

REPORT ON THE FOURTH GROUP MEETING

HELD BETWEEN THE SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE BANGLADESH GOVERNMENT COMMISSION AND THE JANA SAMHATI SAMITI AT DHUDUKCHARA UNDER THE PANCHARI POLICE STATION WITHIN KHAGRACHARI DISTRICT ON DECEMBER 26, 1994, (based on two letters written to me by the Jana Samhati Samiti on 10 December, 1994, & 9 January, 1995).

A. BACKGROUND

At the Third Group Meeting, which took place on August 28, 1994, both the Sub-Committee of the Bangladesh Government Commission (BGC) and the Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS) agreed upon the following decisions: 1) The Fourth Group Meeting between the Sub-Committee of the BGC and the JSS would be held in the first week of November, 1994, & the BGC would fix the date for the Meeting and inform the JSS of the time-table in time; 2) The Cease-fire would be observed for a further period till November 30, 1994; 3) The Sub-Committee of the BGC would prepare a new set of proposals to be discussed at the Fourth Group Meeting; and 4) The two Members of the Shanti Bahini (SB) would be released by the Bangladesh Government (BG) by September, 1994.

The BGC had postponed the Fourth Group Meeting, which was due to be held in the first week of Nov., 1994, till Dec. 12, 1994, on the pretext of an abnormal political situation caused by the Ansar (Islamic Guards) revolt and the Opposition Parties' demand for holding elections under a neutral caretaker Government. Again, it rescheduled the Meeting for 26 Dec., 1994, on the same excuses. At the same time, the Bangladesh Military Forces in league with the Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators have stepped up operations against the SB camps and the Jumma villages, intensified atrocities on the innocent Jummas, set up more check-posts & camps, grabbed more Jumma lands, and brought more Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators into the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in violation of all terms and conditions of the Cease-fire Agreement.

The BG did not release the two Members of the SB by Sept., 1994, as promised by the Sub-Committee of the BGC. On the other hand, it arrested five more SB Members in contravention of the Cease-fire Agreement. In Nov., 1994, the JSS wrote to the BG demanding their immediate release but the latter has not yet released anyone of them.

The BG has not yet returned to the Jumma Refugee Repatriates of the first two batches their ancestral villages and agricultural lands. Still, it is trying to repatriate the Third Batch of the Jumma Refugees against their will.

The BG had imposed the three Hill District Councils on the Jumma People (the People of the CHT) against their will. On Jan. 5, 1995, the Bangladesh Radio had announced that the BG had further extended the term of the Councils by two years from 5 Jan., 1995, to 5 Jan., 1997.

B. THE DELEGATES TO THE FOURTH GROUP MEETING

a. The Delegates Of The Sub-Committee Of The BGC

1) Mr. Rashed Khan Menon, MP (Bangladesh Workers Party), the Head of the Sub-Committee of the BGC & Chairman of the Group Meeting; 2) Mr. Kalpa Ranjan Chakma, MP (Awami League); 3) Mr. Mohammad Shahjahan, MP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party); 4) Mr. Shahjahan Chowdhury, MP (Jamat-I-Islami) was absent.

b. The Delegates Of The JSS

1) Mr. Jyotirindra Bedhipriya Larma, the President of the JSS and Head of the JSS Delegation; 2) Mr. Goutam Kumar Chakma, a Member of the Central Committee of the JSS; 3) Mr. Rupayan Dewan, a Member of the JSS Central Committee; and 4) Mr. Sudha Sindhu Khisa, a Member of the Central Committee of the JSS.

c. The Delegates Of The Liaison or Coordination Committee

1. Mr. Hangsadhvaj Chakma, the Convenor of the Liaison Committee; 2) Mr. Mohammad Safi, a Member of the Liaison Committee.

d. The Bangladesh Government Delegates

1. Mr. M.A. Wadood Bhuiyan, the Director (Administration) of the Special Affairs Division under the Prime Minister's Office, Dhaka; 2) Mr. Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal, an Officer of the Special Affairs Division; and 3) Mr. Mohammad Ismail, the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachari District.

C. THE FOURTH GROUP MEETING

The Delegates of the Sub-Committee of the BGC (also known as the Bangladesh Government Committee on the CHT or briefly the CHT Committee) arrived at the venue at 11-15 a.m. and the Meeting began fifteen minutes later.

