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# The Secret War in Bangladesh

by Ulrich Henes

Bangladesh. Its name seems synonymous with hunger, floods, war, and other man-made and natural disasters. The disaster-prone people of Bangladesh have often received world sympathy and help. However, as is so often the case with a people who themselves have suffered greatly, that experience does not prevent them causing minorities in their country to suffer the same sorts of terrible experiences they have had.

On March 25, 1971, the army of West Pakistan attacked East Pakistan, beginning weeks of systematic rape, murder, and torture of the Bengali people. Eventually worldwide public protests and the intervention of the Indian army forced the West Pakistan military to withdraw, and Bangladesh was established as an independent state.

Nine years later, on March 25, 1980, the Bangladesh Army descended on a gathering of tribal people at Kalampati Union in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh and, without warning, opened fire on the crowd. Another group of soldiers rushed to the nearby Pawapara Buddhist temple and began killing tribal people who were there working on reconstruction. When the killing ended, some 300 tribal people lay dead.

Both the meeting of tribal people and the construction work at the temple had been organized at the request of the same army unit that committed the massacre. Leaders of the tribal community had been invited to come and discuss law and order problems with the district administrator.

In the days which followed, bands of Bengalis, aided by Bangladesh soldiers, attacked several villages in the surrounding area, burning houses, looting, and raping, forcing the inhabitants of the

villages to flee further into the wooded hills. Buddhist temples were looted and either partially or completely destroyed. Several priests suffered torture at the hands of army personnel. The Kalampati Massacre and the follow-up raids, in which more tribal people were killed, frightened people so badly that, despite government assurances of safety, many of the survivors have not returned to their villages to this day.

In order to understand this incident, one has to look back over the last 35 years. Situated in southeast Bangladesh, bordering on India and Burma, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, (about the size of Northern Ireland) comprise the largest district of Bangladesh. The area is, even by Bangladesh's desperately low standards, underdeveloped. There are some 500,000 tribal people (some estimate one million) of 13 different tribes living there. Almost all are Buddhists, with a distinctive Burmese, Thai, or Tibetan appearance and a non-Bengali culture, social customs, and habits.

Because of their different cultures and religion, the tribal people have suffered hostilities from neighboring peoples for centuries. When the British arrived on the Indian subcontinent, they recognized the desperate situation of the tribal people and in 1900 created an autonomous area, called the Chittagong Hill Tracts, to be governed directly by the Governor of Bengal and administered under the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation. This required that all government functionaries apart from a few high officials be locally recruited. Non-tribal people were not allowed to settle in the district permanently, nor could they purchase land from tribal people. They could be expelled from the district if they were thought undesirable or found doing anything detrimental to the Hill Tribes' interests.

When India and Pakistan gained independence from Great Britain in 1947, the situation gradually changed. Although the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation was left standing, its terms were ignored by the new Pakistani government. Muslim settlers were brought in, the tribal police force was disbanded, and its officers, together with other civilian tribal officials, were transferred to other districts of what was then East Pakistan. In the 24 years of Pakistani rule that followed, the Hill Tribes lost practically all their political and economical rights.

One heavy blow came in the 1960s, when construction of a hydro-electric dam on the river Karnafuli at Kaptai submerged an area of 350 square miles and displaced more than 100,000 tribal people from their ancestral homes, pushing them into the hills. Many died during the removal, and many more fled to East India. No tribal people were employed for the construction of the dam, and, although the project supplies all of Bangladesh with electricity, only one percent of the Chittagong Hill Tracts tribal people benefit from it.



Carrying their belongings, tribal people flee to safety in India.

In 1961 another wave of refugees was created when serious rioting of immigrants against the tribal people forced some 60,000 to flee over the border to East India. The riots stopped only after the Indian and other governments lodged protests with Pakistan.

During the 1971 war for the independence of Bangladesh, the tribal people sided with Bangladesh forces in the hope that under independence their conditions would improve. However, already during the war many Muslims from neighboring districts settled on tribal lands with the help of the Pakistani army, and following independence they refused to leave. Yet, the greatest tragedy for the tribal people began only after independence.

Under Sheikh Mujib's leadership, the new Bangladesh government started a systematic campaign, using every means at their disposal, to clear the Chittagong Hill Tracts of tribal people and resettle the land with Bengalis from severely overpopulated districts of the rest of the country.

