to Vietnam; however, Cambodian ruler Norodom Sihanouk retained Enoul under house arrest in Cambodia, where he remained until his death six years later at the hands of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>5</sup>

FULRO split into factions, some aligned with the U.S. and South Vietnam, others with the North Vietnamese. An estimated 40,000 Montagnards served with the United States military forces during the span of the war primarily as scouts, interpreters, and Mobile Strike Forces (MIKE) combatants under the CIDG and/or FULRO. Famed anthropologist authority Gerald C. Hickey estimated that 200,000-

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5. The most complete story of FULRO is found in Hickey's two books, *Free in the Forest* (1982) and *Window on a War* (2002). Also see Hickey, *Shattered World* (1993) and Sidney Jones, Malcolm Smart, Joe Saunders, *Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts Over Land and Religion in Vietnam's Central Highlands*. Human Watch Report, April 23, 2002, 13-27.

220,000 Montagnards lost their lives during the war and the rest became refugees. He stated that by the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 approximately 85% of highlanders were forced from their villages which were destroyed or left in ruins. For at least three of the tribes—the Bru, Pacoh, and Katu—not one house remained.<sup>6</sup>

Conditions worsen even more for the Montagnards after the communist victory. Just as the Republic of Vietnam had done in earlier decades, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's goal of a unified national culture, under socialist development, provided the justification for abolishing "the inefficient practices and divisive nature of Montagnard cultures and placing these nomadic peoples in stable settlements." As Hickey characterized it, the Communists

...brought to bear the same mix of Vietnamese ethnocentrism and chauvinism as the Saigon governments, but now they added the Marxist-Leninist perspective which depreciated the highland people as "primitive" (in the worst sense), their rites of passage as "backward." And their religious beliefs and practices as "superstitions". This led to the worst oppression the surviving highlanders have ever experienced. It also has contributed to wanton destruction of the highland physical environment.<sup>7</sup>

Ethnic Vietnamese (*Kinh*) were sent into the highlands and the original inhabitants relocated to the valleys to grow rice and other crops for use in the rest of the country. Those identified with past involvement with U.S. forces were sent to re-education camps.

Some of the highlanders escaped to the forest and organized a guerilla movement against Hanoi. In Cambodia an uneasy alliance between FULRO and the Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese emerged. The Vietnamese invaded Cambodia in 1979, drove the Khmer Rouge out of power in Phnom Penh, and established a puppet government in the country; but elements of the Khmer Rouge survived as guerillas in the countryside. They made common cause with FULRO, and some 7000 FULRO forces operating out of their base in Mondolkiri conducted military raids across the border against Vietnamese forces. However, in 1986 the Khmer Rouge cut off support to FULRO.

Some FULRO fled into the jungles and continued their fight, many perished, and a few ended up in refugee camps in Thailand. Through the intervention of a couple of former American Special Forces personnel, 212 FULRO members and their families were relocated from the refugee camps to the United States in 1988. A remnant of fighters continued to operate deep in the jungle in five small riverine villages in northeastern Cambodia where they survived under extreme deprivation and with no contact with the outside world. The UN Transitional Authority Cambodia (UNTAC) peacekeeping force discovered the group by chance and a journalist Nate Thayer made his way to the hidden camp in

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6. Hickey, *Shattered World*, 261.

7. *Ibid*, 364.

September 1992 to report on them. When the insurgents asked about their leader Y Bham Enuol, they were informed that he had been executed 17 years earlier. The famed UN diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello traveled to the camp and negotiated the ending of hostilities, surrender of their remaining ancient weapons, and asylum for the 417 fighters and their families in the United States.<sup>8</sup> The connection with Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, home of the Special Forces, and Green Beret veterans who had worked with Montagnards in early years, determined the settlement of both of the last groups of the FULRO in North Carolina. Several Special Forces veterans continued to be sponsors for the refugees.<sup>9</sup>

### Kok Ksor's Early Life

Ksor, a member of the Jarai tribe, was born in 1944 in Bon Broai village, Cheo Reo district, in the present-day Gia Lai province of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. He joined the Bajaraka movement in 1958 as a boy, and three years later in 1961, he left his studies as a secondary student in Ban Me Thuot to go with his uncle, Ksor Dun, a leading Bajaraka activist, to Cambodia. He joined FULRO in 1964 after the Montagnard Revolt. Dispatched as FULRO's representative in his native Cheo Reo-Pleiku region, Ksor survived Viet Cong attacks several times as he traveled to Vietnam to carry FULRO messages to Ban Me Thuot.