After opening the Meeting, Mr. Rashed Khan Menon explained that the Fourth Group Meeting could not be held on Dec. 12, 1994, due to the on-going political unrest in Bangladesh. As per the decisions made at the Third Group Meeting, he wrote to the BGC about drafting a new set of proposals to be presented at the Fourth Group Meeting. In response, the BGC held a meeting to discuss the following points: 1) The future constitutional position of the CHT, 2) The Administrative structure of the CHT, and 3) The Jamma Refugee rehabilitation programme. It decided that the Government would take decision on those points. The BGC had discussed some of the CHT issues as shown below: 1) Constitutional recognition of Ethnic Entities and also the Administrative Status of the CHT, 2) Formation of a Hill Council or Apex Body for the CHT, 3) Land Right of the Jamma People, and 4) Withdrawal of the Bangladeshi settlers from the CHT. Mr. Menon stressed that the first two issues were most important because their resolution would require the consent of both the Government and the Opposition Parties.

Mr. Menon had disclosed that on 24 Dec., 1994, those issues were raised at the Cabinet meeting but the Cabinet could not discuss them in depth as it had to discuss some other burning issues of Bangladesh. He also disclosed that he tried to persuade the BGC to solve the constitutional problem first because without solving this issue the other issue - the formation of a Hill Council or Apex Body for the CHT - could not be resolved. In this connection, he reminded the BGC that the Sub-Committee of the BGC was promise-bound to present a draft of new proposals at the next Fourth Group Meeting. Responding to the reminder, the BGC Chief, Col. Oli Ahmed shrugged off the Sub-Committee's commitment to the JSS by making an evasive remark - "The JSS ought to understand the present political situation in Bangladesh". However, he advised Mr. Menon to tell the JSS that the peace process would continue and that the discussion would be held at higher political level.

Then, Mr. Larma wanted to know the meaning of "higher political level". In reply, Mr. Menon explained that whatever might be the political confusion at the national level in Bangladesh the Dialogue on the CHT issue would be continued at political level and that the present Members of the BGC and of its Sub-Committee might be inducted into a political body created for the CHT Dialogue even if the Opposition Parties' MPs resigned. Despite the prevailing political uncertainty, which might last for another three months or so, he assured the JSS of the help of all Members of the BGC and of its Sub-Committee.

Mr. Larma also wanted to hear the opinion of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party's MP, Mr. Mohammad Shahjahan, on this point. In response, the latter said that Col. Ahmed and the Cabinet had been too busy with the current political unrest to deal with the CHT question seriously and that the BGC Chief had requested the JSS to continue the talks.

After that, Mr. Menon invited Mr. Larma to speak. Mr. Larma stressed that the continuation of the peace process needed a conducive atmosphere by strictlypage /3-

strictly observing the Cease-fire and by sincerely trying to make substantive progress in the talks. Regrettably, he said, the Bangladesh Government had neither adhered to the Cease-fire Agreement nor did anything to find a political solution to the CHT crisis. Although the JSS abided by the truce, he further said, the Bangladesh Military Forces continued to attack the SB camps and Jumma villages, apprehend the SB (or JSS) Members and innocent Jumma People, rape the Jumma girls and women, and torture & murder them in blatant breach of all terms & conditions of the Cease-fire Agreement. For example, on Oct. 8, 1994, the soldiers of the 42 East Bengal Regiment from the Bamer Longadu Army camp under the Longadu Military Zone gang-raped & killed a young Jumma girl, Miss Bhanumati Chakma, the daughter of Mr. Adeyghan Chakma of Ranachara village in Longadu Mouza under Longadu Police Station within Rangamati District. Mr. Larma accused the Bangladesh Government of violating the Cease-fire Agreement by creating more Military encampments & checkposts and by bringing in more Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators who grabbed more and more Jumma lands. He also blamed the Sub-Committee Members particularly Mr. Shahjahan, who represented the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, for failing to get the release of the SB Members despite their commitment to do so. At that stage, Mr. Hangsadhvaj Chakma, the Convenor of the Liaison Committee, testified that he had gone to Dhaka four times to take the matter up with Col. Oli Ahmed and also the Director of the Special Affairs Division but he did not hear anything from them indicating clearly that the Bangladesh Government was not willing to honour the promises of the Sub-Committee made at the Group Meetings. Then, Mr. Larma forcefully declared that the Peace Process could not be continued indefinitely if the Bangladesh Government did not stop the Cease-fire violations, release the SB Members unconditionally, and make progress in the talks by implementing the commitments given to the JSS. He also complained that the Radio Bangladesh indulged in launching false propoganda against the JSS by distorting and fabricating facts & figures. For instance, Mr. Larma pointed out, at the Third Group Meeting both the Sub-Committee of the BGC and the JSS had agreed upon the extension of the Cease-fire till the end of Nov., 1994 but the Radio Bangladesh reported this information on 28 Aug., 1994, by announcing - "General Amnesty has been extended by the next two months at the request of the Jana Samhati Samiti".

