

# Fresh tribal influx in Tripura

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AGARTALA, June 22.

WITH the Shanti Bahini offensive aimed at subverting the June 25 district council elections in the Chittagong hill tracts of Bangladesh gaining fresh momentum since early May, Tripura's south district is witnessing a fresh influx of tribal refugees.

The guerilla offensive launched by the Shanti Bahini has led to 69 deaths, including those of 23 Bangladesh army personnel, between May 20 and June 2. In brutal reprisals, the Bangladesh security forces and the plainland resettlers are wreaking vengeance on the tribals for their support to the insurgents.

Since the latest round of influx began on May 13, over 8,000 tribals have entered Tripura. There is a possibility that the influx will continue unabated until the June 25 polls to the three new district councils unilaterally created by the Bangladesh government through an act of parliament.

A significant feature of the latest round of influx is the arrival of a large number of important pro-government leaders. An erstwhile Bangladesh MP from the president, Gen. H. M. Ershad's Jatiya Dal, Mr Upendra Lal Chakma, alleged that the district councils created by the Bangladesh government were a hoax aimed at legitimising the presence of over 3.5 lakh plainland infiltrators in

illegal possession of tribal land.

Mr Chakma, who headed the liaison committee formed by the president, Gen Ershad to initiate peace talks with the rebel Shanti Bahini, perceived a serious threat to his life following the daylight murder of Mr Shanti May Dewan, chairman of the Rangamati Sadar sub-district, by Bangladesh intelligence officers in March last. Mr Upendra Lal Chakma claimed to have entered Tripura on May 24 to escape a similar fate.

The insurgent Shanti Bahini had embarked on a bush-war against the Bangladesh government under the political banner of Jana Samhati Samity in 1976, demanding provincial autonomy with a separate legislature for the 5,138 sq. miles hill tracts, restoration of alienated tribal land and deportation of all plainland infiltrators. It held six rounds of peace negotiations with representatives of the Bangladesh government between October 21, 1985, and December 15, 1988, on a five-point charter of demands.

Though the samity agreed to drop the demand for provincial autonomy, the Bangladesh government unilaterally cancelled the seventh round of the peace talks slated for February 22 this year and introduced four separate bills in the national assembly on February 15 to create three district councils in Khagrachhari, Rangamati and Bandarban and nullify the Chittagong hill tract regulation, 1900, which had made the hill tracts into an excluded area during British rule.

Apart from the obvious effort at

sidelining the Jana Samhati Samity, the sole representative organisation of the tribal people, the district councils proposed to be created by the Bangladesh government fulfil none of the basic tribal demands.

The zilla parishad Act provides for dismissal of the elected councils any time without giving any reason in the national interest. The clause providing for reservation of 30 of the 93 seats in the three district councils (each having 31) for the non-tribal settlers followed by 20 for the numerically dominant Chakma tribal groups has struck at the root of the tribal demand for deportation of plainland infiltrators, the vast majority of whom have been settled in the hill tracts under officially sponsored schemes.

Faced with the fearful prospect of being reduced to a minority by the non-tribal settlers in their own homeland, who now roughly constitute 45 per cent of the hill tract population as against only 2-5 per cent on August 15, 1947, the Shanti Bahini launched the renewed offensive to disrupt the polls. The Bangladesh government has also stepped up security measures to deal with the threat.

Commenting on the preparations being made by the Bangladesh government for the polls, Mr Chakma said that all efforts are being made to rig the election.

Apart from this, retaliatory operations against the tribal people in the name of combing operations were continuing, he added.

## Poor turn-out in Chittagong poll

RANGAMATI (Bangladesh), June 25 (UNI): Polling in three hill districts in the strife-torn Chittagong Hill tracts began today on a poor note amid scattered incidents of violence.

The turn-out in the district headquarters of Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachhari was between 20 and 30 per cent till 2 p.m. when last reports came in. In the interiors, the turn-out was even thinner.

Sporadic gun shots, bomb blasts and arson were reported last night from several areas by the Chakma insurgents who had pledged to disrupt the elections, being held for the first time in independent Bangladesh.

A strong armed presence of security personnel was deployed at all polling centres and other strategic points.

### Doordarshan is 'biased': Dhaka

By ZAGLUL A. CHOWDHURY

The Times of India News Service

DHAKA, July 29: Bangladesh yesterday expressed its "dismay and regrets" at what it called "the recently launched anti-Bangladesh campaign in the Indian media, including the government-controlled Doordarshan".

A spokesman of the foreign office termed a recent programme telecast on the Chakma tribal refugees as "biased, partial and not reflective of the actual situation".