Earlier while still in school in Ban Me Thuot, Kok met a young girl, H'li Nie Hrah, the sister of the important Rhade Protestant minister Y Ham Nie Hrah. H'li was a highly intelligent and resourceful young woman who fell in love with Kok when she was still very young. When she turned 18, she determined to go to Cambodia to find him. With the help of numerous guides along the way, she and two other young women who had boyfriends in Cambodia set out on the

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8. See Samantha Power, *Chasing the Flame: One Man's Fight to Save the World* (NY: Penguin, 2008), 119-121. Vieira de Mello also negotiated with the Khmer Rouge and led other Cambodian refugees from camps in Thailand.

9. Nate Thayer and Leo Dobbs, "Tribal fighters head for refuge in U.S.A.," *Phnom Penh Post*, October 23, 1992. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/tribal-fighters-head-refuge-usa>; and Thayer, "Vietnam era renegade army discovered: Lighting the darkness: FULRO's jungle Christians," *Phnom Penh Post*, September 25, 1992. <http://www.nate-thayer.com/vietnam-era-renegade-army-discovered-lighting-the-darkness-fulros-jungle-christians/>. Both accessed July 22, 2020. Former FULRO leader, Pierre K'Briuh, an ethnic Sre Catholic, who escaped from Vietnam after spending nine years in communist prison camps, was an intermediary in making contact with the last FULRO fighters in 1992. K'Briuh became a Catholic deacon in Greensboro, NC and headed the Montagnard Human Rights Organization. Y'Hin Nie, a leader of the last group of FULRO to leave Cambodia in 1992, became the pastor of the United Montagnard Christian Church in America in Greensboro, and head of the Montagnard Dega Association. See lengthy article on Hie, "A Space for Montagnards: A Cultural Refuge in Greensboro," no author cited, no date <http://www.ibiblio.org/redefininghome/montagnards>.

perilous trip. Arriving on an elephant, H'li found Kok in a secret FULRO camp deep in the jungle in the northeastern part of the country. The couple married the next day and Kok left for his recruitment and training work in Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

As a young man, Kok was one of FULRO's legendary warriors. Don Bendell's somewhat hyperbolized *Snake-Eater* recounts some of Kok's harrowing events. Moving back and forth between Cambodia and Vietnam, Kok served first as an interpreter and then in several combat roles at different times with American units, including the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Pleiku and the Fifth Special Forces. He was wounded in battle, awarded the Purple Heart, and captured by the NVA in a firefight defending H'Li's village near Ban Me Thuot during Tet 68. Some of his comrades were executed immediately, but he was held as a POW for several months before surprisingly being released. No question exists that Kok was a brave warrior who saw his share of combat and danger. His Montagnard identity and his passionate Christianity drove him, and he believed that God's intervention saved his life many times.<sup>11</sup>

While continuing his primary function of recruitment and training for FULRO, Kok held several different non-combat jobs with the American forces. He worked for a time as a bartender in a Non-Commissioned Officers (NCO) Club in Ban Me Thuot, performed maintenance work on military installations for defense contractor Pacific Architects and Engineers, and served as an interpreter for USAID.

The South Vietnamese considered FULRO and Ksor as threats and both the Viet Cong and the South Vietnamese government sought to kill him, but in a couple of cases Americans protected him. After General Lon Nol's coup in Cambodia in 1970, Ksor and several other Montagnards received commissions in the Cambodian Army. Kok moved H'Li and their three sons at the time from Mondolkiri to Phnom Penh where along with other Montagnard officers they resided across from a military base. As he departed for continuing operations,

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10. In his study of the development of a cross-tribal elite through marriages and other associations, Hickey outlines the beginnings of what would later become the fuller Degar identity. In Hickey's list of the 100 most important highlander leaders, 35 were Jarai and 34 were Rhade. The majority (55) of the one hundred leaders were listed as traditional followers of their ethnic group's religion. Only one was a Buddhist, and 44 were Christians (30 Catholics and 14 Protestant). Kok and his uncle Ksor Dun were the only two Protestants of the Jarai. Eight of the Rhade were Protestant. Hickey came to know most of the leading highlander figures. When he spoke about Montagnard leaders, he often mentioned Kok, with whom he had various contacts, as the prominent younger leader among the older peers. See Hickey, *Free in the Forest*, Appendix B, 304-307.