Soon after independence, the army carried out a "search for Rajakars and Albadars" (supporters of Pakistan), in which some 400 tribal people were killed, hundreds of houses were looted and burned, and a large number of women were raped and tortured. Badly shaken by these attacks, the tribal people organized themselves and, under the leadership of a member of Parliament, sent a delegation to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman asking for autonomy and compliance to the still unnullified Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900. These demands were taken as a secessionist movement, and a massive military operation was carried out in the district. Thousands of men, women, and children were murdered and hundreds of villages were burned. To escape torture and persecution, hundreds of tribal people fled to the forests. Some of them began a resistance movement calling itself *Shanti Bahini*, or "peace force". With its present forces estimated at anywhere from 5,000 to 25,000, the Shanti Bahini have often used military actions, increasing in number and intensity, to oppose the military actions by the Bangladesh government.

During Sheikh Mujib's regime, a large number of non-tribal people were allowed to settle permanently in the Hill Tracts. Tribal people were expelled from their homes, and their agricultural lands were distributed among settlers from other parts of Bangladesh. Government policy was to outnumber the tribal people with Bengali settlers, force them to lose their identity in the larger Bengali society, and so to eliminate the possibility of any future popular movement by tribal people in the district.

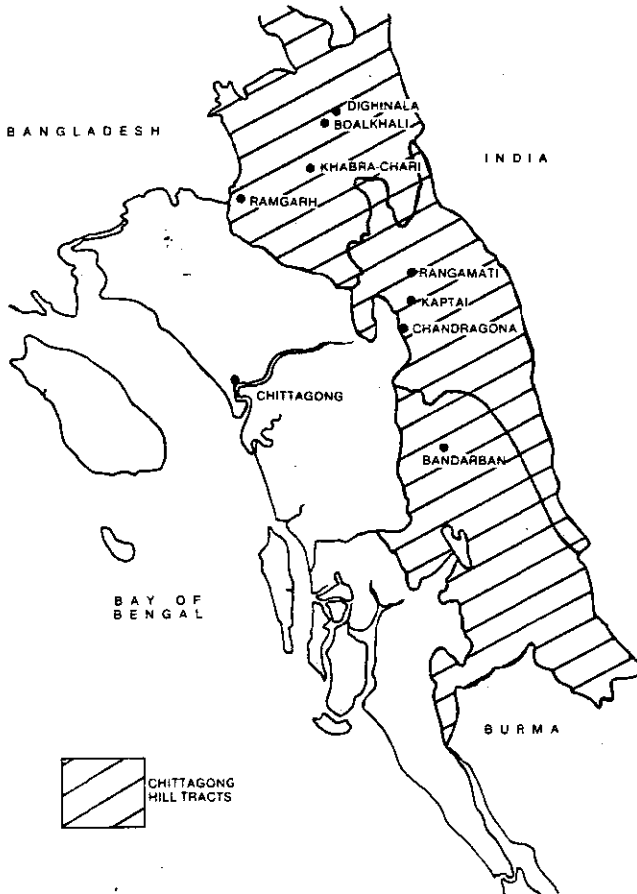
In pursuit of this policy, they set up the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board in 1975. Despite the name, this body has little to do with developing the area for the Hill Tribes people who live there. For instance, Australia and the Federal Republic of Germany are giving the Board financial aid for the construction of 59 miles of all-weather road running north into the Hill Tracts. Tribal people fear it will be used to facilitate military access to the area and open up the interior to Bengali immigration. Sweden, in response to their fears, is winding down a program to develop the area's timber resources, after failing to win sufficient reassurances from the government that the tribal people will be the ones to benefit.

Perhaps the desperation of the tribal people is best illustrated in their appeal for a halt to regional aid. They would welcome development aid if it were applied in their interest and if it brought an end to the military's reign of terror. So far it has done neither, and military repression has not only continued but intensified under the present military government of President Ziaur Rahman.

Due to increased resistance in the Hill Tracts, and in order to safeguard their resettlement program, the Bangladesh government has greatly increased the number of army and police personnel in the district. With one armed representative of the Bangladesh government for every eight Hill Tribe people, the Hill Tracts now resemble a vast military camp. The number of police stations has been increased from 12 to 28, and the army has been stationed far into the interior of the district. There, for want of suitable barracks, they have occupied many school buildings and government offices. The Maischari Buddhist Temple, some 40 miles north of Rangamati, was occupied for eight months by police, on the grounds that the government forces had no place to live. A petition about the matter to the Deputy Commissioner and the Superintendent of Police had no effect.

