

# BPF Seeks End to Genocide in Bangladesh

by Michael Roche

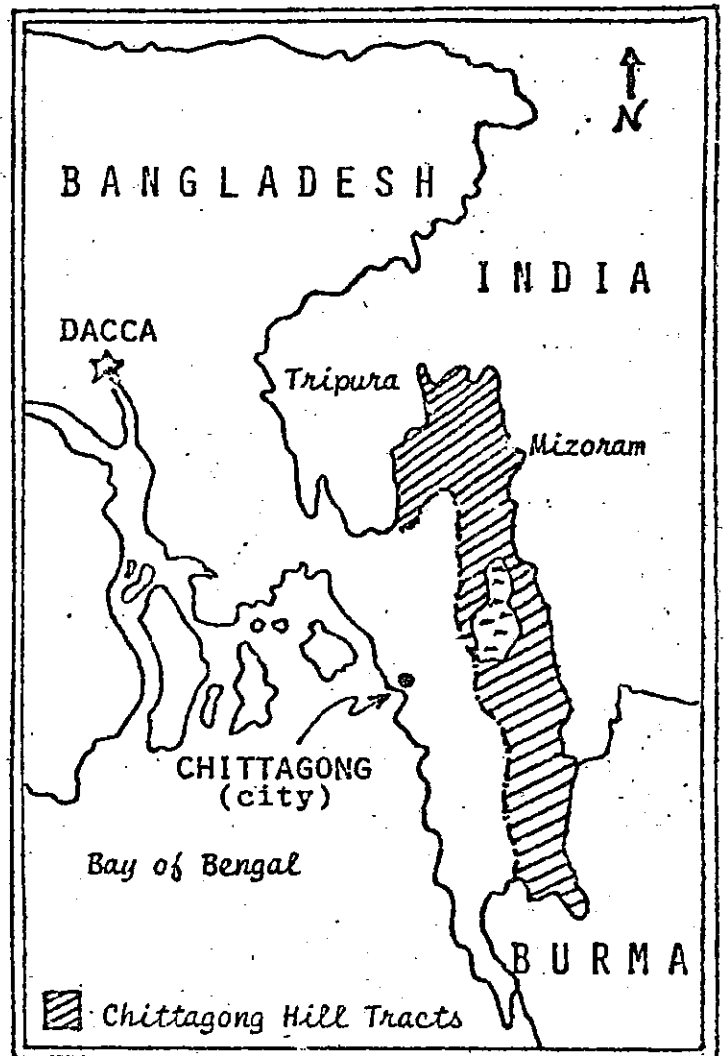
In July the BPF board of directors made official response to the message brought in April by a brave emissary from Bangladesh: it adopted the task of alleviating the plight of the peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as its first major project. In doing so, our young organization became one of the few concerned groups standing between some 600,000 tribal people and what appears to be certain genocide.

Briefly, the tribespeople of Chittagong Hill Tracts are culturally and ethnically distinct in Bangladesh. Having maintained a tradition of Theravada Buddhism since the 15th century, they constitute an island of Buddhists in a sea of Muslim hostility.

Their longterm isolation from the mainstream of S.E. Asian Buddhist history makes them a unique cultural-ethnic entity, and for that reason they have been studied by such Western anthropologists as Claude Lévi-Strauss. Even the British colonizers recognized this cultural uniqueness and, in 1900, instituted the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation, making the Hill Tracts area largely autonomous. This regulation has not since been officially abrogated, even by the present government of Bangladesh.

Since the 1960's, the Muslim majority of what is now Bangladesh has escalated efforts to appropriate the Hill Tracts and to destroy the tribal culture. With the Kaptai dam project, located squarely in the Hill Tracts, they flooded 350 square miles and displaced upwards of 100,000 tribespeople. This project employed no native people and has supplied them with virtually no electricity.

The harassment of the 1960's did not end when, in 1972, the Bangladesh independence movement succeeded. Tribal people had aided in the independence effort in hopes that the new regime would respect their cultural and territorial heritage. But soon after independence, the persecution began anew, as the government sought to consolidate its



## Bangladesh effort (continued)

authority. An effort led by a member of Parliament to ask the government to respect the Chittagong Hill Tract Regulation of 1900 was answered by charges of secessionism, massive bloody reprisals, and the burning of hundreds of villages. In response, the tribal people organized the Shanti Bahini or "Peace Force" to resist the government oppression.