11. Don Bendell, *Snake-Eater* (Naples, FL: Speaking Volumes, 1994). Bendell, a prolific writer of nearly 30 Western adventure novels and Vietnam Special Forces accounts, draws on stories told by Ksor but wraps them in the writer's dramatization. In the Epilogue, Bendell claims that he served as the original adviser to the Montagnard Foundation and as is considered a family member with the Ksor's. The family does not affirm this claim.



Kok told H'Li that he would return for the family when he could. In the next years, Kok was in and out of Cambodia and Vietnam, and Lon Nol sent him for U.S. military training three times between 1971 and 1975. These included to the U.S. Intelligence Officers School in Okinawa, Japan, and Transportation Officer Training at Ft. Eustis, Virginia. In 1974 Y Bham Enoul appointed Kok as FULRO chief of staff.

Ksor and another Montagnard officer in the Cambodian army were in the U.S. when the Khmer Rouge took over Phnom Penh in April 1975 and executed Enoul and other FULRO leaders. Other Montagnard officers took refuge in the French Embassy, but the French gave them up and they were never seen again. Through the services of the evangelical Christian humanitarian group World Vision, Ksor's family was extricated from Phnom Penh to Thailand before the evacuation of the city. The account is quite dramatic as the passports and visas to embark on the last flight out did not arrive before takeoff; however, when the plane had to circle back for a repair, the documents were delivered at the last minute and the Ksors made it on the flight.<sup>12</sup>

The family ultimately came to the United States under the care of a Baptist church in Charleston, South Carolina. United with Kok, the family lived in several places, including Charleston, Abilene, Kansas, and Newport News, Virginia before returning to Charleston for six years. Kok received a GED high school diploma and an associates' degree in electrical engineering technology from Trident Technical College in Charleston. In 1988 the daughter of the Ksor's original sponsor in Charleston brought the family to Spartanburg, South Carolina, where she and her husband lived, and the Ksors settled there permanently. The family joined the local Christian Missionary and Alliance church, a denomination with long ties to the Central Highlands, and Kok commuted every other week to Greensboro, NC to pastor a Montagnard congregation there. When the Spartanburg CMA congregation dissolved, the Ksors joined a local Baptist church and Kok continued to commute. Kok worked in the technology field for the international textile giant Milliken & Company and later for another engineering company until his retirement in 1998.<sup>13</sup>

When the first Montagnard refugees arrived in North Carolina in 1986, Ksor had been in the U.S. for more than a decade and he held U.S. citizenship. He was involved with the new refugee organizations but his priorities differed somewhat from their attention on resettlement and supporting Degar cultural identity in the United States. In 1990 Ksor founded the Degar Foundation, Inc., also known as the Montagnard Foundation, to focus primarily on the persecution of Montagnard culture and religion in Vietnam and Cambodia. It gained U.S. IRS Section 501 (c)

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12. Hear Ksor's account of his family's escape from Phnom Penh on a lengthy video of a presentation at his church, undated. Found on website of Covenant Baptist Church, Spartanburg, SC, <https://www.covenantbaptistonline.org/kok-ksor/>.

13. Brief Biography of Kok Ksor to 1993, Montagnard Foundation papers; and interviews with Ksor family, including Daniel, Jonathan, and H'Li Ksor, July 10, 2020.

tax exempt status in August 1992. All the subsequent Montagnard organizations were united in their identity and desire to maintain their culture, which was centered in their churches, but some division existed between the focus on communities in the U.S. vs. human rights violations and the persecution of Degar people in the Central Highlands.