The spokesman said a strong protest had been lodged with the Indian government by the Bangladesh high commissioner, Mr Farukha A. Chowdhury, against "such officially sponsored media campaign". "This officially inspired campaign runs counter to the spirit of the assurances of friendly cooperation and goodwill," Dhaka's protest note said.

The spokesman regretted that the Indian campaign came at a time when Bangladesh had informed of possessing incontrovertible evidences of "sheltering, training and arming tribal Bangladeshi terrorists in Indian camps." The foreign minister, Mr Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury, also deplored certain "malicious charges" made in the Indian press.

### Typhoon kills 38 in China

AGARTALA, July 26 (PTI).

THE Buddhist Chakmas and other tribes of Chittagong hill tracts, about 50,000 of whom have taken shelter in refugee camps here in the wake of mounting threats of annihilation due to racial discrimination of the Muslim majority in Bangladesh, have intensified their "war of self-termination".

Besides the armed struggle waged against the "brutal repression" of the Bangladesh army which has recently stepped up organised settlement of Muslims in these strategic hill tracts, the Jumma people, as they are known in the north-eastern region, have pleaded with the Prime Minister, Mr Rajiv Gandhi, for India's good offices for a permanent political settlement of the ethnic problem.

The Chakmas have formed the "Shanti Bahini" and the "Jana Samhati Samity" for carrying on their "struggle for existence" and "a war against extermination". They have now knocked at the doors of world bodies including the Amnesty International to arouse public opinion against the denial of human rights to about four lakh tribals in the Chittagong hill tracts.

### TALES OF WOE

Several victims of the "atrocities" committed by the Bangladesh army in Dighinala, Merung, Bagaichari, Panchari, Khagrachari and Chengi valley narrated their horrifying experiences and tales of woe to a group of visiting journalists from Delhi.

These included instances of inhuman tortures, looting, rape, mass massacres, arson and repression.

According to the petition the Chakma leaders have sent Mr Gandhi, from October 15, 1986 to November 5,

1986, the Bangladesh armed forces and Muslim infiltrators had carried joint operations in the whole of the Chittagong hill tracts.

Since November 5, 1986, rounding up of the Jumma Peoples and indiscriminate beating, looting, arson, rape and torture continued unabated and 10,000 Jummas were compelled to leave their homes, the petition said.

The Bangladesh government, instead of giving proper rehabilitation facilities to the Chakmas who were repatriated from the refugee camps in Tripura and Mizoram in 1979, 1981 and 1986, subjected them to torture, oppression and humiliation and evicted them from their houses.

### TRIPARTITE PACT

The thousands of Chakmas who have been provided with shelter, food and clothing in the camps by the Centre through agencies of the Tripura government, appeared determined not to return until a tripartite agreement on the issue was reached between Bangladesh, India and the Shanti Bahini.

While all the Chakma leaders in different refugee camps expressed their resolve to fight for autonomy to safeguard the national existence and entity of the Buddhist and allied ethnic minorities; they put forward their terms and conditions for return to Bangladesh.

They have appealed to the Indian government to keep the repatriation of refugees in abeyance until the situation in the Chittagong hill tracts is normalised.

A tripartite meeting to work out the modalities of repatriation should be convened and a conducive atmosphere created to facilitate the return of the refugees. The Chakma leaders demand that all illegal Bengali-Muslim infiltrators be withdrawn from the hill tracts and the Bangladesh government

ensure the return of the land and properties of the Jumma People and their rehabilitation.

India has taken the stand that it will provide shelter to all the refugees from the Chittagong hill tracts on "humanitarian grounds" although this has cost over Rs. five crore since April, 1985.

"We can't compel them to go back. They can't be pushed back. Unless they are willing to go, nothing can be done", said Mr I. P. Gupta, additional secretary in the Union home ministry, who is handling the refugee problem.

The Centre has also been trying for a political solution of the issue and the matter was taken up with the Bangladesh government at the foreign secretary-level some time back.

The Tripura chief minister, Mr Nirpen Chakraborty, said there was difference in approach on the Chakma refugee issue, between the Centre and the state government.

The Tripura chief minister, however, made it clear that there was no question of settling the refugees in Tripura as a saturation point had already reached in the state with a total population of 21,00,000 and an annual budget of only Rs. 65 crore. Such a move might spoil the atmosphere of cordiality among different communities, he added.

The CPI-M leader accused the Centre of adopting an ad hoc approach to the question of tribal uplift throughout the country.