Encountering this resistance and realizing that the tribal people weren't going to go quietly, the government has taken a new course, designed to conceal its ongoing repressive actions under the guise of "regional development". The Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board, founded in 1975, provides cover the poverty-plagued government needs to continue attracting economic aid from liberal Western governments such as the United States, Australia, and Federal Republic of Germany.

The Bangladesh government knows that if its actions are seen as the repression they are, vital international funds will be jeopardized. Withdrawal of aid has already occurred in the case of Sweden, which is pulling out of a program to "develop" timber resources in the Hill Tracts.

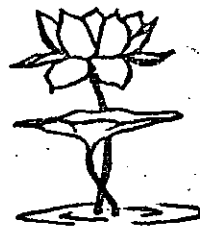
Thus, the Bangladesh authorities have recently adopted further tactics of obfuscation and deception. On the pretext of "rebel" violence, the government has sealed off the Hill Tracts so tightly that even U.S. State Dept. representatives are forbidden access. A ban has been placed on travel by the Hill people, and news is thoroughly censored.

A first step to dispel ignorance of the situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts was taken jointly by the International Fellowship of Reconciliation and BPF last

spring, as they sponsored the international tour of a tribal representative. Contacting leaders of the nations supplying aid as well as members of the United Nations, the speaker—unnamed for reasons of his safety—graphically described the plight of the tribespeople.

Information from this tour has been consolidated and updated by Ulrich Henes in an excellent article in IFOR Report. Titled "The Secret War in Bangladesh," this article is available from the BPF office in Berkeley. (We ask a 50¢ donation to cover xerox and postage costs.)

A second step in this project, again jointly taken by BPF members and interested friends such as Mike Gabel of IFOR, has been follow-up contact with the State Department and members of Congress, asking use of America's aid-generated influence to persuade the Bangladesh authorities to reverse their course in the Hill Tracts.



To date, this second phase has achieved only mixed results. Sen. Charles Percy, soon to chair the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has taken active interest in alleviating the situation in the Hill Tracts, and several other members of Congress express similar intent.

But all are hampered by a paucity of documentation and the Department of State's apparent desire to steer clear of controversy. The administration position, repeated with a dismaying regularity both to BPF members and interested Congressmen, can be summarized as follows: Since the Chittagong Hill Tract people are ethnically and religiously different from the people of lower Bangladesh, and since there is a greater density of population in the lowlands, the

## Bangladesh effort (continued)

government opened the Hill Tracts for settlement in order to make opportunities equal and to put valuable resources to use.

This policy, if in fact it can be called a policy, has no moral or legal defense and is comparable to the violent plundering of land belonging to Native Americans. The State Department, however, seems to accept at face value both the Bangladesh government's "development" concern and its claim that the violence in the area has originated with the tribespeople. The Dacca government insists that it has made conciliatory gestures to the tribespeople and that it has cancelled the resettlement program, despite mounting evidence to the contrary.

The next phase in the Chittagong Hill Tracts project must be to dispel the cloud of ignorance and secrecy which surrounds the Hill Tracts. To this end, under joint sponsorship of BPF and IFOR, I'll visit Bangladesh next spring. My itinerary there is problematic, as the country is essentially a police state and travel is extremely restricted even outside the Hill Tracts. It should be possible, however, to reach members of Parliament who have spoken against the atrocities in the Hill Tracts and also to the American ambassador. It may be possible as well to interview tribespeople who no longer reside in the Hill Tracts.

We hope the results of this fact-finding trip will be increased documentation of past and present conditions in the Hill Tracts and secure avenues of communication with people in Bangladesh who can keep us abreast of events there. Particularly we would like to put members of the Bangladesh Parliament in touch with sympathetic U.S. representatives, produce a few articles, and generate some

some news coverage.

Finally, in returning by way of India, Thailand, and Japan, I hope to knit at least a limited support network for our friends in the Hill Tracts. My return trip may also serve to sow the seeds of the International Buddhist Peace Fellowship already proposed.