Uncontrolled military operations have resulted in allegations of many flagrant human rights violations over the last several years, including massive imprisonment without trial. At the moment it is estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 tribal people are being held without charges or trial. Many of the prisoners are said to have been transferred outside the Hill Tracts, without their families being notified. No legal

recourse is available to either prisoners or their families. Prisoners have reported the repeated and consistent use of inhuman tactics to obtain information or to force confessions. Methods reportedly used include: 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.



Forced resettlement camps have been started during the last three years in various parts of the Hill Tracts. Usually all the inhabitants of a "union" (administrative unit comprising 10-12 square miles) are forced to move to a government "model village", in fact a concentration camp. The stated aim of this resettlement has been to clear out vast areas of the Hill Tracts and thus remove food and other sources of support to the resistance movement. Intimidation, physical abuse, and burning of whole villages have been employed to force resettlement, and tribal people in different parts of the Hill Tracts are fleeing their centuries-old villages to avoid being interned in forced resettlement camps.

The army has opened check points on roads and waterways and does not allow anybody to carry such essential commodities as salt, kerosene, and medicine beyond the district capital, Rangamati. Even medicine on prescription is seized from any tribal person found carrying it. The amount of food one can purchase at the market is severely limited. Since there are army or police

units at every market place and numerous check points along the roads, a serious food shortage is affecting many parts of the Hill Tracts.

Especially painful to the tribal people is the persecution they suffer for their religious beliefs. It is not unusual for tribal people to be pressured to convert to Islam; a number of forcible conversions have reportedly taken place. Looting and burning down of Buddhist temples and torturing and killing of Buddhist priests have already been mentioned. The military also effectively prevents many people from practicing their religion. Chittaran, some 20 miles south of Rangamati, is the holiest of all places for Buddhists of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and Buddhists from every corner of the district have traditionally gone there on pilgrimage. Now the army has established a check point on the way to the Buddhist temple. People going there are asked for their identity cards (special cards only for tribals) and thoroughly searched. Harassment has increased to the point that few people dare go to the temple.

So far, it does not seem that the Bangladesh authorities have been greatly influenced by the occasional international protests against their treatment of the Hill Tribes people. In August 1979, the government issued a secret circular advising the District Commissioners of all other districts of Bangladesh to prepare lists of landless people under their jurisdiction. Now these landless people from all over Bangladesh are being taken in large numbers to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in government-hired buses, trucks, and trains, and there settled on the tribal people's lands. The new settlers are supplied with free wheat, a grant for building a house, and cattle for plowing. In addition, large amounts of wheat received by the government for Food for Work projects are being distributed among the new-comers.

Increasingly, there have been clashes and riots between the dispossessed tribal people and the settlers occupying their land. The army has responded with additional camps near the new settlers, recruiting many as *Ansars* (Islamic guards) trained in the use of weapons.

The most recent serious action against the tribal people was the massacre at Kalampati, March 25. Although not the first incident of its kind, this mass killing prompted the Bangladesh press for the first time to report on government repression in the Hill Tracts. Three members of the Bangladesh parliament, including the representative from the Hill Tracts, went to the area on a fact-finding mission three weeks after the massacre. They found a mass grave and other evidence of rioting against the tribal people. Their findings were made public in a press conference in Dacca on April 25, 1980:

*The inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts compared the incident of Kalampati Union to the genocide of '71. We think there is no exaggera-*

*tion in the comparison. In fact, what we have seen in the area reminds us of the nightmare of 1971. It is obvious to us that the incident of Kalampati is not an isolated event. It was perpetrated systematically and with definite plan.... [In] the name of providing food and shelter, poor, helpless and landless people from the different districts are being used against the oppressed and innocent people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This is not only an ignoble and inhuman plan, but also a conspiracy directed against the poor people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other districts of Bangladesh.... After visiting the area, we came to the firm conclusion that if the prevailing problems of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are not solved immediately it will jeopardise the interests of the whole of Bangladesh.*

The members of Parliament went on to appeal to the government to recognize the nationalities of the Chittagong Hill tribes and grant them regional autonomy within the framework of the constitution. Specifically they suggest that the military control of the area be replaced by a civilian administration and that the government begin a dialogue with tribal leaders. They also call for a judicial enquiry into the incident of Kalampati and punishment of those responsible for the murders, lifting of restrictions on the movement of market goods, reestablishment of damaged Buddhist religious institutions, and an end to resettlement in the Hill Tracts of people from other districts.



Burned house in the village of Pujgang.

