

Bangladesh's Genocidal Crimes

An Appeal to Save the Chakma and other Tribe

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Chittagong Hill Tracts

May I present to you the following evidence regarding the genocidal policy of the Bangladesh Government against the indigenous nationalities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

A full scale invasion of tribal lands in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) by Bengali settlers has been actively promoted by successive regimes in Pakistan and Bangladesh since the late 1960s. Growing tribal resistance has been met with a hardening of official policy, the closure of the entire CHT beyond Rangamati to foreigners and journalists, and an increasing militarization of the Region.

The scale of the ensuing conflict, between the tribal peoples defending their territorial rights and the military backed invasion, can be measured in thousands of lives. Some estimates place the number of tribal deaths since the late 60s as high as 100,000. Yet the total tribal population of the CHT is only some 600,000. According to some reports, there may be as many as 85,000 military personnel currently in the CHT.

Faced with a continual and accelerating dispossession

of their lands and finding all their attempts to achieve a political resolution of their problems denounced as "secessionist", the tribals have had little alternative but to resort to violence. The Shanti Bahini (the "Peace Force"), formed in the early 1970s, has since waged a "secret war" against the Bangladeshi military. Indiscriminate and violent reprisals have been taken by the armed forces against the tribal villagers which have caused terrible loss of life and many tribals to seek refuge in the forested hills where they have suffered great privation.

Strict controls on tribal movements have been imposed by the military and many have been relocated into "strategic villages". Despite the closure of the area to visitors, frequent tales of bestial atrocities committed both by Bengali settlers and the military have filtered through to the outside world.

Since May 1984, the Shanti Bahini adopted the tactic of directly assaulting Bengali settlements established on tribal lands by the Bangladeshi government. Three separate attacks were made by the tribal forces on Bengali settlements, in late May and early June, resulting in some 200 deaths.

The attacks are the direct consequence of land conflict. Government programmes to settle some 170,000 Bengalis on tribal lands near Bhushanchara have been deeply resented by the Chakma, the most numerous tribal group in the area. After the raids, some 16,000 settler families allegedly fled their new lands, but were shortly reestablished by the military, which began fortifying the new settlements with hard defense lines. General Ershad, President of Bangladesh, visited the area a week after the first attacks and promised more aid to the settlers.

Less publicized in the Bangladeshi press have been the violent reprisals take by the military against the

Chakma. Several hundred tribals have been killed in a number of separate attacks. On 30 June of 1984, Bengali settlers were prompted by the military to forcibly reap the Chakma's rice crops. When the tribal resisted, the Bangladeshi soldiers emerged from concealment and initiated an attack on several communities named Chota Harina, Bara Harina, Chedoa, Garjangtali, Soguri Para and Maudong. More than three hundred Chakma were murdered. Witnesses to the murder assert, "The captured tribals were divided into three groups — old and young men, elderly women, and young women. Men and old women were shot dead. The young women were raped freely, some of them were killed and some were converted to Islam."

On May 31, 1984, the 7th and 26th Bengal of 305 brigade of the Bangladesh Arm, members of the 17th Battalion of the Bangladesh Rifles, members of the Village Defence Party of the Barkal Rehabilitation Zone and Muslim Bengali settlers of the same zone initiated massacres in the villages of: Tarengya Chat, Suguri Para, Bhushan Chara, Gorosthan, Banarupa, Bhushan Bak, Het Bharia, Goruri Para, Jarul Chari, Garjan Tali, Ludibash Chara, Ujyang Chari and Dhanu Bak. The attacks resulted in 63 deaths and one person wounded. Twenty-five of those killed were of thirteen years of age and younger, there were a number of babies among the victims. Five members of the population remain untraced, all young women of 15 to 26 years of age.

The Bangladesh Army also mounted a month-long "scorched earth" operation from 20 September to 19 October in the Gaba Chari area of the Subalong valley. Houses were burnt, crops were destroyed, harvests taken and people evicted. The following villages were razed to the ground: Bar Kalak, Hotyal Chara, Harin Hat Para, Mong Chari, Sivram Para and Baner Subalong.

As a result of these attacks, some 18,000 tribal

refugees sought refuge in Mizoram, India. Thousands of indigenous inhabitants had been forced to take shelter in the nearby forests. Their farmlands and villages have already been expropriated by the outsider Bengali settlers.

Tens of thousands of tribal plough-land farmers have been herded into concentration camps and their farmlands have been seized for the outsider Muslim Bengali settlers. Torture, rape, starvation, lack of medical care, and even murder are commonplace in concentration camps. Life in the Joutha Khamar under the Bangladesh army is so horrible that when the Bangladesh Government proposed to set up another camp at Ghagra, near Tangamati, the local tribal people simply left their ancestral homes and fled to nearby areas. Now the Muslim Bengalis have occupied their villages and farmlands.

The Bangladesh Government is totally dependent on foreign aid. It receives huge financial help from *developed countries* and also from international organizations such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the International Development Association. I believe that if the foreign aid is suspended then the repressive regime of Bangladesh will be compelled to reverse its anti-tribal policy and to restore the birth-right of the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The tribal people of the CHT are being persecuted by the fundamentally hostile Bangladeshi military junta because they are ethnically, religiously and culturally different from the Muslim Bengalis. They are as helpless as a child and they need all kinds of protection of the civilized world as a child needs care of parents. In 1980, Bengali Brigadier Hannan and Lt. Col. Salam declared at a public meeting at Panchari: "We want the soil, and not the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts."

