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BANGLADESH: RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE CHITTAGONG
HILL TRACTS AND AI CONCERNS

The present account of recent events is based entirely on reports already published in the media.

The present paper deals with recent events in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where there has been a political dispute between hill tribespeople and the central government of Bangladesh. This dispute has in part involved armed resistance by some people in the area to the central authorities. AI concerns relate to repeated allegations that military personnel of the government of Bangladesh in the course of these events have resorted to mass arrests without trial and political killings of unarmed people. AI has written to the government of Bangladesh requesting information about these allegations and urging a full and public inquiry.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts are a remote and inaccessible part of Bangladesh and border India and Burma, covering about 5,000 square miles. The flow of information from this area has been hampered both by the lack of transport and communications networks to and within the Hill Tracts, and by the Bangladesh government's sealing off of the area.

In recent years, however, there have been increasing signs of tension and outbreaks of violence. Recently, a number of reports have nevertheless been published and the main developments are summarized in this circular.

Under British colonial rule the Buddhist tribespeople in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), who are of Mongolian origin, were administered indirectly by the Governor of Bengal (Chittagong Hill Tract Regulation of 1900). Except for the Deputy Commissioner who was British, all other administrative staff including a separate police administration were locally recruited; certain tribal chiefs used to help in the administration, while non-tribal people were not allowed to settle in the district nor could they purchase land. Migration to the CHT was strictly forbidden under the 1900 Regulation, as tribal opposition to assimilation by a majority culture was well known.

In 1947 British India was divided into the independent countries of India and Pakistan.* The Hill Tracts became part of East Pakistan, now the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Already under Pakistani rule the tribes were reported to begin to complain about the increasing numbers of non-tribal settlers, who were encouraged to settle in the CHT by the government. In the early 1960s problems seem to have been intensified by the damming of the Karnaphuli river as part of the hydro-electric Kaptai project planned to generate 80,000 kilowatts of electricity. The resulting lake

devoured nearly 62,000, according to another source 80,000, acres of best rice-growing land in the CHT. Nearly 100,000 people lost their homes (Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER), Hong Kong, 2 May 1980). Those who stayed were driven to slash-and-burn cultivation. Others still live in refugee camps. Between 30,000 and 100,000 Chakmas (see below) are reported to have sought sanctuary in India (The Statesman Weekly, Delhi & Calcutta, 10 May 1980). Although some compensation was given by the government, no organized efforts were made to resettle the majority of the tribespeople who had lost their prime agricultural lands (according to FEER, Hong Kong, 2 May 1980).

In 1964 the government of Pakistan abolished the special status of the CHT under the 1900 Regulation. The tribal police force was disbanded, officials belonging to different tribes were transferred from the CHT district to other non-tribal districts and all branches of the district administration earlier run by the tribals themselves were brought under the control of the central Pakistan administration. The abolition of a special status was affirmed later under the Bangladesh Constitution which came into effect in 1972 (Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay, 6 September 1980).

From the foundation of the People's Republic of Bangladesh in 1971 until August 1975, when President Mujib Rahman was assassinated, the government was formed by the Awami League. All other parties were proscribed in 1974 by the government. (For a comprehensive report see Report of an AI Mission to Bangladesh, 4-12 April 1977, AI Index: ASA 13/03/78). In February 1972 a deputation led by the member of parliament representing the CHT, Manobendra Narayan Larma, met Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and discussed with him four demands: autonomy of the CHT with its own legislature; retention of the 1900 regulation in the Bangladesh Constitution; continuation of the tribals' chief offices; and Constitutional provisions restricting the amendment of the Regulation and imposition of a ban on the influx of the non-tribal people. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rejected the demands on the grounds that this would encourage ethnic feelings. It is reported that after this meeting a massive military action was started including the army, police and Air Force attacking villages in the tribal areas; several thousands of men, women and children were killed according to sources close to the tribespeople (The Statesman Weekly, Delhi & Calcutta, 10 May 1980; Ifor Report, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, The Netherlands, October 1980).