## Ending the Silence...

This press conference might mark the beginning of a new phase in the struggle of the Hill Tribes people for autonomy and self-determination. The whole of the Hill Tracts is a sealed off area which can be entered only with a special government permit. Only in the last three years have the tribal people succeeded in spreading information about their situation beyond the borders of Bangladesh. In 1979, a member of the Chakma tribe studying in England made public an appeal to save the

tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In January 1980, the *Jana Sanghati Samiti* (Chittagong Hill Tracts People's League) distributed a carefully-documented information packet to the various foreign embassies in Dacca, calling for an end to the genocide.

In Spring 1980, a representative of the Hill Tracts, at considerable personal risk, came to Holland on IFOR's invitation. This person's visit gave us a chance to hear first-hand about the situation in the Hill Tracts. We were told of the Hill Tribes' interest in using nonviolent means to defend themselves, and we promised to look for ways to assist them in that regard. IFOR is currently considering a project to strengthen and support non-violent resistance in the Hill Tracts, and funds are being sought to carry it out. We were also able to arrange for this person, with the help of IFOR members in Europe, North America, and the Far East, to meet with various governments, government agencies, reporters, and humanitarian organizations.

The people of the Hill Tracts ask for the release of all tribal people held without charges or trial, cessation of military operations in the Hill Tracts by the Bangladesh government, and an end to the violence against the Hill Tribes. Governments and donor agencies supporting projects in Bangladesh are requested to stop aid until the Bangladesh government ends the atrocities and restores the tribal people's rights, as defined by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900. Especially concerned for the plight of tribal refugees forced to flee into India and Burma, where they still encounter Bengali hostility, they ask the United Nations to give attention to this problem.

Until IFOR can offer more concrete help in the form of the above-mentioned project, we hope to help, with the support of IFOR branches, by publicizing the situation. Bangladesh is a country heavily dependent on foreign aid. If that aid was made conditional, the effect could be considerable.

If you will help, please begin by finding out if your government or national development aid agencies have projects in Bangladesh. If so, make sure they know about the situation in the Hill Tracts and encourage them to bring pressure to bear on the Bangladesh government. It is also important that newspapers and other media be alerted to what is happening in the Hill Tracts. (More detailed background documentation is available from IFOR.) When this news is more widely reported and there is more awareness among people in the rest of the world, there will be more concern to help. Donations for IFOR's work in support of the tribal people can be sent to IFOR, marked "Bangladesh". Finally, courteously worded letters in support of the demands of the Hill Tribes people can be sent to: *President Ziaur Rahman, President's Secretariat, Bongo Bhaban, Dacca, Bangladesh.* ●

SECRET

Govt. of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh,  
Office of the Deputy Commissioner, CHTs.

Memo No. 1025 (9) C

Dt. Rangamati, 15th Sept./80

From :Mr. Ali Haider Khan,  
Deputy Commissioner,  
Chittagong Hill Tracts.

To :Mr. ....

Sub: Settlement of landless non-tribal families in CHTs.-2nd Phase

With reference to our discussion in Dacca on 21-8-80 and reference to Commissioner, Chittagong Division's letter No. 66(9)/C dt. 4-9-80 on the above noted subject, I furnish below a guideline regarding the programme of settlement of landless non-tribal families from other districts in CHTs:-

- 1) Selection of families should be completed by 15th Oct. 80
- 2) The Chairman of the Union Parishads concerned will issue identity cards to the selected families in the forma enclosed at Annexene (A)
- 3) Names of families groupwise should be sent to us by 22nd October/80. On receipt of these lists we shall decide as to where they will be rehabilitated and shall indicate to you on which dates the groups should report to the reception centre at the Haji camp(pilgrimage camp), Chittagong.
- 4) At the reception centre an officer will take care of the settlers and will make arrangements for their journies to the rehabilitation blocks. The settlers will however, arrange their own food.
- 5) At the reception centre settlers will be given taka 200/- per family and on their arrival at their rehabilitation blocks they will be paid another instalment of taka 500/-. After that, each family will be given further grants (C) taka - 200/- per month for five more months. In addition for 6 months

the settlers will be given 12 seers of wheats per family per week under Food For Work Programme for construction of their own houses, reclaiming their lands, making village roads for them and for digging tanks in their own paras (areas). For another six months there will be provision for wheat under strict Food For Work Programme.

6) In rehabilitation blocks each family will be settled with Khas land without salami at the following rate:-

- 1) 5 acres hilly land
- 2) 4 acres mixed land
- 3) 2.5 acres paddy land

I enclose here with an annexure 'B' an instruction for the Chairman of the Union Parishad where from the families will be sected.

Sd/ Ali Haider Khan

D.C.

Chittagong Hill Tracts