



Community Statement on the deportation of Montagnard American Community Member

In July, Charlotte community member Chuh A was deported back to his birth country of Vietnam. Chuh is a member of the Montagnard ethnic group from Vietnam. Chuh arrived in the United States with his family at the age of 13, with refugee status. Like many Montagnards in Vietnam, his father was recruited to assist the United States military during the Vietnam war. When the United States military left Vietnam, the Montagnards were left behind to fight against persecution by the Vietnamese government. The United States began to accept Montagnards as refugees in the late 1980's. While Vietnam has accepted about 40 deportees each year, Chuh is the first of the Montagnard ethnic group to be deported. Because Montagnards still face persecution today for their land, their religion, and their past ties to the United States military, Chuh faces a higher risk of danger than Vietnamese deportees.

Chuh's story, while unique in its own way, echoes the struggle of many other Southeast Asian American deportees. Many of us arrived in the United States as refugees, fleeing from the American War in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. We went on to live in and attend under-resourced and heavily policed neighborhoods and schools where we were targeted and criminalized. The United States welcomed us here after making our birth countries unsafe for us to live in. Many of us are now being forced to leave our homes in the United States because of mistakes we made in our youth. Many deportees leave behind families and lives they have worked hard to build when they are forced to return to their birth countries.

Chuh has lived for 18 years in the United States. He is now 31 and is married with 4 children. Since Chuh's deportation, his family is struggling to make ends meet. Chuh's deportation was rushed, with ICE's decision to deny his stay of removal arriving days after he had already arrived in Vietnam. His attorney was unaware of the deportation and only knew it was happening when Chuh's wife called to tell him that he was already on the plane. The deportation was so rushed that his attorney did not have time to file a motion to reopen to allow Chuh to present his claims that he will be in danger should he be deported to Vietnam.

As community organizations, we stand behind Chuh and other Southeast Asian deportees. Deportation is unfair, dangerous, and immoral. We will continue to demand that deportation laws be changed. We will continue to fight to stop further deportations and for the return of our deported community members.

Signed,
Bunong Indigenous Community Association
Montagnard American Organization
Montagnard Dega Association
Southeast Asian Coalition

Background History on the Montagnard Community

Who are the Montagnards?

We are the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. Indigenous means “native peoples”. We are the original inhabitants of the region which became modern Vietnam. We are many tribes, Jarai, Rhade, Koho, Bahnar, Bunong, with many traditions, but we are united under the name *Montagnard*, a French word that simply means “mountain people”.

During the Vietnam War, 45,000 Montagnards fought alongside American soldiers against the Communist North Vietnamese government with the hope one day that they would be freed from colonial rule. Most villages were destroyed and over 200,000 of us were killed. After America left, many were then killed or imprisoned for aiding our ally. Tribal lands were taken. In 1986, Montagnards received special consideration for refugee status from the US government because of their role in the war. Many resettled in North Carolina, where more than 10,000 Montagnard people now live today. North Carolina is now home to the largest Montagnard population outside of Vietnam, with the largest concentration residing in Greensboro. As farmers, most arrived with limited education but a strong desire to work and contribute in their new country. Typically adults struggled to adjust to a new way of life in a modern city, taking low paying jobs like packing boxes, assembling parts, cleaning hotel rooms and offices or sewing uniforms, sometimes filling military orders. Only recently, after 30 years of being here, have families been able to encourage youth to attend college instead of going to work to help the family survive.

Today and the Future

Because few of our elders attended school, they had limited opportunities to improve their English or get involved in their children’s schools, homework or other educational activities. In their homeland they faced violence, discrimination and loss of traditional lands; here in the US they found they were a minority within a minority, invisible because even today we are counted as Vietnamese-Americans or pushed into stereotypes that we are America’s “model minority”. As indigenous tribal people we are different. Because we speak several languages when we seek services often our parents are denied proper interpreters. In courts and in doctors’ offices the consequences can be serious and life changing. Few of the services represent organized efforts to recognize us, our past, our loss, our culture and our hopes for the future even as more and more of us obtain citizenship, raise families, buy homes, complete high school and then college. Despite this situation, as Americans we are a resilient and determined people, used to overcoming odds. We contribute, work hard and pay taxes to local cities and the state of North Carolina. More and more of our youth graduate from high school, attend community colleges, private colleges and universities and UNC schools. Our graduates are becoming professionals opening shops and businesses. Despite the hardships we faced as a community in Vietnam, and again here in the US, we continue to stay strong and resilient. The Montagnard community will continue to grow, prosper, and support each other through adversity.