After the delegation returned from the meeting with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1972, some tribals increasingly turned to violent tactics and created the Shanti Bahini, the armed wing of the political party Jana Sanghati Samiti (JSS). Today it is reported to have 5,000 volunteers and is led by former MP Manobendra Narayan Larma. It was reconstituted in 1975 after hopes under the government of President Ahmed had been frustrated after he fell from power.

On 19 November 1975 another delegation of 67 hillmen met the President of Bangladesh, Justice A.S. Sayem, and renewed their demands. In 1976 Mr Ashok Dewan presented similar proposals to General Ziaur Rahman, then President of Bangladesh.

Today more than 13 tribal groups live in the CHT, the largest being the Chakma tribe, which accounts for 40 per cent or more than 200,000 of 550,000 tribespeople. The Shanti Bahini is mainly composed of Chakmas. Another guerrilla group, the Mukti Parishad, based on the Tangchainga tribespeople, is much smaller in size and is reportedly hostile to the Shanti Bahini. Other

tribes include the Marmas, Tripuras, Bohmong, Maung, Mizo and Reang. One other tribal organization is the government-supported Tribal Convention led by its secretary general Charu Bikash Chakma. Mr Bikash Chakma stated that the government forces, especially the army, were behaving with restraint despite rebel provocation. In an interview he also claimed that the Shanti Bahini had killed a number of people - most of them tribals - who opposed their activities. "They are the biggest killers, more than the army", he is cited in the interview (FEER, Hong Kong, 2 May 1980).

The tribespeople are mainly Buddhists, whereas Bangladesh is a predominantly Islamic country. The Shanti Bahini are not demanding secession; previously they favoured a degree of autonomy similar to that enjoyed by Indian states under a federal government, and today they demand the right to self-determination within Bangladesh. The tribespeople want the reintroduction of the British enactment of 1900 and for this measure to be accompanied by 1) the restitution of all lands taken by immigrants since 1970, 2) preservation of their indigenous culture, 3) free movement and commerce within the district and 4) freedom from official harassment (The Statesman Weekly, Delhi & Calcutta, 10 May 1980).

Since 1977, according to the tribal population, troops Hill Tracts to "massacre" the tribals living in Matirana, Guimar, Manikcharri and Lakshmichhari. Such allegations have continued up to the present time. Information gathering became even more difficult when the government sealed off the area and prohibited foreigners from visiting the CHT. Conflict has been increasing since late 1978 and casualties have been suffered on both sides.

The picture has been complicated by a number of additional factors. Firstly, some reports allege that after 1975 the Indian government under Mrs. Indira Gandhi supported armed resistance as it was hostile to the (then) new government in Dacca. Rebels were alleged to be operating from India's Tripura state. No similar allegations have been made regarding the present Indian government under Mrs Gandhi. Secondly, the Shanti Bahini are alleged to have close contacts with neighbouring rebel groups in Burma; they are alleged not to be on good terms with the Mizo National Front operating in the neighbouring state of Mizoram. Observers claim that currently the Shanti Bahini receive no foreign backing. The Bangladesh government has reportedly encouraged non-tribal settlement and over 25,000 Bengali settlers are said to have moved into new settlements in the past few years (FEER, Hong Kong, 23 May 1980).

