

THE DETERIORATING SITUATION IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

(based on a letter written to me by the Jana Samhati Samiti on 1.5.1995)

Since the launching of the Opposition Parties' movement for holding General Elections under a Neutral Care-Taker Government and particularly after the Ansar (Islamic Guard) Revolt, the panic-stricken Pro-Islamic Bangladesh Government (BG) has stepped up Military operations against the Cease-fire abiding Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS) and its resistance force, the Shanti Bahini (SB), equipped the Bangladesh Army with more advanced G-3 and G-4 guns, built more Military encampments, and arrested at least 16 SB Members who were strictly observing the Cease-fire.

The BG has also intensified suppressive measures against the Hill People Council, the Hill Women Federation and the Hill Student Council in particular. At the same time, it has escalated atrocities such as looting, arson, detention, religious persecution to torture, rape and murder against the helpless and innocent Jumma People.

The BG has not yet rehabilitated properly the Repatriated Jumma Refugees as it has promised. Many of them have not yet got back their homes, their native villages and their ancestral agricultural lands let alone other facilities as provided in the 16-Point Benefit Package. On the other hand, the BG has given top priority to the settlement of more Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and is forcing the Jumma People, Headmen and Councils to give more lands to the new illegal Muslim settlers.

Regarding the on-going negotiation with the JSS, the BG is reluctant to continue the talks in good faith. Even it has totally ignored the following recommendations of the Sub-Committee of the Bangladesh Government Commission (BGC): i) To withdraw all the new Military encampments constructed after the date of the Cease-fire Agreement, ii) To stop attacks on the SB men and camps, iii) To stop atrocities on the Jumma People, iv) To release all the arrested SB Members, v) To submit a new set of proposals to the JSS, and vi) To observe the Cease-fire.

In brief, the BG does not want a negotiated political settlement to the crisis in the CHT. Instead, it is breaching all the provisions of the Cease-fire with a view to translating into action its fundamental Islamic policy what the Military Leaders frankly declared - "We want only the Land and not the People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts". For example:

1. Onslaughts Against The JSS Or SB

In contravention of the Cease-fire Agreement, the BG has directed its Security Forces to attack the JSS or SB camps and personnel. As a result, the Bangladesh Security Forces are carrying out onslaughts frequently on the JSS or SB bases throughout the CHT although the JSS or SB is strictly and sincerely adhering to the Truce Agreement and has the right to repulse the attacks in self-defence. The Security Forces have also arrested 16 JSS or SB Members who were unarmed and not engaged in any illegal or provocative activities. Perhaps, it is worth-mentioning that the Sub-Committee of the BGC has no doubt about the deliberate violation of the Cease-fire by the BG and so asked the BG to release all the detained JSS or SB personnel unconditionally. Needless to say, the BG does not want to set them free nor does it want to abide by the Cease-fire. These evidence confirm that it is bent on finding a military solution and that it is pretending to talk with the JSS just to continue the ethnic-cleansing process unabated.

2. Attempt To Suppress The Hill Student Council At Bandarban

Like the JSS, the Hill Student Council (HSC) has demanded Autonomy for the CHT which is an anathema to the BG. This consistent Jumma demand enrages the BG as much as a red rag enrages a bull. No wonder, the BG, like an infuriated bull, has been trying its utmost to gore the HSC to death. For instance, it directed the local Military, Police and Civil Authorities of Naniachar and also the Parbattya Gano Parishad (PGP), the militant.....page /2-

militant organisation of the Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators, to massacre the Members of the HSC at the annual conference held at Naniachar Bazaar on November 17, 1993. The conference was permitted by the Local Authorities and the Jumma students were totally unarmed, peaceful and unwary of the BG's conspiracy to kill and maim them. While the meeting was in progress, a large group of the PGP goondas armed with knives, spears, iron bars & chains, and bamboo & wooden sticks attacked the students in front of the Police, who neither disarmed the goondas nor stopped them from attacking the helpless students. On the other hand, the Security Forces shot at those who tried to flee. In this premeditated massacre, at least 67 Jumma men, women and children were murdered, over 500 injured with many of them seriously and many still unaccounted for. The BG has not yet published the inquiry report because it fears massive international actions if the cold-blooded mass-killing is exposed.

Having not been able to crush the HSC at Naniachar, the BG hatched another plot to suppress it once and for all at Bandarban during its annual conference scheduled for 15 March, 1995. Perhaps, it is important to note that the HSC had announced the date for the conference one month earlier in order to obtain permission from the Local Authorities for holding the meeting at "Rajar math" and give sufficient time to the Jumma students to prepare themselves for the conference. All on a sudden, under the instructions of the Local Military, Police and Civil Authorities, the PGP announced on March 14, 1995, that it would hold a meeting at the same venue on 15 March, 1995. On the transparent pretext of preventing clash between the HSC and the PGP, the Deputy Commissioner of Bandarban District imposed Section 144, which prohibits the assembly of more than 5 people, in the area on 14 March, 1995, and thereby attempted to stop the Jumma student conference.