As in many such situations, political agendas, clashes between strong personalities, and church politics surfaced. As Thomas Pearson's *Missions and Conversions: Creating the Montagnard-Dega Refugee Community* discusses the emergence of Dega identity, he views it as a conversion experience forged in the years of FULRO surviving in the jungle that spawned a common ethnic religious unity. The Dega Protestant Churches were the products and center of this identity, although various pastors established different followings. No real differences in theology existed as churches split over personalities and in some cases political ambitions. Pearson notes the conflict between Ksor and some other Montagnard pastors.<sup>14</sup> Montagnards also claim that communist agents worked to sow dissension among the groups. Ksor particularly was repeatedly targeted by the Vietnamese regime as a violent terrorist traitor trying to destroy the Vietnamese nation.<sup>15</sup>

### Religious Persecution

Historically the Montagnards were animists. Catholic priests brought Catholicism into the highlands in the 1850s, and in the 1930s Protestant missionaries entered the area. Evangelical American Protestant missionaries, most prominently the Christian and Missionary Alliance, focused on the highlands area, where they translated the Bible into several Montagnard languages, and gained many converts. Even after the communists took over, closed Christian churches and schools, and imprisoned ethnic minority pastors, Christian radio programs broadcast from the Philippines continued to win converts. By the early 2000s, Protestants in Vietnam rose to an estimated 800,000 with the number in the Central Highlands as many as 400,000. Evangelical Christianity remains a central bond among the various ethnicities.<sup>16</sup>

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14. Pearson, *Missions and Conversions*, particularly 85-91.

15. See <http://vietnamembassy-usa.org/activities/some-facts-about-montagnard-foundation-and-its-founder>.

16. The information for religious and other persecution of the Montagnards is drawn from Human Rights Watch reports, particularly Sidney Jones, Malcolm Smart, Joe Saunders, *Repression of Montagnards: Conflicts Over Land and Religion in Vietnam's Central Highlands*. Human Watch Report, April 23, 2002. ISBN 1-56432-272-6. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/vietnam>; and *Montagnard Christians in Vietnam: A Case Study in Religious Repression*. Human Rights Watch Report, March 2011. ISBN 1-56432-755-8. <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/montagnard-christians-in-vietnam>.

In February 2001, in response to a Montagnard peaceful demonstration against confiscation of their land and infringements on religious freedom, the Vietnamese government reacted brutally, beating the participants and arresting hundreds. During the next year, over 1500 Montagnards fled to Cambodia. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) housed the refugees in two camps in Ratanakiri and Mondolkiri provinces. Throughout the year, continued Montagnard persecution caused hundreds more to flee. Cambodia did not want the refugee problem and with Vietnamese unrelenting pressure for repatriation, the country constantly returned desperate refugees to Vietnam. Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations documented the ongoing persecution of the Montagnards and the severe retaliations when they were forced back into Vietnam. In March 2002, Cambodia announced that it was closing down the camps and accepting no more refugees. UNHCR strived to gain refugee status for Montagnards in other countries.

Throughout the next two decades, incidents of persecution and exploitation of refugees by Vietnam and Cambodia continued unabated. Montagnard lands were given over to Vietnamese-run coffee plantations. Human Rights Watch extensively documented the incidents year by year. Montagnards periodically demonstrated to call attention to their plight, and Vietnam reacted brutally. Over 1000 individuals protested in Bon Me Thuot in April 2004, again suffering violent reaction from Vietnamese police. Vietnam cloaked their actions as a matter of national security against dangerous radicals attempting to undermine the state by harming national solidarity and public order. Kok Ksor was cited as a foreign instigator. Despite the fact that FULRO had ceased to exist more than a decade earlier, Vietnam continued to cite the organization. With armed struggle dead, Montagnards turned even more to religion. Pearson argues that what became known as Dega Protestantism was a direct outgrowth of FULRO's demise in the jungle.

