

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Working Group on Indigenous Populations
Twelfth Session
Geneva, 25 - 29 July 1994

STATEMENT OF THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS (CHT) HILL WOMEN'S FEDERATION
ON
AGENDA ITEM 5: REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTS

Thank you Madam Chair. Greetings to you and to all the participants on behalf of the Jumma indigenous peoples of the CHT, Bangladesh and my organization, CHT Hill Women's Federation. I also congratulate you and your colleagues on your election.

I wish to acknowledge the sponsorship of the UN Voluntary Fund without which my participation in this meeting would be impossible.

I take the opportunity to briefly report on the situation of indigenous Jumma peoples of the CHT who are not yet acknowledged by the Government of Bangladesh as indigenous: 'There is no indigenous people in Bangladesh. There are some nomadic people from beyond and as such they are tribal people. Hence there is no necessity to celebrate the International Year 1993 of the World's Indigenous People in Bangladesh.' This contradicts the CHT Regulation 1900, the main legal instrument for the administration of the CHT, which is still in force and identifies the Jummas as indigenous. This is reinforced by other government regulations and administrative provisions including the Income Tax Act 1922, No. 4(6) kas-5/77/589 which begins 'Indigenous Hillmen residing in CHT.'

Jumma women are discriminated against on the basis of race and gender. They are targeted for being Jummas, indigenous to the CHT, and subjected to rape, sexual harassment and physical and mental torture due to the prevailing political situation in the area which is referred to by my fellow Jumma. In the absence of their male partners, due to arrest, detention, and death etc. Jumma women also have to carry the burden of feeding and nurturing the entire family including children and elders. Yet the food system is under stress due to a number of factors:

1. Scarcity of agricultural land in the hilly region of CHT is further aggravated by the construction of the Kaptai hydro-electric dam in 1959-63 which submerged 40% of the total cultivable plough land in the area. It also submerged 10% of the total land of the CHT evicting thousands of Jummas from their homes and lands;
2. Restriction imposed on the traditional jum cultivation in order to use the traditional Jumma land for state forestry activities for commercial purposes;
3. Influx of non-indigenous settlers brought in by the government under the policy of population transfer;
4. The relocation of the Jummas in the cluster villages under strict surveillance of the state authorities which has resulted in a virtual standstill in agriculture. In this process of relocation Jummas are dispossessed and uprooted from their homes and agricultural lands.

We also express our concern for the forced repatriation of the Jumma refugees from the camps in the Tripura State of India. Since 1986, over 56,000 Jummas were forced to leave their homeland and take shelter in the refugee camps in Tripura due to the systematic oppression by the Bangladesh Government. Based on a 'Memorandum of Understanding' by the Government of Bangladesh and India the first batch of 1841 Jumma refugees (i.e. 2.3% of the total refugees) have returned home in February 1994. The majority of these refugees could not resettle on their lands, as was promised, and it is reported that most of their homes and lands are still occupied by the Bengali migrants who settled in the CHT under the population transfer policy of the said government. I would like to add that restitution of their traditional lands was a precondition of the repatriation articulated in a thirteen point charter of demands of the refugees. I would also like to submit a report on the present state of the repatriated first batch refugees by Hill Watch Human Rights Forum of 1 June 1994 to the Working Group. I will attach it with my statement. Another demand, guarantees of security by demilitarization of the area has also not been met. Under such conditions the majority of the refugees

have refused to return home and have staged a hunger strike as of 6:00 to 18:00 hrs on 21 July 1994, the day of the second repatriation, including complaints against inadequate food supply in the camps. The refugee camps also do not have adequate basic facilities including health, sanitation and education.

In this context, Jummas, including the CHT Hill Women's Federation, desire a violence-free CHT. They look forward to leading a life where they have freedom of life, liberty and action. They urge the world community, indigenous and non-indigenous representatives to support the struggle of the Jumma peoples by demanding the following:

1. Immediate demilitarization of the CHT;
2. Removal of the Bengali Settlers from the CHT who are occupying the lands of the Jummas;
3. Repatriation of the refugees under international auspices, such as the UNHCR and the ICRC,
4. Recognition of the sustainability and ecologically viable traditional agricultural practices of the Jummas, including forest and water management;
5. Secure full and meaningful participation of the Jummas in devising their own development priorities.

Thank you for your kind attention.

(submitted by M/s Kabita Chakma on 27 July, 1994)