Despite the imposition of Section 144 in the area, the BG-supported PGP goondas organised a demonstration at 10 a.m. on 15 March, 1995 in the area of Bandarban Bazaar and shouted anti-Jumma, anti-JSS, anti-SB and anti-HSC and pro-Islamic slogans under the very nose of the Security Forces. Still the Local Authorities took no actions against the PGP demonstrators for breaching the ban.

The HSC saw the ban as unjust because it had announced to hold the meeting one full month prior to the scheduled date whereas the PGP had announced to hold the meeting only one day before the scheduled date. Moreover, the ban was discriminatory as it was not imposed on the Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators. So, the HSC decided to go ahead with the conference on the afternoon of 15 March, 1995. However, it changed the venue from "Rajar math" to Madhyampara, which is also in the area of Bandarban, with a view to avoiding a confrontation with the PGP goondas over the venue at "Rajar math". The Jumma students were totally unarmed.

Hardly had the Jumma students begun the conference when the Police attacked them with cane-lathis and beat up them mercilessly but failed to disperse them. Then the Police retreated only to return about 20 minutes later with more Security personnel and hundreds of PGP goondas who were still demonstrating in the Bandarban Bazaar area under the patronage of the Security Forces. They fired rubber bullets and tear-gas shells at the students, lathi-charged them and arrested their leaders. Thereafter they attacked the nearby Jumma houses, looted all valuable things, beat up the innocent Jumma men, women and children including Buddhist monks, molested Jumma women and girls, and burned the houses in the area.

At about 1.30 p.m., one Humayun Mohammad, the driver of the Chairman of the Bandarban Hill District Council, set fire to the house of Mrs. Chengri Marma in order to incite other PGP goondas to burn the Jumma houses. The Fire-Brigade personnel arrived at the scene at about 2 p.m. but they were prevented by the PGP goondas from extinguishing the fire. As a result, some 300 houses were burnt to ashes.

Similarly, Sub-Inspector Ibrahim of Bandarban Police Station had demonstrated.....page /3-

demonstrated to the Security personnel and the PGP goondas how to brutalise the Jumma people. He molested and beat up Ms. Mucchang Prue Marma severely till she was seriously injured and had to be hospitalised at Bandarban Sadar Hospital. He also zealously demonstrated how to persecute the people of non-Islamic faiths. He harassed 2 Buddhist monks - i) Rev. Waizo Marma & ii) Rev. Narendra - in many ways and beat up them severely. Having been encouraged by his brutalities, the Security Forces and the PGP goondas brutalised the helpless Jumma people with greater zeal. As a consequence, some 200 Jumma men, women and children were injured and many of them seriously. Mr. Umaung Prue Marma reportedly died from a serious head injury caused by rubber bullets. Of course, hundreds of Jumma women and girls were molested by the Muslim attackers.

Many Jumma student leaders were beaten up, arrested, tortured and detained in Bandarban Jail. Many of them were injured and some of them seriously. Nobody knows about their fate. It has been learnt from reliable sources that atleast 22 Jumma students are still being held in the prison without any means of communication with other Jummas or lawyers.

In protest, the HSC, the Hill People Council, and the Hill Women Federation brought out processions in many places in the CHT and demanded a judicial inquiry into the planned attacks on the Jumma students and public, punishment for the culprits, and immediate and unconditional release of all arrested students. His Highness Mong Shwe Prue Chowdhury, the Bomong Chief of Bandarban, and The Hon. Bir Bahadur, MP (Bandarban) condemned the Local Authorities for causing the Bandarban riots, called for an independent enquiry into the incident, and demanded the proper rehabilitation of arson victims. On 16 March, 1995, the HSC organised a protest meeting in Dhaka at which Mr. Belal Chowdhury of the Samajtantrik Student Front, Mr. Mahbubul Hoque of the Bangladesh Student Union, and Mr. Nirmal Chatterjee of the Student and Youth Council held the BG responsible for the Bandarban rioting and asked for a judicial probe by a High Court Judge and appropriate actions against the Security Forces and other Local Authorities. Many organisations such as the Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, Gana Forum (Chittagong Branch), the Samajtantrik Student Front (Chittagong & Chittagong University Branch), the Bangladesh Bouddha Hindu Oikya Parishad (Chittagong Branch), the Bangladesh Student and Youth Oikya Parishad (Chittagong City Branch), and so forth issued statements condemning the BG for committing brutalities against the Jumma students and people and for plotting to suppress the Jumma student movement.

