

United Nations General Assembly: Special Session on Indigenous Affairs

**Thailand**

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1. **Introduction**

According to a Tribal Population Survey, Thailand is home to an estimated 914,755 (in 2002) indigenous people, amounting to 1.4 percent of Thailand’s population. In Thailand, the indigenous population is referred to as ‘hill tribe’ people because they mostly reside on the highland border between China, Burma, Laos, and Thailand. A diversity of hill tribes with unique customs and languages exist in Thailand including Akha, H’tin, Karen, Khamu, Lahu, Lisu, Lua, Med, and Yao. Hill tribes face many issues including the lack of citizenship, healthcare, and education. Additionally, hill tribes face discrimination because of their association to opium and drug trafficking. This is why Thailand must take action to alleviate the burdens that indigenous people face. However, these problems are complex and there are gaps in the amount of research that has been done towards indigenous issues.

1. **Past Actions**

Since Thailand arose as a modern nation-state, Thailand’s relationship with its indigenous population has drastically changed. In the past, Thailand’s upland (hill tribes) and lowland people were much more interdependent, relying on one another as allies. However, as Thailand developed, officials began classifying the indigenous populations as ‘Khon Pa’, or wild people, in attempt to build national identity and “Thai-ness”. This contributed to growing stereotypes that the indigenous populations are environmentally destructive, opium cultivators, and communism supporters. Since the development of the Thai nation-state, hill tribe people have faced numerous issues, including discrimination, healthcare, citizenship, and freedom of mobility.

Thailand currently denies citizenship to over 370,000 hill tribe people, with estimates from human rights group from 600,000 to 1,000,000. The lack of citizenship for this population has had numerous implications regarding healthcare and freedoms. Relating to Committee Topic 1, non-citizens are unable to make use of Thailand’s universal healthcare system. Yet Thailand’s indigenous populations live in high-risk areas for malaria due to the geography, which give rise to optimal conditions for *Anopheles’* breeding. Although malaria elimination is Thailand’s public health priority, malaria remains a major issue for the hill tribe people due to this lack of access to public healthcare. Regarding Committee Topic 2, non-citizens are unable to own any land and may be expelled or arrested from the country for travelling outside of specified regions. Additionally, Thailand has introduced a number of laws and policies to relocate hill tribes due to unsupported claims that tribes are responsible for deforestation. Concerning Committee Topic 3, much of Thailand’s indigenous population lives in poverty due to their lack of education, despite government policy set to integrate indigenous children into schooling. Due to expensive schooling costs and instruction in non-native languages, Thai schools have discouraged hill tribe people from getting an education. Moreover, non-citizens would be ineligible to receive an education. Therefore, much of the indigenous population lives in extreme poverty and especially the undocumented indigenous population can be exploited by human traffickers. In all, hill tribe people face a multitude of difficulties, especially those without citizenship.

Regarding the numerous issues that indigenous people face, the Thailand government has done little to actually improve the lives of indigenous people and, in many cases, has caused more difficulties for hill tribes. In 1959, the term ‘hill tribe’ was first coined in establishing the Hill Tribe Welfare Committee, which was set up by the Thai government. Contrary to the name, this committee encouraged accusations that the hill tribes were responsible for the destruction of forests and helped the Thai government to forcibly evict hill tribe people from their homes in the name of conservation. In 1992, guidelines were set by the Ministry of Education to integrate children in Thai schools, but little was done to implement these guidelines. In 1999, thousands of hill tribe people sat in a demonstration demanding proper citizenship, land rights, and amended forestry laws, to which the government responded with armed force. However, Thailand has signed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which obligates the government to recognize, respect, and protect indigenous rights. Although there has currently been little change implemented, Thailand has the potential and the attitude to change indigenous rights.

1. **Proposed Solutions**

In order to solve indigenous issues, Thailand would look favourably upon conducting more research and partnering with NGOs and indigenous communities. At the moment, it is unknown how many hill tribe non-citizens with estimates from 600,000 to 1,000,000. More information must be gathered before Thailand can realize the extent of and find a solution to this issue. Thailand should partner with indigenous community leaders and NGO’s like the International Justice Mission to see how change is implemented in these communities, rather than approaching change through solely a top-down approach, which has proved unsuccessful for Thailand in the past.

Thailand would also encourage implementing education on indigenous issues in school curriculum for non-indigenous Thais. This would allow for indigenous issues to gain more attention with the public, gaining ground for new policies that are more inclusive.

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