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The actions of the Bangladeshi government are a vivid demonstration of this declaration.

The Bangladesh government has made a recent attempt to cover up the genocidal crimes committed by the Bangladeshi regime before the Fourth Session of the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations (meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, 29 July - 2 August 1985). The official representative of Bangladesh, Agga Vansa Mahathera, stated in part before this body:

The Bangladesh delegation is dismayed and amazed to note that in the course of general debate in this working group efforts have been made by some to divert this body from its basic purpose and to convert it into a chamber of complaints or a tribunal in individual instances. Attempts have thus been made to present before the Working Group baseless allegations regarding the current situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in my country. These attempts to tarnish the image of my country through a deliberate misrepresentation of facts is unprecedented in its nature and hardly consistent with the professed sincere humanitarian vocations of those who have actually made them. The Bangladesh delegation has, therefore, no hesitation in rejecting them.

May I in this connection convey to you the position of my government on the whole gamut of issues relating to the situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts which, I hope, will help the Working Group to appreciate the existing situation in that area in its proper perspective. But, before doing that I would like to reiterate our well known stand that any attempt to define the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as indigenous populations is not only erroneous, but is also based on arguments having very scant respect for scientific reasoning. It is the considered view of my delegation that in defining the indigenous populations practical insight should be derived from the historical experience of those countries where racially distinct people coming from overseas established colonies and subjugated the indigenous populations. No such situation ever existed in Bangladesh where the people coexisted through recorded history with complete communal harmony. The factual situation is that the entire population of

Bangladesh falls under the category of autochthon and should be described as such in any objective analysis.

My delegation naturally fails to understand the allegations made by some in this august body regarding programmes and action (a) of my government in the area particularly the allegations implying that the policies and programmes of Bangladesh government have led to uprooting of the local people. These allegations are not corroborated by fact nor do they reflect the existing reality in the area. In fact, any movement of people to and from the Chittagong Hill Tracts is comparable to normal inter-regional migration in any other country and by no way assumed, at any point of time, and overwhelming proportion so as to cause perceptible and substantive harm to local people. The movement of people to and from this area into other areas in Bangladesh is also perfectly consistent with the basic human rights of all citizens of Bangladesh including the Tribal people who have unrestrained right to freedom of movement.

I may here also stress that contrary to what has been alleged by some in this Working Group the basic objective of the enlightened policy of the Government of Bangladesh has always been to improve the quality of life of the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts and to assist them in their endeavour to accelerate economic development. This is reflected in many initiatives undertaken by the Government of Bangladesh. In addition to the normal development activities within the framework of the Annual Development Plan, the Government of Bangladesh has thus formulated and is assiduously implementing a Special Five Year Development Plan for the Chittagong Hill Tracts area with a total outlay of Tk.2,630 million (about US\$100 million) for which special budgetary provision has been made outside the normal Annual Development Plan. The genuine desire to help the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts reflected in these special efforts have an added significance as these efforts are being made at a time when Bangladesh is faced with a very critical situation with respect to availability of resources to be employed in different priority areas.

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We were also surprised at the deliberate attempts made in some of the statements to represent in a distorted manner the law and order situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Totally baseless and

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preposterous allegations have thus been made about so-called atrocities perpetrated in the area. We cannot but reject these allegations categorically. Such insinuations lead us to believe that there is some basis in thinking that the tribal people are being fomented by certain foreign agencies. In this connection it was worth noting that in this august forum on Human Rights attempts were made to inject extraneous political elements amounting to interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state which has nothing to do with humanitarian considerations relating to the people in the area.

At the risk of being repetitive, I may here underline the fact that the basic policy of the security forces in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has always been to ensure peace and security in the area and to ensure the rule of law for the benefit of the common people. There has been not attempt on the part of the government to coerce people in any way and the government has been trying relentlessly to improve conditions for all round social and economic development. Government has also announced a general amnesty for the misguided elements. These measures have been widely welcomed and even the most neutral of observers have recognised their positive impact. Following this amnesty more than 3000 misguided elements have returned to the fold of lawful activities and are pursuing peaceful professions as law abiding citizens. This development by itself speaks of the confidence now reigning in the area amidst local people about the government policies. Finally, peaceful elections in my country held barely two months ago to elect the heads of the local administration on the basis of universal adult franchise in which the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts participated enthusiastically also convincingly exposes the real character of the allegations made before this august body about the situation in the Chittagong Hill tracts and their total irrelevance in the present day context.

The official representative of Bangladesh has made an unsuccessful attempt to cover up the genocidal crimes committed by the Bangladeshi regime against the defenceless indigenous nationals of the CHT. His statement is devoid of facts and figures and has not a leg to stand on. There is not doubt that it has

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outraged not only the UN Working Group, but also the entire international community. I hope that the UNO, all human countries, and various human rights groups would take adequate measures against the Bangladesh Government for misleading the world.