I'll file future reports as my very full agenda permits and as events unfold. Those who would like to assist in the project should contact the Berkeley office. Meanwhile, I would like to thank those who have already contributed generously, both in time and funds. The future of the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts is not bright, but it is brighter for our efforts.

*Since writing this piece, Michael has departed for India, where he will attend a three-month meditation retreat before proceeding to Bangladesh. In a phone call just prior to his departure, he restressed the difficulties he anticipates in Bangladesh and indicated that it may be necessary for him to spend quite a while there before meeting key people.*

*To increase Michael's chances of success in Bangladesh and in spreading the word once he leaves, the Board is seeking contributions to a special project fund. If you are able to contribute, please make your check payable to the Fellowship of Reconciliation (for tax purposes) and note on it "Hill Tracts Project". Send it to the Berkeley BPF office. Thanks. — Ed.*

## FLASH!

In a release just received, Amnesty International (AI) formally states its concerns regarding events in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Famous for careful study of human rights cases, AI is now investigating various incidents in the Hill Tracts. Involvement of this prestigious agency lends hope much needed in light of other current news. (See item on reverse.)

## Parliament turns disorderly

**DACCA, Bangladesh** — Parliament degenerated into a melee yesterday during a protest against a "shoot-to-kill" bill.

Opposition lawmakers disrupted proceedings with shouting and some legislators even broke microphones. Young opposition parliamentarians came close to exchanging blows with government officials. And some opposition lawmakers manhandled a government minister in the chamber.

Outside the building, baton-swinging police battled demonstrators opposing the bill.

The government-sponsored measure would give police and military forces a free hand to arrest or shoot on sight, people making trouble in areas where a "disturbance" is declared.

The government said the bill would be necessary to stem the tide of a secessionist rebellion in a tribal area of the country called Chittagong Hill. But the 79 opposition members of the 339-member parliament said the proposal could sanction violations of human rights.

The above report (*Honolulu Advertiser*, 12-11-80) may indicate a serious deterioration in the situation of the Hill Tracts people.

## WE WELCOME THE FOLLOWING NEW MEMBERS

John Cooper/Gladesville, Australia  
Todd Feiler/Cazadero, California  
Lori Feinman/New Paltz, New York  
Eliot Fintushel/Rochester, New York  
Cynthia Gillette-Wenner/Pebble Beach, CA  
Paul Hammack/El Paso, Texas  
Marge Hammer/Rochester, New York  
Edwin Hedges/Topeka, Kansas  
Michelle Hill/Honolulu, Hawaii  
John Huddleston, Jr./Mayfield Heights, Ohio  
Sukanya Mach/Rochester, New York  
Gerald McConoughey/Milan, Illinois  
Robert Metters/Rochester, New York  
Motsinger/Kansas City, Missouri  
John Ortega/Los Angeles, California  
Clark Ratliffe/Rochester, New York  
Ken Schulz/Honolulu, Hawaii  
John Spula/Rochester, New York  
Vaughn Swazey/Washington, Pennsylvania  
Susan Tannehill/Bergen, New York  
Ben Taylor/Geneseo, New York

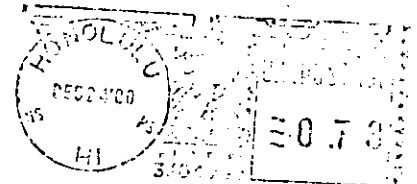
## A New Strategy

...hope it works!

### Psychic Healing

We read in the *Village Voice* that a firm called Karma Construction won the bid and got the job of installing a bathroom in the New York offices provided former President Richard Nixon by the General Services Administration. Karma, according to the *Voice*, is run by "artists, ex-hippies and spiritual seekers" who mainly renovate artists lofts under the motto "We build mantra-filled walls." The workers are said to have started the job with a purification ritual, covered the raw wall with mandalas and other symbols and the sheetrock with mantras in English, Sanskrit and Tibetan. Then they sealed the prayers under handmade Mexican and Italian tiles. "We wanted to give him a Karmic connection, to plant a seed so he can be reborn to help others," said a Karma Construction partner, Barry Bryant. The final word from the *Voice* is that President Nixon is delighted with the work.

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THE NETHERLANDS

PLEASE FORWARD

Wall Street Journal (6-30-80)