Vietnam is signatory to United Nations and other international agreements on the protection of religious liberty. The Vietnamese Constitution declares full religious freedom or freedom from religious belief, but Article 70 includes this limitation: "No one can violate freedom of belief and of religion; nor can anyone misuse beliefs and religions to contravene the law and state policies." This provides justification for the nation's restriction that "all religious groups register with the government and operate under government-approved religious organizations." Unapproved religious groups or restricted independent congregations included Mennonites, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao Buddhists, Khmer Theravada Buddhists, and United Buddhists of Vietnam. But two new religious expressions that emerged in 2000 became prime targets. The Catholic sect known as "Ha Mon" was founded in Kontum in 1999 and practiced primarily in three provinces; it had an estimated

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[hrw.org/report/2011/03/30/Montagnard-christians-vietnam/case-study-religious-repression](http://hrw.org/report/2011/03/30/Montagnard-christians-vietnam/case-study-religious-repression).

2500 followers by 2010. The government held public ceremonies to force confessions of criminal intent and demanded signed pledges to abandon the "false religion."<sup>17</sup>

But the government's chief culprit was "Dega Protestantism." Although evangelical Christianity had been deeply established in the highlands for a half century, it surged in 2000 in a host of independent house churches of various kinds. Vietnam decreed that the so-called collective "Dega Protestantism" was "a false religion," a guise for a political Montagnard independence movement against public order. Vietnam argued that national security demanded that it be crushed. The government pressured highland Christians to join the state-certified Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). However, Montagnards recognized that the SECV was a sham tool of the communists' subversion. Vietnamese police and military units were dispatched at various times to break up house churches and to prevent Montagnards from fleeing to Cambodia. The government brought charges in provincial courts against individuals simply for being identified with Dega Protestantism. Forced confessions, public "constructive criticism," and re-education followed. The clear message was to have no involvement with Dega Protestantism.

In the United States, the former FULRO soldier Kok Ksor, who had fought and nearly died many times for the Montagnard cause, employed several international venues to call for full religious freedom and non-violent protest. In 2000, while attending the United Nations Forum on Indigenous Peoples in New York City, he met Marco Perduca and Matteo Mecacci of the Global Committee for the Rule of Law, members of a loose federation known informally as the Transnational Radical Party (TRP). The TRP added human rights in the Central Highlands to its agenda and Ksor spoke at its international conference in Tirana, Albania, in 2002.<sup>18</sup>

Ksor also began a long friendship with Cambodian fellow human rights activist Sam Rainsy. Rainsy's father Sam Sary had been deputy prime minister under Norodom Sihanouk and Rainsy had served in parliament and briefly as Minister of Finance in the mid-1990s. Cambodian dictator Hun Sen banished Rainsy from the country and he was convicted *in absentia* of false crimes. Allowed to return in 2013, the popular politician won a seat in parliament and hoped to form an opposition government. Rainsy and Ksor promulgated an agreement in 2013 that in a future government headed by Rainsy's Cambodian Nonviolent Radical Party, under the UN Charter Montagnard refugees would be protected in

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17. Ibid.

18. See interview with Emma Bonino, head of the TRP, [http://www.emmabonino.it/press/about\\_emma\\_bonino/860](http://www.emmabonino.it/press/about_emma_bonino/860).

Cambodia. However, Rainsy was accused of planning to give away Cambodian territory to the Montagnards and again exiled from parliament and the country.<sup>19</sup>