The state chief secretary, said the Tripura government was looking after the refugees to the best of its ability despite the fact that it was causing strains on the state economy.

A fresh move has been initiated for an official-level meeting with the tribal leaders from both sides to work out the modalities for return of the refugees to Bangladesh. A date for the proposed meeting is yet to be fixed, he said.

## Chakmas take heart from Lanka accord

By KIRIT BHAUMIK

Times of India News Service

AGARTALA, August 1.

THE accord signed by India and Sri Lanka for solving the ethnic problem of the island appears to have given a glimmer of hope to Chakma tribal refugees here. The precedent set in Colombo lead to the creation of conditions for their return home. The Colombo accord be achieved by SAARC as the basis for solving ethnic conflicts in the region, according to the refugees leaders, the minorities living in different countries do have a more secure life.

Hope may well turn into frustration. Although the Bangladesh government has been urging the Chakmas to return to their homes as "congenial conditions" had been created for them in Chittagong hill tracts, the appeals have not responded so far. This is not the first time that they taken refuge in India. Each time returned, they were sadly disappointed.

Chakma leaders point out that Bangladesh government has not beyond giving vague assurances. It stated that the tribals would get their land and homesteads. It has been said about the plans settled on their land. No assurance has been given that their ethnic life would be recognised and their life preserved. They have only told that they would be "properly situated".

Chakma suspicion is deeply rooted in their psyche. It is born out of a long history of "Gradual expropriation" as they see it. Their mis-

fortune began, the tribals say, when Cyril Radcliffe, sitting in Rawalpindi, drew the boundary between India and Pakistan and gave the area to the latter although the non-Muslim population of the hill tracts constituted 98.5 per cent.

Under the British, the area was given the status of an "excluded area". It prohibited non-tribals from settling in the area and thereby preserved the tribal way of life. According to the Chakma leaders, the Pakistani government violated this "constitutional safeguard" and settled hundreds of Muslim families in the region. Finally, the "excluded area" status was abolished in 1963.

The next misfortune befell the Chakmas when the Pakistani government built a dam on the Karnafuli river submerging most of the Chakma land. The Chakmas then took shelter in the Indian area of Mizoram.

After the independence of Bangladesh, the tribals point out, even the ethnic identity of the Chakmas was sought to be effaced with the constitution declaring that "all citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as the Bengali people". From 1976 onwards successive Bangladesh governments launched plans for the resettlement of the plains people in the hill tracts, "destroying village after village, killing people in hundreds under the pretext of suppressing hostilities and secessionists."

The Chakma-refugees therefore seek firm guarantees for their security and welfare on their returning home. They want their lands and homesteads to be restored to them, and withdrawal of the plains people and the army from the hill tracts.

They also want constitutional safeguards for the preservation of their ethnic identity and tribal way of life.

# 50,000 flee secret war in Bangladesh

## Death toll mounts as tribesmen battle government troops in lush Chittagong Hill Tracts

By Richard Ehrlich  
Special to The Star

**RANGAMATI, Bangladesh.** — A secretive war is being fought between the Bangladesh government and Chakma Buddhist tribesmen who are seeking autonomy here in the lush ridges and valleys of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Amnesty International has reported "arbitrary arrests, torture and unlawful killings" of tribals by security forces during the past several years, while Chakma refugees describe executions and rapes by Bangladesh troops and Chakma militants accuse the government of "genocide."



**Hossain Mohammad Ershad:** He insists his people must be free to settle where they like.

The government strenuously denies all the charges.

"One hundred years ago, Rangamati was all Chakmas," says a dispirited young Chakma standing with friends in one of the town's Buddhist temples. "Now," he says, "it is nearly all Bengalis."

The most recent statistics show that in 1980, the 610,000 Bengalis made up 52 per cent of the hill tracts' population. The natives who resist their encroachment belong to 13 tribes, including the majority 230,000 Chakmas.

More than 50,000 Chakma men, women and children have fled the fighting in this southeast sliver of Bangladesh during the past year and gone across the border into India, where they now huddle in makeshift camps.

### 3,000 rebels

More than 2,000 people, including hundreds of soldiers, have died in 10 years of warfare.

The Chakmas' fight for autonomy is led by the deadly Shanti Bahini — "peace force" guerrillas.

"The Shanti Bahini are not just popular, they are very, very popular," another young Chakma says at the temple, as a Buddhist monk, wrapped in a saffron robe, nods in agreement. "They are fighting for our liberation from the Bengali people."

Despite such endorsements, there is no independent estimate of the support enjoyed by the 3,000 rebels.

