

THE PROMOTION OF PERSONAL STATUS FOR ETHNIC GROUPS

The problem to gain personal status is an important one for ethnic groups in Thailand, and is a major concern of the Catholic Commission for Ethnic Groups (CEG). It pushes our commission to give on-going assistance to brothers and sisters of ethnic heritage to obtain legal status in order to live their daily lives peacefully and without violation of their basic human rights.

CEG has been working very actively from 1998-2001 advocating a solution to this problem; we have been working and consulting closely with government departments, other N.G.O's, and the private sector in order to further the cause and just policies for our ethnic population.

However, the problem of citizenship for our highlanders cannot be tackled easily. Some of the problems met with have been dishonest government officials withholding documents and ID cards from the people. A case in point has been a Thai citizen in the Mae Ai District, in the Province of Chiangmai. This was followed by some 1,243 people withdrawing their names from civil registration. Similar cases also occurred in Suan Pung District, Ratchaburi Province.

The end result of this has been the delay in the process of registration for citizenship in the general population. CEG continues to monitor this situation and coordinates with other agencies in efforts to support the ethnic population toward their rightful recognition as citizen in Thailand.

A Human Interest Story:

An elderly man was asked: "How do you feel when your Thai Nationality has been revoked"? He replied, "I am Thai! I was born in Thailand. Why don't they believe me? I have proof of this".

And then he broke down and cried. Our staff member, who interviewed him, also broke down and cried at the injustice done to this elderly man of many years.

The withdrawal of Thai Nationality of the 1,243 villagers in the Mae Ai District, Chiang Mai has been in the news since the beginning of 2002. This was uncovered when a regional security agency made public that corruption was rampant among district officials relating to the withholding of ID cards for the villagers in this area. Interrogation of local officials followed and in order to save face, the villager's citizenship status were revoked on the premise that they had obtained it illegally.

This order of revocation was decided upon without a thorough examination of information and evidence. Even the officials who were not involved in the corrupt practices could not distinguish who were eligible and were not, so they revoked all.

A number of affected villagers filed complaints with the National Human Rights Commission to right this wrong; in turn, the commission sought co-operation from CEG to assist in the solution of this problem.

CEG has worked very hard in advocacy issues, and in 2002, has pushed for two important policies related to the above problem.

1. Survey the ethnic population whose names have not appeared on the civil registration list.

2. Study and make recommendations to government for policy changes affecting the human basic rights of the ethnic population.

In-depth Human Rights Training for Ethnic Groups

Since the aim of the work of CEG is for the benefit of local communities, advocacy to promote just government policies for our ethnic communities continues to be our high priority.

In 2002, CEG has organized training on human rights for ethnic groups in several areas with an emphasis on empowerment of ethnic groups, helping them to be aware of their dignity and values within their religions and cultures which they might not, realize or have more importantly have disappeared in the strong current of our present society . This training integrates the components of :

basic legal rights

- right to manage the natural resources in their communities
- the right to education
- the right for employment
- the freedom to travel
- the right of self defense against harassment of any nature.

In the past year, CEG has provided legal training in the following areas.

On 21-25 July 2002, it provided training for representatives of the Karen communities, both women and men, at Ban Din Khao, Mae Chaem District, Chiangmai. The training component dealt with the right to arrange the natural resources in their communities.

On 23-24 November 2002, it provided training for Akha young boys and girls of Mae Suay Catholic Centre, Mae Suay District, Chiangrai, under a topic of "Religious and Legal Rights". Youth trainees were in two groups, the first were young people from highland villages and the second were secondary highland youth, who are students in the district school.

On 18-19 December 2002, CEG worked with Diocesan Social Action Centre of Ratchaburi to provide non-violence training for Karen youth at the Parish of Our Lady of Fatima at Suan Pung District, Ratchaburi Province. This is the area where young people face violation of rights in their daily life, especially the right to travel and work in other areas.

This training empowered youth leaders to protect themselves and relatives in their communities from violation of rights through a non-violence approach based on love and mutual understanding. This we believe is real power and ultimate solution of all problems.

However, this training was just a starting point and shone the light to ethnic groups in the area to be aware of and empowered in protecting their rights. CEG continues to be a consultant and help to co-ordinate solutions to problems and obstacles that cannot be resolved at the local level.

Firm Step Forward....For Dignity and Sustainable Life of Ethnic Groups

The work of CEG this year will carry on its mission and vision, but will look beyond immediate problems of the ethnic groups and will give priority to sustainable and genuine empowerment of communities. It will go deep into the aspect of spirituality, renewing and applying religious and cultural values in the empowerment of community, and building networks between various ethnic groups.

1. Development Research on "Renewal of Religion-Cultural Values"

Mutual reflection and review of the work undertaken in the past made CEG aware that emphasis on advocacy for amendment of laws and policies affecting the life of ethnic groups and training on various rights as provided by law to appear to be only one aspect of life. Another essential element is the authentic wisdom contained within ethnic religions and cultures ; a deepening in understanding of this truth can be, for our ethnic population, a force and power in solving many of the problems and difficulties they face in life. Therefore, ethnic wisdom in management of forest resources will be renewed as a training component.

This year, CEG has begun a development research project to learn and renew religious, cultural and wisdom values of ethnic groups through a participatory learning process. The

objective is to motivate and raise awareness especially among the youth to cherish their own traditions and customs.

2. Co-ordination to Promote Organization and Networking

Tribal people have been living and taking care of natural resources, especially forest and watershed, which are the sources of life, for a long time. Until this age of globalization and the mainstream of material development, a competition for resources is waged. Various ethnic groups who are taking care of these rich natural resources have to join hands, get organized and build their network to protest against exploitation what they are facing today. This is another essential role of CEG in coordinating organization and networking of various ethnic groups.

3. A Centre of Knowledge and "Dharma Sati" Legal Aid

Experience of the Human Rights Desk of CEG in giving legal aid and training to ethnic groups over the years shows that violation of human rights of ethnic groups occurs frequently, especially by government officials who violate the laws regularly. On the other hand ethnic groups know and understand very little about their rights and laws related to them. If their right is violated, it is very difficult for them to defend themselves in court.

This year, CEG plans to set up a centre of legal knowledge and assistance to provide knowledge on the application of laws to ethnic groups and promote legal assistance to all those in need of protection.

4. Communication to Promote Understanding in Society

Communication to promote understanding and a proper attitude in society to foster genuine respect and dignity for all persons, especially our ethnic communities is essential and an on-going task of our commission.

Every year, CEG publishes a newsletter entitled "Ethnic Groups" twice a year we publish stories about the life of our ethnic groups, present to the general public in order to provide a deeper understanding of the problems of the communities

Last year, CEG published X'mas cards, under the title of "Silence and Serenity". These cards reproduced nationally famous paintings by our Thai artist, Mr. Damrong Wong-Upparat. This was an income -generating effort proposed by our office.

Additionally, CEG is developing a website to provide on-going information and life-stories of our Thailand ethnic population so long overlooked and neglected. .