

NICHIREN WALKERS PLAN NEW PROTEST MARCH

Nichihonzan Myohoji monks will take to the highways again next year in an effort to focus U.S. and world attention on the U.N. second Special Session on Disarmament (SSD II). The Nichiren monks, veterans of many cross-country protest walks, plan to set out in teams from Montreal, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. The four marches will converge on New York City by mid-May, when SSD II begins.

Among previous long-distance walks the monks have participated in are the 1976 Continental Walk for Disarmament and Social Justice and the Long Walk, centered on Native American issues. Native Americans will be deeply involved in planning and carrying out the simultaneous treks of next year, too.

THE BUDDHIST PEACE FELLOWSHIP
P. O. BOX ~~1211~~ 4650
BERKELEY, CA 94704

SPECIAL NEWS FEATURE



August 1982

Michael Roche: REPORT FROM BANGLADESH

This first of two articles stems from Mike's recent trip, jointly sponsored by BPF and the International FOR, to investigate the situation of the tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Entering Bangladesh, I was struck immediately by its ambience of social fragmentation and ultimately of fear. It is a fear born of Bangladesh's bloody history since independence, as consecutive governments have turned to violence and terror in efforts to obtain and consolidate power. The nation's Buddhists, as a small minority, are particularly divided by this fear, and nowhere I went did I feel I could comfortably assume where a new acquaintance's feelings and loyalties lay, especially in regard to the question of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Arriving in Dacca in mid-April, I learned that the Sangha itself has two branches, the more prominent of which has sought accomodation with the government of Bangladesh in the hopes of preserving a viable Buddhist community in a sea of Islam. In this sentiment, leading clergyman Vissudhananda Mahathero has toured the world as a representative of Buddhism in Bangladesh yet, in all his meetings with world leaders, has neglected to speak out for the Hill Tracts people.

This omission is not surprising, given the fact that the tribespeople are largely perceived, even by their fellow Buddhists in Bangladesh, as a people apart, ethnic separatists who value their own

cultural identity more than the general nationalist identity fostered by the government of Bangladesh. Members of Ven. Vissudhananda's circle tend to identify themselves with Bangladesh's nascent bourgeoisie and thus with the forces of modernization and centralization represented by the modern state.

In the course of my 23-day stay, Bengalis and even tribal Buddhists pointed to Buddhist temples in Dacca, Chittagong City and Rangamati (Hill Tracts) proudly and optimistically, as evidence of fruitful cooperation between Buddhists and the State. What these guides did not acknowledge were repression of Buddhist institutions in the Hill Tracts and beatings of Buddhist clergy both within and outside the Hill Tracts. Many such beatings

occurred during the three weeks of my visit.

To Buddhists of this inclination, the plight of the tribals is the predictable fate of those who stubbornly cling to old ways in the face of modernization and nationalism, not the bitter suffering of Sangha kin. Clearly the dividing line for loyalties in the current situation is the acceptance of secular, primarily middle class values rather than the practice of Buddhism.

In fairness, I must add that, the aura of fear being what it is in Bangladesh, many acculturating Buddhists may have seen me as a spy or at least an idealistic eccentric. In any case, however, the anxiety elicited merely by mention of the Hill Tracts is a useful gauge of the government's repressive policy there.

Midway through my trip I succeeded in slipping--illegally--into the Hill Tracts itself and living for three days in a tribal village. It was in this village that the masks imposed by suspicion and terror were lowered for the first time in frank discussions and I got a clear picture of the situation in the Hill Tracts. These discussions, tempered by newspaper research and interviews elsewhere, provide the substance of what I relate in this article.

The fear in that village (whose name I advisedly omit) is qualitatively different from that I encountered in other parts of Bangladesh. Though I was in a relatively "safe" area of the Hill Tracts, only a few miles in, and though the tribespeople displayed an openness and warmth that I have experienced nowhere else in Asia, the possibility of a sudden Army raid weighed heavily and constantly on everyone.

Villagers refused to accept even the smallest gift of Western manufacture for fear that one of the Army's many searches would ferret it out as evidence of contact with the outside world --a "crime" under the extralegal rules now applied in the Hill Tracts. Indeed, such a search occurred in the middle of the night just two days after I left.

But the fear has other causes, too. Women are afraid to leave the village alone because rapes have been frequent, most perpetrated by the military. Rationing is kept extremely strict as an instrument of control--so strict that tribals must go to government centers

almost daily for such necessities as rice, salt and kerosene. A special permit is required to carry medicine.

Able-bodied young men face particular harassment as suspected revolutionaries. Constantly interrogated and searched by the military, sometimes dragged off without cause or legal proceedings, young men tend to drop from sight. In the village I visited, most of them had fled to the jungle to live with the Shanti Bahini, the tribal guerilla force that has opposed government forces in the Hill Tracts since 1974. It is the presence of the Shanti Bahini that the administration cites as the rationale for its "counterinsurgency" programs.

From the villagers I learned also the exact mechanism the government employs in its land grabs in the Hill Tracts. The tribal people have traditionally drawn a distinction between land reserved for private use (relatively small plots) and that held in common by the tribe as a whole. The government has abolished the latter category, ingenuously reasoning that all land not held in strictly private hands is public property.

Thus, state logic continues, the government may distribute the land to whom it sees fit. Beneficiaries might justifiably be the thousands of tribespeople left landless by the government's construction of the Kaptai Dam, the majority of whom have never been compensated for their losses. Instead, the land is distributed in five-acre parcels to landless Bengali Muslims who are recruited from other districts and favored as members of the nation's ethnic and religious majority.