In February 2014 Ksor met in Brussels with Marco Pannella, a member of the European Parliament for thirty years and head of the TRP. The TRP was fragmenting and with Pannella's death in 2016, it dissolved. Ksor strived to keep the party's principles alive. In December 2017 he hosted European-based human rights activist Laura Harth in Spartanburg to visit the Degar community and to attempt to re-launch the TRP. The effort was unsuccessful, but an international human rights NGO with UN Consultant status remains as heir of the TRP. Dying of cancer in the last weeks of his life, Ksor continued to foster human rights alliances. He postponed his treatments to travel to Charlotte, NC in November 2018 to participate with Sam Rainey in a joint meeting of the Cambodian and Montagnard communities and reaffirm the earlier 2013 agreement.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout his work, Vietnam propaganda attacked Ksor as an insurrectionist and attempted to get Montagnards to repudiate him. The regime tortured his half-brother to gain a renunciation of him and forced five relatives to denounce him at self-criticism rallies. For more than a decade, his mother, Ksor H'Ble, whom Kok last saw in the mid-1960s, was periodically harassed and physically assaulted to get her to condemn her son. In February 2001 she was forced to attend a staged television broadcast where Vietnamese security forces demanded that she denounced her son. When she remained silent, she was beaten and three ribs broken. A committed Christian, H'Ble was arrested again at a prayer vigil, shocked by an electrical stun gun, and kicked repeatedly. She suffered medical problems from this incident until she died. In October 2010 she was detained and ordered to read a statement that called her son a traitor whom the Montagnards should not follow. Instead, she responded, "I don't know what my son Kok Ksor is doing. How can I tell people not to follow him? If you know that he is doing, why can't you tell the people yourself? Besides I am an old woman and who would listen to me?" Ms. Ksor H'Ble died, at age 80, on August 18, 2011. Between the day of her death and her funeral three days later, 16,000 Degar Christians from 37 nearby villages traveled to Bon Broai village to pay respects. The Vietnamese posted 2500 soldiers and security police to prevent people from other provinces from traveling to the village.<sup>21</sup>

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19. See Rainsy's copious website, <https://rainsysam.com>; Sam Rainsy, *We Didn't Start the Fire: My Struggle for Democracy in Cambodia* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2013); and his more recent "China Has Designs on Democracy in Southeast Asia: A Base in Cambodia Is Only the Beginning," *Foreign Affairs* (June 10, 2020), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-06-10/china-has-designs-democracy-southeast-asia>.

20. See Matteo Angioli, "In Memory of Kok Ksor," <http://globalcommitteeoftheruleoflaw.org/in-memory-of-kok-ksor/>.

21. Accounts cited on the independent human rights organization, Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization website: "Montagnards: Relatives of Kok Ksor forced to confess 'wrongdoings' in Vietnam," <http://www.unpo.org/article/733>, June 3, 2004; and

Nothing could be farther from the truth than Vietnam's charges against Ksor. He readily admitted to his contacts in the country and to encouraging protest and prayer vigils, but, as he expressed constantly, his understanding of Christianity demanded non-violence. On May 11, 2007, he spoke in Washington, DC, at the Commemoration of Vietnam Human Rights Day, sponsored by Vietnamese human rights activists. He emphasized that the Degar people did not hate the Vietnamese nor were they unwilling to live with them. The Degar people simply wanted human rights in their ancestral homelands. The Montagnard people and Degar churches did not wish to establish an independent state. "We reiterate that even if we so desired such, it is impossible for a population of less than a million and without armed forces to overthrow a government with a population of over 80 million who has also hundreds of thousands of fully armed soldiers at its command." Ksor echoed his Christian message that "God created all human beings and if God loves us then God loves all humans that thus this planet is for all people to enjoy."

By invitation of TRP colleague and Italian parliament member Matteo Mecacci, Ksor had spoken to the parliament's Human Rights Committee in Rome on November 19, 2009, where he reiterated the same themes. He cited that groups such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, US International Commission for Religious Freedom, and others had acknowledged the violations against the Degar people. He noted that Vietnam's destruction of highland forests and replacement with state run coffee plantations destroyed a way of life. He accused the Vietnamese of "ethnic cleansing or a form of creeping genocide," including forced sterilization of Montagnard women. He prayed that "the Almighty God will create a compassionate heart in each and every one of the world leaders so that they will have compassion toward our people."<sup>22</sup>

On February 20, 2012, Ksor made a statement to the UN Commission on Human Rights "Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination," citing continuing atrocities, including murders of Degar people, and confiscation of land transferred to ethnic Vietnamese. He reiterated a common theme that the Degar were not opposed to living among the Vietnamese people on Degar ancestral land, but that the violations of human rights of the Degar needed to cease. Ksor's moderation was reflected in his deeply-held conviction that the soul of Vietnam itself was at stake: "The Vietnamese government and people need to change their attitude toward our people in order to live together in peace and prosper as one nation." He reaffirmed that "We build our churches not to work against the government but to learn how we can transform ourselves to be a

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"Degar-Montagnards: A Mother's Silent Pain," September 11, 2011," <http://www.unpo.org/article/13190>. Nadia Hussein, <http://www.restlessbeings.org/human-rights/the-persecution-of-the-degar-people> is no longer accessible.