On March 16, 1995, a 14-member-team of human rights activists, lawyers and journalists from Dhaka including Mr. Uttam Kumar Roy of the Bangladesh Manabadhikar Samannoy Parishad, Mr. Gaved Hasan of the Bangladesh Ain O Salish Kendra, Mr. Salim Samad (journalist of the Independent), Mr. Shahidul Islam Shafiq (Organising Secretary of the Bangladesh Student Union), Mr. Manjurur Rahman (Central Committee Member of the Bangladesh Student League), Mr. Rayhanur Rahman (Advocate of the Supreme Court), and so on left for Bandarban to see the situation for themselves. After investigating the matter on the spot, it published a report in Dhaka on 18 March, 1995, stating that the Bengali Members of the PGP, the Members of the Security Forces, the Bengali students belonging to the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Bengali students belonging to the Jamat-e-Islami had attacked the Jumma students, looted cash, ornaments and valuable goods of the Jumma people, molested Jumma women and girls, beat up Jumma men, women and children injuring many of them seriously, arrested many Jumma students although many of them were wounded, and set the Jumma houses on fire. The inquiry team recommended the proper rehabilitation of all the affected people who lost their homes and property and demanded that the people responsible for the Bandarban riots and arson be tried and then appropriately punished.

On 23 March, 1995, 45 intellectuals of Bangladesh including Begum Sufia Kamal (poet), Mr. Shamsur Rahman (poet), Justice K.M. Sobhan (judge of the Supreme Court), Dr. Kamal Hossain (lawyer & politician), Dr. Ahmed Sharif.....page /4-

Sharif, Dr. Humayun Azad, Mr. Sudhangshu Shekhar Haldar (lawyer), Ms. Meghna Guha Thakurata, Dr. Arefin Siddique, Mr. Abdul Mannan Chowdhury & so forth issued a joint statement to the Press in Dhaka, accused the Bandarban Police and Civil Authorities of organising and executing the attacks on the Jumma students and civilians, and opined that this kind of oppression would serve only to prolong the crisis in the CHT.

3. Attempt To Mislead Public Opinion

Having failed to cover up the Bandarban riots and arson, the BG made a desperate attempt to counter the public condemnation of the Government-organised atrocities on the Jumma people. It directed the leaders of the PGP and the Islamic Fundamentalist groups of Dhaka to hold a seminar on the CHT problem at the National Press Club in Dhaka on March 30, 1995. Among the participants were Barrister Agar Ali (Vice-President of the Freedom Party), Mr. Anisur Rahman (a Leader of the Jatiya Ganatantrik Party), Dr. S.M. Lutfur Rahman (a Professor of Dhaka University, and Justice Sultan Uddin Khan. They and the PGP Leaders claimed that due to the non-cooperation of the Jumma people, the Governments of Gen. Ziaur Rahman and Gen. Hossain Mohammad Ershad could not solve the CHT problem and that every citizen of Bangladesh had every right to settle anywhere in Bangladesh including the CHT. They demanded stern suppressive measures against the JSS and SB and also the banning of the HSC. The PGP leaders organised similar meetings at several places in the CHT and made similar claims and demands to mislead the public opinion.

4. In the first week of March, 1995, the Bangladesh Army has set up a new camp at Koloya Para of the Remakri area in Pansa Mouza under Thanchi P.S. within Bandarban District in violation of the Cease-fire.

5. All vehicles entering the CHT are checked in order to find out if any foreign nationals are visiting the area secretly.

6. Previously there were reserved places for Jumma students at various educational institutions such as Universities, Medical Colleges, Engineering Colleges, Polytechnics, Agricultural College, and so on. But the BG has stopped reservations from the current session with a view to depriving the Jumma students of higher education.

7. The BG has pressured the Local Councils and Headmen to demand in a memorandum sent to the Commissioner of the Chittagong Division on March 11, 1995, the following facilities:

- i) To lift ban on land settlement in the CHT.
- ii) To hand over some areas from the Forest Department in the CHT to the Deputy Commissioners of the 3 Hill Districts in the CHT for horticulture and afforestation schemes.

and so forth.....

The said 2 demands are certainly intended to facilitate the settlement of tens of thousands of new Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators in the CHT under the Government-financed Muslim Bengali transfer scheme.

-THE END-

(This report has been written by Ramendu Shekhar Dewan, a Spokesman of the Jana Samhati Samiti in Europe on 2 June, 1995)