Current Situation Concerning the Hilltribes in Thailand

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1) Natural resources and environment on the highlands, where most of the hilltribe peoples live, have been very much destroyed or degraded. The causes of this destruction include unsustainable (agricultural) production systems, both traditional and modern, Population growth, forest concessions by the government (before 1989), and government projects, such as road construction for national security ad tourism promotion.

This leads to the decrease of hilltribe peoples' quality of life in forms of, for example, having not enough rice for consumption all year round, and having lost the sources of herbal medicine and materials for household use.

Furthermore, it affects relationships between hilltribe peoples and outside because, on one hand hilltribe peoples are still seen by many as the ones who are responsible for destruction of watershed forest areas and consequently the present water crisis, but on the other hand, being in the watershed areas they are the ones who could recover and protect the degraded forests and therefore should be supported by lowland people who use the water.

3) Directions of government policy toward hilltribe peoples, which are in the same direction with national development policy and mainstream development paradigm at global level, are unquestionably promoting capitalism, materialism and consumerism which greatly affect hilltribes' social structure and cultures in forms of, for example, labour migration, prostitution, drug addiction, AIDS, commercialization, indebtedness, and decline of the community with its traditional governing and problem-solving mechanism and the family institution.

4) Christian missionary and conversion of hilltribe peoples into Christianity creates conflicts in, and even split of, their communities, reducing their strength to cope with problems.

Hill Area Development Foundation (HADF) is at present working directly with 28 villages of four tribal groups - Akha, Lisu, Lahu and Mien - with a population of about 6,000 covering an area of about 1,600 acres in Mae Chan and Mae Faluang districts of Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand.

It is difficult to estimate the number of
hilltribe peoples that HADF has affected. However, HADF is working actively with a network of hilltribe development NGOs called CONTO (Centre for the Coordination of Non-governmental Tribal Development Organizations) which has 38 member organizations all over the region. (Ms. Tuenjai Deetes is at present CONTO President.) HADF is also working closely with a government development project for security in Mae Chan - Mae Faluang Areas which covers an area of 16,000 acres and a population of 40,000 hilltribe peoples.

Accomplishments by HADF so far as existence of:

1) Community leaders who are the models for their fellow hilltribe peoples on sustainable agriculture practices, and on management and conservation of watershed forests and river basins. Mr. Jagor Airtae, a Lahu community leader in an HADF core target village, received the Good Citizen Award 1993 for his outstanding efforts and commitment on sustainable agriculture and natural resource conservation.

2) A network of 28 villages for conservation of Mae Chan and Mae Salong river basins in Mae Chan and Mae Faluang districts of Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand.

3) Mutual collaboration between local hilltribe peoples' organizations, HADF and related government agencies, including the Third Region Army, Chiang Rai Hilltribe Committee, and the Royal Forestry Department. HADF and the hilltribe people organizations in its operational areas, also received much supports from academies, educational institutes, mass media, international organizations and other Thai NGOs, both Bangkok-based national NGOs and local or hilltribe-related NGOs.

4) The authorities, especially in HADF operational areas and the upper north, begin to accept that human beings can co-exist in harmony with the forests - the concept and practices so much promoted by Thai NGOs and certain academies in the past five years, but generally disagreed by the government so far.

5) After much work in the past seven years, most members of the new generations of hilltribe peoples are literate in Thai language and two families now have Thai citizenship, considering that in the beginning, there was no private or government agencies working with them in those areas before. HADF is now lobbying hard for 23 families of community leaders who are the models in sustainable agriculture and resource conservation to also receive Thai citizenship, and there are signs that this would be possible in no so long. Overcoming this barrier, the struggle for basic rights of hilltribe peoples would be easier in the future.