President Hossain Mohammad Ershad rejects the Shanti Bahini's call for autonomy and insists the people of Bangladesh must be free to settle where they like. "This is one of the tragedies of the

world, people who are on the wrong side of progress," says one diplomat stationed here. "The conflict is between the laudable desire by the Bangladesh government to give people land who don't have land, and the understandable desire by these Chakma people to stop it. We can probably give both sides some understanding."

Here in Rangamati, the district headquarters of the hill tracts, the Chakmas have clearly lost their war to drive settlers out.

The town's winding hilly streets are lined with dilapidated shops swarming with Bengalis who bring supplies up from the flatlands to keep the town running. Army outposts manned by an estimated 15,000 troops dot the landscape.

Newly built mosques attract many of the faithful. In the evening, modest homes are lit by televisions and cooled by ceiling fans. Others bed down for the night in mosquito-infested huts amid dark, forested hills filled with a prehistoric eeriness. A spectacular lake, the biggest in Bangladesh, quietly laps at Rangamati's shores.

Along with the onslaught of Bengali settlers has come the inevitable barefoot children, emaciated beggars and other reminders of the overpopulated and underfed flatlands in the rest of Bangladesh.

"I like it here, there is no crime in Rangamati," a Bengali tea stall owner says. "And I like the Chakmas too. They speak nice, they look nice. But they say this is Chakma land, not Bangladesh."

Much of the war is kept secret from the outside world. Journalists are prevented from travelling through the Chittagong Hill Tracts, and tourists who arrive by bus from Chittagong port are usually allowed

to visit Rangamati for only 24 hours.

The Bangladesh government recently escorted diplomats — including an American, a Canadian and a Briton — on a surprise helicopter tour of the hill tracts. "The diplomats didn't see much," one Western envoy lamented.

But they were impressed by the government's new strategy of trying to win the war by stressing development programs including improved roads, medical care, education and other social services in the hill tracts. The government hopes the Chakmas will find it more beneficial to join the mainstream.

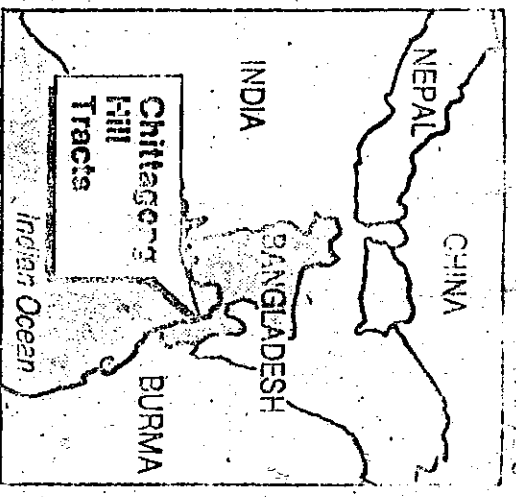
Officials point out the hill tracts occupy 10 per cent of Bangladesh but the tribes comprise less than one per cent of the nation's population. Therefore, they say, the influx of settlers is inevitable, logical and within their rights.

### Worst problem

"Everyone has to conclude for themselves how much of it is genuine development and how much of it is subjugation," one diplomat says. "Bangladesh has a problem of 100 million people and can't feed them. Those are crude basic facts. That's this government's worst problem."

According to diplomats' statistics, culled from government records, the Chittagong Hill tracts in 1951 had a 91 per cent tribal population. In 1974, the region was still 88 per cent tribal. Then in 1975, Bengali settlers started rushing in.

The tribesmen charged the government was deliberately settling landless peasants to outnumber the tribes. The government denied the charge, saying it was trying to help poor people, and dropped the scheme in 1985, officials said.



**Troubled land:** "Bangladesh has a problem of 100 million people and can't feed them," envoy says.

But it was too late. In the early 70s, the anti-settler insurgency fanned by the Chakmas while other tribes remained relatively passive. Many of the worst reports of alleged torture, rape and indiscriminate killing by security forces came during 1977 to 1980, officials say.

Last year, fighting again escalated, causing the 50,000 refugees to flee. A fresh round of alleged atrocities was reported.

"There are elements of the society who lose their heads but these soldiers are being dealt with," one diplomat says.

At the turn of the century, the tribes were protected by the then British colonialists who prevented settlers from encroaching the hill tracts. But after the British left in 1947, the region's special status eroded. The government fears the Shanti Bahini do not merely want autonomy — they crave independence. The guerrillas deny this, and attempts to arrange talks between the two sides have repeatedly failed.

Richard Ehrlich is a Star correspondent based in Asia.

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