22. Degar Foundation Addresses the Italian Parliament, <http://www.degar.org> website.

better human being according to the teaching of the Bible and to keep our mother tongue alive and most of all to have hope for future life." He also linked the Montagnards' plight in the Central Highlands with other indigenous peoples such as Khmer Kampuchea-Krom people in the Mekong Delta and the Tai Dam people in Dien Bien.<sup>23</sup>

Oscar Salemink's careful study, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, confirmed Ksor's recurring charges of cultural genocide. In a sharp satirical critique, he reflected that in the socialist idea of developing an advanced society, not all elements of culture are deemed worthy of retention. "Outmoded habits" and "obsolete and backward practices" should be eliminated. Bad habits included religious practices, unhygienic or wasteful rituals, non-scientific taboos, etc. Party leaders must ensure that folkways conformed to socialist ideals. To maintain a façade preservation of highland culture in museums and displays largely for the tourist industry, selective artifacts are displayed, professional dancers and singers replace native performers for audiences, *Kinh* craftsmen and peddlers produce handicraft and trinkets presenting Montagnard life, and inconvenient song lyrics are changed to *Kinh* expectations. Vernacular languages are subordinated to Vietnamese—indeed only languages of communities over 500,000 are allowed to be taught.<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Until his death the quiet-spoken Ksor continued to reach out to political figures, the U.S. State Department, and the world community with his message. He often asked the rhetorical question: why the U.S. ignored the treatment of the Montagnards, a people who had been their ally and who had fought and died with them? He pointed out the U.S. continued to overlook or discount that the toxic herbicide Agent Orange used in the highlands still damaged his people.<sup>25</sup> He asked how could the U.S. scramble to engage in economic, business, social, cultural, and military agreements with Vietnam and totally disregard that nation's violations of UN and other human rights agreements? He pointed out that the Montagnards were simply another case of collateral damage.<sup>26</sup>

But Ksor was not bitter; his focus was always on his faith. In his pastoral role, he traveled constantly to Montagnard churches in North Carolina, and he continued to tap into the extraordinary evangelist commitment of the Montagnard community to raise money for their people in Vietnam and Cambodia, including

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23. Statement to CERD 80th Session, <http://www.degar.org> website.

24. Salemink, *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, 276-279.

25. Hickey's report, "Perceived Effects of Herbicides Used in the Highlands," Appendix C, *Free in the Forests*, 308-319, and fuller discussion, Hickey, *Window on a War*, 336-346, 355.

26. <https://www.covenantbaptistonline.org/kok-ksor/>.

founding at least thirteen new churches in villages in Cambodia. Ksor never wavered from preaching that ultimately what was important was to love one's fellow man and to seek God's guidance. Hate was not of God and violence could never be the answer. He asked for his people to pray that God would change the hearts of the oppressors and open the minds and hearts of people around the globe to the plight of indigenous peoples. But ultimate freedom was assured in God's heavenly kingdom.<sup>27</sup>

In his private life, Kok was a devoted family man who loved his children and grandchildren. When his website still existed, it displayed numerous pictures of all his family, an exceptionally accomplished group with advanced education and significant career positions. Two of his sons worked as ITT specialists and two were physicians in a joint medical practice. One daughter-in-law with a Ph.D. served as a school counselor. The grandchildren follow in the same talented vein.

Although Kok's family remains active in the Degar religious community, his leadership in the global Montagnard community is almost impossible to replace. He was an iconic figure instrumental in virtually every aspect of the Montagnard cause throughout his entire life. The few remaining FULRO personalities today are aged and dying off. Although the family attempted to maintain the Montagnard Foundation, Inc., it is largely moribund and has been supplanted by other Montagnard organizations with less international and political orientations. The large question exists how much of the fervor for the culture, people, and causes can be sustained by the second and the third generation further removed from the realities on the ground in Vietnam and Cambodia and subject to increasing assimilation in America. Although little known outside limited circles, Kok Ksor's life and mission will remain significant in the quest for human rights for a largely ignored, oppressed people.

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27. Ibid.



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