Hill tribes rock Chiang Mai

The Chiang Mai hills will rock once again when hilltribe musicians stage their second International Pop Concert to bring attention to their legal status and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, human trafficking and drug abuse.

The concert, to be held on November 3 at Kard Cherng Doi, Chiang Mai, will have more than 20 singers from seven ethnic groups, who will lead the show with songs and messages delivered in their mother tongues, namely Karen, Hmong, Mien, Akha, Lisu, Tai Yai and Lahu.

"Minority people are starved for information and entertainment in their own language," says Dr Sheldon Shaeffer, director of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) Regional Office in Bangkok, one of the event's co-organisers.

"This puts them at great risk."

In Thailand and the Greater Mekong sub-region, there's a disproportionately large number of highland folk in the sex trade, trafficked individuals, drug users and those infected with HIV/AIDS. One of the major issues leading to such situations is the lack of citizenship and the scarcity of information in ethnic languages, which limits the efficiency of prevention programmes.

"The concert won't prevent the problem, but it will capture the attention of people who aren't easy to reach. It will educate Thais to think of hilltribes as citizens of their country and not as a tourist attraction," says David Feingold, head of the Unesco Trafficking and HIV/AIDS Project.

More than 5,000 highland minorities and lowland people are expected to attend the concert. Admission is free, but visitors have to obtain a ticket from Radio Thailand Chiang Mai on Prachasamphan Street, Chiang Mai.

"We're so small that our voice can't be heard," says Chi Suwichan, 27, a Pakayo musician of the Karen tribe, who received a master's degree in non-formal education for development from Chiang Mai University. "But at this concert, at least people can hear stories from the insiders.

"Lowland and highland people are neighbours, but we lack communication. And it leads to misunderstanding. We don't expect people to understand us and the issues better just by attending one concert, but we hope that those who come can spread the word and speak on our behalf," he says.

Organised in honour of His Majesty the King's 80th birthday, the concert is also an opportunity for highlanders to express their gratitude for His Majesty's tireless work in improving the livelihood and welfare of mountain people.

Three years ago, Thailand's first International Hilltribe Pop Concert, organised by Unesco and Radio Thailand Chiang Mai, shook the mountains around Chiang Mai with a crowd of 4,000 stomping, dancing and singing fans.

"The first concert was a major success - both as entertainment and in bringing attention to the issues facing
hilltribe people," said Feingold, who has been working with the northern highlanders for almost 40 years now.

"This year’s event is even bigger, and highlights the importance of legal identity in preventing human trafficking."

The five-hour show kicks off at 6.30pm on November 3 and will be broadcast live by Radio Thailand Chiang Mai. The broadcast can be listened to across Thailand, southern China, Lao, northern Vietnam, Burma and parts of India from 7pm. Thailand’s Channel 11 will also televise the concert from 8.30pm onwards.

The event is part of a continued cooperation between Unesco and the Government Public Relations Office Region 3, Chiang Mai. Additional support comes from the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture, Culture Ministry; Plan International Thailand; Southeast Asia Regional Cooperation in Human Development; the International Labour Organisation’s Mekong Project to Combat Trafficking in Children and Women; United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS; the British Embassy; the UN Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region and the Asian Development Bank.

For more information, contact Feingold at d.feingold@unescobkk.org; call (02) 391 0577, extension 504; or contact Chotika Khrueanee at k.chotika@unescobkk.org; call (02) 391 0577, extension 510.

(c) 2007 www.nationmultimedia.com Thailand