Replying to these questions, Mr. Menon disclosed that the Bangladesh Security Forces had also alleged the violation of the Cease-fire by the SB. Then he opined that there should not be any objections to the collection of taxes & donations by the JSS or SB but the question of maintaining law & order arose when anybody was kidnapped to force him or her to pay taxes. He also opined that the attack of the Bangladesh Security Forces on the camps of the SB could not be justified at all. However, Mr. Menon promised to raise this issue again with the General Officer Commanding of the Chittagong Division of the Bangladesh Army. At that point, Mr. Mohammad Ismail pointed out that the SB Members had recently removed some planks from a wooden bridge at Babuehara under Dighinala Police Station in Khagrachari District. Mr. Larma dismissed this allegation as untrue. In this connection, Mr. Kalpa Ranjan Chakma said that he also heard about the incident. He was told that some SB Members had removed the planks from the said bridge because the drivers of vehicles did not pay taxes to the SB. Then, Mr. Hangsadhvaj Chakma testified that he had personally investigated the matter and found that some Bangladeshi Muslim drivers of some passenger jeeps misbehaved with some local Chakma youths, who in protest removed the wooden planks to disrupt the journey of the arrogant and bigoted Bangladeshi Muslim drivers. In addition to this false allegation of the Government against the SB, he also testified that the Bangladesh Security Forces had already re-established nine checkposts on a twentyfour mile stretch of the Mahalchari-Manikchari Road in Nov., 1994, in contravention of the Cease-fire Agreement. Regarding the Radio Bangladesh's distorted and fabricated reporting, both Mr. Menon and Mr. Shahjahan admitted that the Radio Bangladesh's version of the Cease-fire extension was not true as both sides unanimously extended the Cease-fire.

Then, Mr. Larma vigorously demanded the release of the SB Members within one month. In reply, Mr. Menon said that he would try his best to set them free. However, he thought, it might take longer than one month. Thereafter, he proposed to extend the Cease-fire upto March 31, 1995. On this proposal, Mr. Larma adamantly reiterated his stand on the issues of the Cease-fire violations and the arrest of the SB Members by the Bangladesh Security Forces and said that he would accept the proposal only on condition that the Bangladesh Government would abide by the terms and conditions of the Cease-fire Agreement and release the SB Members unconditionally and without further delay. He also forcefully argued that if the Government wished, then the Members of the SB could be released within 24 hours. On behalf of the Sub-Committee, Mr. Shahjahan assured Mr. Larma of his utmost help in getting the SB Personnel released. After that, the Sub-Committee unanimously decided that the SB Members should be set free by the Government by March 15, 1995.

Mr. Larma also pointed out that the Sub-Committee had not yet been able to make any progress towards a negotiated political solution despite the JSS's compliance with the framework of the Unitary Bangladesh Constitution. Then, Mr. K.R. Chakma suggested that the Sub-Committee could bring some proposals in writing from the Government for discussion at the Fifth Group Meeting. On this suggestion, Mr. Menon feared that the Government might not give anything in writing to the JSS at this stage in case the written commitments became troublesome to the Government at a later stage. Then, Mr. Larma suggested that the Government could make a new set of proposals in the name of the Sub-Committee. This suggestion was found acceptable to the Sub-Committee Members. It was decided that the Sub-Committee would send the draft proposals to the JSS by 15 March, 1995, and the JSS would send its opinion on the draft proposals to the Sub-Committee as soon as possible (within a few days). Finally, both the Sub-Committee of the BGC and the JSS reached the following agreements:-

1. The period of the Cease-fire was extended upto March 31, 1995, by both sides.
2. The Sub-Committee would send a new set of proposals, drafted in consultation with the Government, to the JSS on or before March 15, 1995, for the opinion of the JSS.
3. The apprehended Members of the JSS would be released at the earliest moment.
4. The next Meeting (Fifth Group Meeting) would be fixed with the consent of both sides through communications.

These agreements were put down on a paper, which was signed by Mr. Menon on behalf of the Sub-Committee of the BGC, by Mr. Larma on behalf of the JSS, and by Mr. Hangsadhvaj Chakma on behalf of the Liaison Committee, in order to prevent the Bangladesh Government reporting any motivated, distorted and fabricated information about the talks through the State-controlled Press and Radio & Television.

The Fourth Group Meeting between the Sub-Committee of the BGC and the JSS had ended at 1-30 p.m.

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(This report has been written by Ramendu Shekhar Dewan, a Spokesman of the Jana Samhati Samiti in Europe, on 24 Feb., 1995)