



**Workshop on Ethnic Groups and Customary Law in the  
Lao PDR: Human Rights perspectives**

**Opening Remarks  
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***His Excellency Mr Chaleun Yiapaoher, Minister of Justice  
His Excellency Mr. Bounkern Sangsomsack Vice- Minister of Foreign  
Affairs  
His Excellency, the Vice President of the Lao Front for national  
Reconstruction  
Your Excellencies and members of the Diplomatic Corps  
Government officials  
Colleagues from United Nations Agencies  
Distinguished Participants  
Ladies and Gentlemen***

On behalf of the United Nations Development Programme, it gives me great pleasure to be here today for this very important workshop on ethnic groups and customary law in the Lao PDR. As His Excellency Mr Chaleun noted earlier, the Lao PDR is a multi-ethnic society. Together, the 49 ethnic groups of this country provide a rich cultural heritage and help to define the unique character of this country as a land that finds unity in its diversity.

*Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

This two day workshop is important for several reasons. Firstly, it has brought together the leaders of all 49 ethnic groups in an

atmosphere that promotes dialogue between central authorities and the ethnic leadership for the leaders to assess their role in helping the Lao PDR to meet its human rights obligations in the provinces among the ethnic communities.

As part of today's workshop, there will be a presentation on the results of the survey on customary laws in the Lao PDR. The workshop provides an important opportunity for ethnic leaders and central authorities to exchange views on the results of the survey. But above all, the gathering together of ethnic leaders in the capital city of Vientiane to discuss issues of customary law and practices with a human rights perspective also allows the Lao PDR to celebrate ethnicity as an important foundation of this society. I take this opportunity to congratulate the Government of the Lao PDR for organizing this important workshop.

*Excellencies, Distinguished Participants*

In the smallest ethnic groups such as the Xeak and the Hanyi of less than a thousand people; from the most remote mountain groups of the Hmong and the Lu Mien to the largest ethnic groups such as the Lao and the (Mon-khmer) Khmou, customary law defines community behavior and the place of the individual as a valued member of his or community. Customary law is the basis for social intercourse in each community. As the Lao PDR makes progressive strides in its economic and social development, the demands of modernization and internationalization puts pressure on establish traditions, including customary law. The challenge for the Lao PDR is how to maintain and promote the customary laws and heritage of its many ethnic groups in

an age of modernity. As I am sure you will all agree, in view of this challenge, today's workshop is both significant and timely.

*Excellencies, Distinguished Participants*

The theme for this two day workshop is 'Ethnic Groups and Customary law in the Lao PDR: Human Rights Perspectives'. The respect for ethnicity and cultural heritage is an important aspect of human rights. The respect for cultural diversity and freedom from ethnic discrimination is also a critical element in human rights. Ultimately, the recognition of the customary laws of the diverse ethnic groups of this country is as much a part of its human rights obligations as it is a part of its constitutional law.

Customary law reflects a community's values, its way of life and its history. But customary law is also dynamic and must reflect changes in human development. While *some* customs may reflect ideas and practices that suited beliefs long ago, they may not necessarily promote the welfare of ethnic communities today. In assessing the human rights perspectives of the cultural practices and customary laws of ethnic communities in Laos today, we must therefore ask: to what extent does a particular custom promote the welfare and health of children? We must ask: to what extent does the custom promote and assist the health of mothers? We must ask: to what extent does the custom respect women and other vulnerable members of the community?

We ask these questions, not to destroy or question the foundations of customs. On the contrary; we ask these questions to strengthen the place of customs in the human development of ethnic groups. This is because ultimately, the role of law as reflected in

customary practices is to develop and advance the community. This is the same for the smallest and the most remote ethnic group, to the largest and most urban ethnic group.

The pride of each ethnic group is its people and how well they develop. Customary law will not fulfill its true function if it holds back a community, while other communities progress. At today's workshop, we have an opportunity to look at some of the customary laws that have been surveyed and to make comments on how as a multi ethnic community, the Lao PDR and the ethnic leaders can discuss ways to use custom to advance this beautiful country.

*Excellencies, Distinguished Participants*

As you may be aware, several of the Recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review that were supported by the Lao PDR relate directly to ethnic groups. The Recommendations range from the improvement of the wellbeing of all ethnic groups to effective participation and representation and equal treatment of all ethnic groups. You will be aware that in at least nine of the Recommendations that were partially accepted, there was a particular focus on the Hmong as an ethnic group. The UNDP is encouraged by the Lao PDR's position that all ethnic groups in the country including the Hmong need, and are entitled to, equal treatment. Today's workshop that includes all ethnic groups without distinction is a step in the right direction.

As I noted earlier, this is an important workshop. Let us seize the opportunity today with ethnic leaders here to discuss the major issues that concern custom and human development. Let us discuss customary

practices and health, nutrition and indeed food security. Let us take a closer look at custom and gender. We should also look at custom and the rights of the disabled. In the process, let us remind ourselves as a multi ethnic society, the fundamental point as expressed in the constitution of the Lao PDR is that all ethnic groups are equal and must be treated so.

*Excellencies, Distinguished Participants*

On a personal note, I have been in the Lao PDR for less than three months. In the short time, I have been fascinated by the multi ethnic character of this beautiful country and the pride the country attaches to its cultural heritage. It is a privilege that in the short period of my arrival I have the opportunity to meet leaders from all 49 ethnic groups in the country. I join my co-chairs in welcoming you and all other participants to this workshop. I wish you well in your deliberations.

Thank you.

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