

Indochina

Principal protagonists



Governments of Laos and Vietnam.

Laos: Hmong people; United Laos Liberation Front. Vietnam: Degar people; *Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées* (FULRO).

Nature of conflict

Laos: Military campaign against Hmong ethnic minority. Vietnam: Religious and cultural persecution of Degar minority.

- Genocide allegations levelled against Laotian government.
- Repression of Christians in Vietnam.
- Unknown. (See text.)
- Unknown. Accusations of mistreatment and forced repatriation of refugees have been made against Cambodia and Thailand.

Population/ethnic composition

Laos: 6.34m. Lao Loum 53%, Lao Theung 23%, Lao Tai 13%, Hmong c5%. Vietnam: Kinh (Vietnamese) 85%, Han Chinese 3.5%, Degar 1.9%.

Territorial extent

Primarily highland provinces of Laos and Central Highlands of Vietnam.

Timeline

- 22 Oct 1953: Laotian independence proclaimed.
- 21 Jul 1954: Formal division of Vietnam into northern and southern states under Geneva Accords.
- 20 Dec 1954: Cambodian independence recognized by France.
- 1959: Onset/escalation of Vietnam war.
- 1961 onwards: Hmong and Degar fighters recruited by CIA.
- 30 Apr 1975: Occupation of South Vietnam by North Vietnamese forces.
- 2 Dec 1975: Victory of Pathet Lao (Communist) forces.
- 1981: 'Easter uprising' by Degar in Vietnam.

Current status

Low-level insurgency by Hmong continues. Repression of Degar cultural and religious rights continues.



The hill tribes of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam include the remnants of the early Mon-Khmer and Malayo-Polynesian peoples who were among the aboriginal inhabitants of the region, before being displaced by subsequent waves of immigration and conquest. The hill tribes are sometimes collectively grouped under the French colonial term 'Montagnard', meaning 'from the mountain', although this name is generally taken to refer especially to the Degar people of Vietnam.

Famed for their warlike tendencies, the Hmong people of Laos staged a ferocious campaign against the French in the 1920s, after which episode they were largely left to their own devices by the colonial authorities. After the French withdrawal from Indochina in the mid-1950s and the start of the Vietnam War between the Communist North Vietnam and the pro-American South (a conflict which eventually spilled over into Laos and Cambodia) elements of the Hmong and Degar populations were recruited by the CIA to act alongside US and South Vietnamese special forces in operations against Communist insurgents. In both Laos and Vietnam, local forces

drawn from the hill populations provided evasion routes for downed US pilots, acted as scouts, and interdicted Viet Cong supply routes along the Ho Chi Minh trail into South Vietnam. Around 40,000 Degars fought the Viet Cong, forming a significant element of the anti-Communist military effort in the Vietnamese Highlands.

The South Vietnamese government of the late 1950s initiated a programme of settling Kinh (Vietnamese) in the Highlands areas, prohibited the use of Degar tribal languages, and denied religious freedoms. In 1964 a number of pre-existing Degar movements merged to form the *Front Unifié de Lutte des*

Races Opprimees (FULRO). This strove for autonomy for the hill peoples and its relationship with the South Vietnamese government was initially hostile, despite US efforts to concentrate Montagnard efforts on the anti-Communist struggle. In 1964, up to 3,000 US-trained Degar special forces fighters briefly staged a revolt against South Vietnamese control over several Highland districts before a peace deal was negotiated by the Americans. Under US brokerage, relations between the Vietnamese and FULRO improved in later years, but US withdrawal from South Vietnam in 1975 precipitated the occupation of the whole of Vietnam by the North Vietnamese and the unification of the country, under Communist rule, in 1976.

Thousands of Montagnards fled to Cambodia after the fall of South Vietnam, rightly fearing that the new government would launch reprisals against them because of their alliance with the Americans. In the post-war era, the Vietnamese government resumed the policies of its 1950s predecessor, displacing Degar and other villagers from Vietnam's Central Highlands, to use the fertile land for coffee plantations and Kinh settlement. Total Degar numbers have declined from 3 million in the 1950s to around 750,000 today. The surviving Degar continue to suffer from land alienation, enforcement of the Kinh language in education, and from the repression of their religious beliefs – many of the Degar are Protestant Christians. In Easter 1981 the Degar rose briefly in full-scale revolt, and widespread protests, as well as government repression of religious and civil rights, continue to be regularly reported.

Following the victory of the Communist Pathet Lao forces in 1975, the Hmong were similarly abandoned by their American patrons, although a sizeable community – estimated at up to 300,000 – were able to emigrate to the United States. During the Vietnam war upwards of 20,000 Hmong are believed to have been killed, although it is not clear how many of these were combatants. The new Pathet Lao government vowed to track down the survivors “to the last root”.

The remnants of the Hmong guerrilla forces retreated into the remote forest regions of Laos where they have continued low-intensity operations against the Laotian authorities in the face of massive military intervention. Although they deny targeting civilians, passenger buses have allegedly been attacked by the Hmong, and in 2004 some publicity was gained by threats (which did not materialize) to attack the ASEAN summit that was being held in Laos.

The death toll among the Hmong, and by extension the size of the surviving Hmong population, is disputed. Attacks by the Laotians, under the guise of rooting out the remaining insurgents, have been characterized as ‘genocide’ by the few Western observers and journalists who have been able to reach Hmong encampments, but this is hotly denied by the Laotian authorities. With a few exceptions, the plight of the Hmong has been largely ignored by the wider world. To Americans, they are, like the Degar

and other anti-Communist Vietnamese, an embarrassing reminder of the US betrayal of its regional allies at the end of the Vietnam war, while to liberal ‘human rights’ organizations they are permanently compromised by their wartime complicity with the CIA.

In Cambodia, minority race relations have followed a different trajectory. In the 1960s the government sought the assimilation of the hill tribes, who are collectively known as the Khmer Loeu, including the compulsory teaching of the Khmer language. The policy backfired; the Khmer Loeu rose in revolt and were subsequently – unlike the hill peoples of Laos and Vietnam – courted and recruited by the Communists. As a legacy, overt discrimination against racial minorities is limited, although religious observance, particularly of Protestant Christianity, is severely restricted. There is, however, an undercurrent of racism against the Vietnamese minority, arising from resentment at historical Vietnamese domination. During the rule of the psychotic Khmer Rouge regime in the mid-1970s, possession of the ‘dark skin’ associated with the Vietnamese was sufficient, along with wearing spectacles, knowledge of French, and other signs of political unsoundness, to condemn the owner to the killing fields.