According to various reports between 20,000 and 100,000 armed forces have been deployed in the area and the number of police stations and strategic roads for military communications have been increased. AI has received several reports of an ambush taking place in March 1980 between Bangladesh armed forces and the Shanti Bahini leading to the deaths of 22 soldiers, including Major Mohsin Raja. On the morning of 25 March 1980 a local officer of the Bangladesh defence armed forces called a meeting at Kalampati Union within Betbunia Thana (Thana police station). The meeting was called to discuss problems of the locality and the restoration of Buddhist temples. Reportedly, when people had assembled on the Bazaar ground, soldiers appeared entering the Bazaar area and shot many tribesmen. According to different reports between 28 (government sources) and 300 people (most sources) were killed, among them Kumud Bikash Talukdar, Shashi Dev Chakma, Aswini Kumar Karbari, Aswini Kumar Chakma, Kalimohan Karbari, Udayan Kumar Chakma, Diñanath Chakm, Bijoy Kumar Chakma, La Theai Marua, Kalanjoy Chakma, Krishna Hari Chakma; many others were reported to have been wounded. Reportedly more than 30 women were taken to army camps and raped. In addition, it is

reported that after this thousands of non-tribal settlers, under the protection of the Bangladesh army, entered the CHT burning down many houses of the tribal people and hacked many unarmed inhabitants, men, women and children to death. A great number of Buddhist temples were reportedly destroyed, including Betchari, Headmanpara, Kashkhalimukhpara, Tanghapara, Rangeypara, Puapara, Chote Dalu, Bara Dalu and Tripuradighi. It appears possible that this might have been a reaction to the killing of 22 soldiers mentioned earlier. Reports about this mass killing appeared in the FEER, Hong Kong, 2 May 1980, The Observer, London, 27 April 1980, the written statement of MP Upendra Lal Chakma (Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal) in his press conference on 1 April 1980, Ittefaq, Dacca, 2 April 1980, The New Nation, Dacca, 13 April 1980, and in a press conference in Dacca on 25 April 1980 by the three members of parliament Shahjahan Sirajb, Rashed Khan Menon and Upendra Lal Chakma.

There was very little reaction to these reports in Dacca either in the press or by Ministers who reportedly refused to discuss the killings (The Observer, London, 27 April 1980).

On 1 April 1980, however, the member of parliament for the CHT, Mr Upendra Lal Chakma, held a press conference in which he accused the Bangladesh armed forces of killing more than 300 persons, and wounding many more. He stated:

"Side by side thousands of Bangali refugees in collaboration with the Army personnel moved in various directions and jumped upon the Tribal villages committing plunder, arson and killing irrespective of child and old man and woman. The villages of Mitingachari, Baskhali, Balimara, Betchari, Kachukhali, Rangipara, Kawkhalipara, Maigyamachari, Powapara, Chotadalu, Baradalu and Tripuradighi were all burnt to ashes and number of people were killed and wounded....

The Buddhist priest of Kachukhali Headmanpara received a severe cut on the head with a sharp weapon and was bodily tortured as a result of which his right hand were broken. He is now under medical care at Rangmati Sadar Hospital. Besides these atrocities the Buddhist nun of Kachukhali Mukhpara Temple was killed and the Buddhist priest of Betchari Temple was also bodily tortured and his worn chibar was set to fire."

(Quotations from the written statement of 1 April 1980 of Mr Upendra Lal Chakma after his trip to the CHT interviewing inhabitants.)

According to another report, methods of torture used by the Bangladesh armed forces over the last years included: "Severe beatings, electric shocks, uninterrupted interrogation, withholding of food and water, inadequate medical care (if any), standing in the sun until collapse, living and sleeping in open trenches exposed to the elements, and half drownings". (IFOR Report, International Fellowship of Reconciliation, October 1980.)

On 25 April 1980 three members of parliament belonging to opposition parties, Mr Rashed Khan Menon (Democratic Movement), Mr Shahjahan Siraj and Mr Upendra Lal Chakma (both Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal) gave a press conference in Dacca after returning from a tour of the CHT where they met about 500 tribals. They reported

in detail the incident. This report states, among other things, that the government plan includes forcible distortion and destruction of the religion, culture, languages and traditions of the tribal people. The members of parliament demanded;

"Stoppage of military operation for the establishment of civil Administration in the true sense,

To start a dialogue with the tribal leaders. At the same time, regarding the heinous tragedy at Kalampati Union of Kaukhali, we have the following suggestions:

- a) Judicial enquiry for the incident of Kalampati Union Man-slaughtering of 25th March and punishment for the murderers.
- b) Rehabilitation of the distressed with due security.
- c) Re-establishment of the damaged Buddhist religious institutions with compensation and apology for hurting religious sentiments.
- d) Stoppage of infiltration from different countries.
- e) Immediate withdrawal of the settlers from Chittagong Hill Tracts."