Needless to say, such distribution of common lands to an alien group makes social friction inevitable in a village structure. Rubbing salt in a wound, the government is also reported to provide a Bengali settler with a cash subsidy of 3,500 Taka (a hefty sum by local standards) and a month's supply of rations. An official of the U.S. Embassy in Dacca repeated these figures, though he would neither confirm nor deny their validity.

Settler immigration has been stepped up in the last year according to all sources and, with it, military conflict

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The persecution of the tribal Buddhists of the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh has intensified. The hoped-for abating of hostile actions after the assassination of President Ziaur Rahman last May not only failed to materialize, but the situation has escalated as the military has sought to reassert its strength.

More violence has ensued and the influx of Bengali (Muslim) settlers into the Hill Tracts has increased. The veneer of orderly "emigration" has, to a large extent, been dropped and Muslim settlers are being armed as part of "Peace Committees" in Hill Tract villages. Much of the Bengali settlement has occurred during this year's rainy season (roughly June through August). At this time, the Bangladesh Rifles and Army of Bangladesh began aggres-

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sive exercises in the Hill Tract villages, a thinly veiled invasion that took place during the cultivation of rice crops, disrupting the village economies. The brutalities of this invasion forced approximately 30,000 people to flee from their villages, nearly 20,000 of them to adjoining Tripura State in India, a very poor district and an area of constant confrontation between India and Bangladesh. Indeed, there is speculation that this action was initiated by a pro-Pakistani faction of the army to sour relations with India.

PEACEMAKING

& THE PRECEPTS

For thousands of years the Precepts have inspired and challenged students of the Buddha Way. The Insight Section beginning on Page 8 investigates what they say to peacemakers in the rich and violent milieu of 20th Century America.



The refugees became pawns in a political struggle between India and Bangladesh and early this year, some 18,000 of them were "repatriated" to Bangladesh. These tribal people were met at the border by hostile Bangladesh officials and were given the equivalent of \$8 and were left to their fates. Return to their native villages is, of course, impossible for these refugees because their homes and possessions have been appropriated by Bengali "settlers", so they join the tens of thousands of homeless now in the Hill Tracts. Harassed by government authorities, unable to flee the country and without any means of support, they live in limbo in a land where the quality of tribal life approaches the infernal.

I hope I have not numbed you with this tale of despair. In an age where the possibility of nuclear conflagration is ever present, so is the possibility of psychic numbing, and I realize that situations such as this exist in many areas of the world. As Buddhists, we endeavor to practice compassion, and as Western Buddhists, we are striving to practice this compassion independent of sectarian and nationalist alignments that seem to

be hampering some Buddhists from traditional cultures in coming to the aid of these people. We are redressing a karmic imbalance when, as a nation that exported so much suffering to Southeast Asia during the past two decades, we make efforts to bring peace to part of that area. The BPF is one of a handful of organizations (including Amnesty International, International Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Anti-Slavery Society) standing between the tribal peoples and annihilation. We are the only Buddhist group I am aware of that is approaching this situation from a political perspective, although some Asian Buddhist groups are providing important economic relief.

What then constitutes a Buddhist (enlightened) perspective in this political situation? I think the answer is to be found in the traditional concept of enlightened action, that is, action that combines the two elements of wisdom and compassion. I will elaborate on this in practical terms with the understanding that it is a tentative analysis and is subject to any and all suggestions from BPF members.

Under the rubric of wisdom we must educate members of our govern-

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ment and the public in general about this situation. Since there are so many peace issues facing us at this time, notably nuclear disarmament, it would be advisable if only one or two members of the BPF in a given area act as part-time resource persons on this problem for the group. Perhaps these persons could combine this role with information dissemination about similar situations, such as the present persecution of Buddhists in Vietnam, or the Tibet situation. The BPF presently has materials on these situations which it will provide to such a resource person. In delegating information-gathering in such a way, I hope we can maintain a high degree of flexibility and prevent the kind of burn out that constant exposure to a plethora of disturbing issues can cause.

Equipped with this information, we should begin informing certain individuals in the government about the Chittagong Hill Tracts situation. Since the conditions there are not well known, the initial contact should be accompanied by BPF-supplied information from the world press, Amnesty International and IPOR. This initial contact should be made by the community resource person. Suggested persons to be contacted are President Reagan, Secretary of State Shultz, your U.S. senator and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. Senators of particular interest to contact are: Sen. Charles Percy (R-Ill.), Sen. Patrick Moynihan (R-N.Y.), Sen. Alan Cranston (D-Calif.), and (probable senator) Jerry Brown of California.

These inquiries should probably emphasize the fact that U.S. aid should be withheld from Bangladesh until the government there addresses this human rights question. The results of these contacts should be made known to the community and pursued. It is quite probable that the BPF will initiate a letter-writing campaign in the near future, and if

the channels have been opened by BPF resource people throughout the country, I think we can expect a fair degree of success.

From the perspective of compassion, we are not only seeking to provide political relief for these people through intelligent political action, but would like to provide some material relief for their ever-worsening circumstances. The BPF has already sent \$175 to Hill Tract Buddhist orphanages, made possible by a \$300 grant to BPF by the Buddhist Churches of America through the offices of Buddhist activist Rev. Ryo Imamura. It is likely that we will solicit contributions in the future to continue such relief.

In closing, I would like to say that I know you are all daily bombarded by the news of many urgent world issues and I thank you for taking the time to keep up to date on this one. I hope that at least one person from every Buddhist community with a BPF membership will be able to make the issue of persecuted Buddhists part of their practice of compassion. I would also like to emphasize to these people that it has never been the policy of the BPF staff to dictate policies in any area, and any suggestions that are workable in this area will be adopted.

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P.O. Box 4650
Berkeley, CA 94704