As far as AI is aware only one demand was met by the government, i.e. to start a dialogue: a five-member parliamentary committee headed by the Home Minister Lt-Col (Retd) Mustafizur Rahman was established to investigate causes leading to the current crisis in the hills and recommended Major-General Manzoor of the 24th Infantry Division deployed in the CHT was ordered to start a dialogue with the rebel leaders to restore peace. Mr Upendra Lal Chakma was not appointed a member of the parliamentary committee. However, he served as a go-between who enabled an exchange of four letters between the two sides from May 1979 to May 1980. As a goodwill gesture, the government released in February 1980 two rebel leaders, Jotindra Bodhiprya Larma (better known as Shantoo Larma) and Sabai Larma (better known as Chabai Marma), who were arrested in 1976. The Bangladesh Home Minister, Lt-Col (Retd) Mustafizur Rahman also announced the release of at least 100 other tribal prisoners during March and April 1980 (FEER, Hong Kong, 2 May 1980).

Charu Bikash Chakma, secretary general of the government-supported Tribal Convention has defended the Bangladesh armed forces against allegations of killings and torture stating that they were behaving with restraint despite rebel provocation. He also gave details to the FEER (2 May 1980) of a Tribal Convention plan, according to which the Hill Tracts should be divided along a 2:1 ratio, with two acres of land reserved for the tribals for every one opened to outsiders. The rights of the tribals should reportedly be established by constitutional and peaceful means. A broader participation of the tribal people in the local administration, exclusive land rights for tribals and some autonomy should be granted. This plan has been submitted to President Ziaur Rahman. The government has on several occasions expressed its willingness to develop the Hill Tracts economically as quickly as possible. It has also refused to bar Bengali settlers from the Hill Tracts on the grounds that every Bangladeshi should be free to settle or buy land where he or she wants to settle.

The FEER adds however that the Home Minister had told the FEER

"that the government had stopped all such settlement. Instead, it is trying to resettle uprooted tribals in government-sponsored cooperative farming estates.

The cooperative farming projects are assisted by the Asian Development Bank. According to the home minister, successful implementation would achieve two purposes: first, it would resettle thousands of tribals who are now living a nomadic life, and secondly it would help the government establish the rule of law in the hilltracts."

However, according to sources close to the tribespeople resettlements are forced by the government to curtail support for the Shanti Bahini by concentrating the population in certain areas, thereby depriving the rebels of food and shelter, and that they are similar to concentration camps.

Until now, no settlement between the government and the rebels has been reached and, although it is difficult to make statements about future developments, it seems not unlikely that the conflict is further sharpening and military confrontation could further emerge.

AI CONCERNS

AI wrote on 4 November 1980 to President Ziaur Rahman expressing concern over the reported killings of 38 prisoners in Southern Khulna District Jail, (Reuter, 22, 24 and 28 October 1980), the hanging of five people in Dacca Central Jail on 4 June 1980 and the alleged massacre on 25 March 1980. In its communication AI requested to receive a list of people killed and a list of people who are still in detention in connection with the incident. Furthermore, AI asked for an inquiry into the incident in view of the serious nature of the allegations received. It asked to be informed about the outcome of any investigation that might already have been undertaken and wished to know whether the findings have been published. It also asked whether any disciplinary and/or criminal procedural steps have been taken against members of the armed forces involved in the incident.

AI also asked the government about the fate of 28 people arrested by military forces both last year and last year.

AI will continue to closely follow developments in the CHT as well as other developments in the People's Republic of Bangladesh.