

ANTI - SLAVERY SOCIETY

REPORT TO THE WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS, 1990

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Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

Once again the Anti-Slavery Society is compelled to express its concern in this forum at the plight of the indigenous tribal peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). There has been no change for the better; blood is still being spilled in the furtherance of what appears to be governmental policy. Since the last meeting of this Working Group the smoke, real and metaphorical, has cleared from the massacre at Langadu.

At least six villages (although the figures of nine and 11 have been variously mentioned) in the Langadu upazilla (subdistrict) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts were attacked on the evening of 4 May 1989, the attacks occurred only about two hours after the murder of the chairman of Langadu upazilla council, Mr Abdur Rashid Sarkar, a non-tribesman. His murderer is so far unknown although the government blames the CHT freedom fighters, the Shanti Bahini, who in turn suggest he was a victim of political rivalry among the settlers from the plains.

The Anti-Slavery Society has in its possession the names of over 30 people killed during the massacre, which was carried out by members of the Village Defence Party, a paramilitary body encouraged by the authorities, trained by the police and composed exclusively of Bengalis. Their arms are supplied by the police, but they also use spears and daggers.

The Langadu victims range from a few months old baby, apparently hacked to death, to 73-year-old Mrs Akpali Chakma who was reportedly tied up and burnt alive.

A week after the massacre the Chakma Raja, Devashish Roy, and other community leaders, protested to the Rangamati Hill District deputy Commissioner about "a merciless and barbarous killing spree".

The Raja also reported that at a meeting called by the authorities the day after the massacre a Bengali settler stated:

We have never done anything except under the instructions of the government, and will not do so in future.

This lends credence to the claim of the CHT's United Peoples Party (JSS) that the Village Defence Party had been called out by Major Zakir of the 14 East Bengal Regiment stationed at Mainee Mukh in Langadu.

The religious difference between the Muslim settlers and the hill people were underlined by the looting and desecration of six Buddhist temples and two Christian churches.

Such is the breakdown in trust that some 8,500 refugees had crossed into Tripura in the period between the Langadu massacre and the beginning of June.

Sadly there is nothing new in armed attacks by the settlers and military personnel on indigenous hill people. As early as December 1971, while fighting for independence from West Pakistan, the Bangladeshi Liberation Army killed welcoming villagers in the Panchari area of the north of the hill tracts.

As Seeds of Peace, published by the Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, printed in September 1989

To depopulate tribal villages, the Bangladeshi security forces and the new Bengali settlers jointly attack villages, loot all valuable, rape tribal women and girls, torture villagers, burn houses, abduct beautiful tribal girls and convert them to Islam against their will, desecrate and destroy Buddhist places of worship, and kill tribal men, women and children, as well as Buddhist monks.....after clearing the area of indigenous people, the Bengali settlers are resettled there.

During the Langadu massacre some 500 huts were set on fire and their occupants fled. The Chakma Raja has emphasised that Langadu upazilla's demography has changed to the detriment of its original inhabitants. The hill people now constitute fewer than 10 per cent of the population of the subdistrict.

The Anti-Slavery Society is conscious of the parallel with the District Council Law of February 1989. As a result of that legislation 90 per cent of the land has been taken out of the control of the indigenous people.

Reports that three non-tribal magistrates have been appointed to the three CHT districts can only bolster the apprehensions of the traditional population.

The Anti-Slavery Society said in this forum last year, that a lack of trust in governmental intentions and promises has been a feature of relations in the Tracts. Now the Tripura agriculture minister, Mr Nagendra Jamatya, has accused Dhaka of conducting a "deliberate disinformation campaign".

According to the Indian Telegraph (19 October 1989) the minister condemns comments made by the Bangladeshi Representative here in Geneva last year as "totally baseless and tendentious Bangladeshi propaganda". The Representative was arguing that 10,000 of the refugees from the Hill Tracts sheltering in Tripura had returned home. Mr Jamatya reportedly asserted that "far from returning, every day new batches of refugees are entering Tripura".

The latest information reaching the Anti-Slavery Society suggests that some 65,000 hill people are now in camps in Tripura; some of them have been there for over three years. The presence of these refugees is a strain on the resources of a far from rich state and the authorities there deserve much praise for their humanitarian stance. Regrettably their contribution has not been sufficiently recognised by the world community. Perhaps the time has come for the UNHCR to become involved.

In view of the tragic situation that continues unabated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, the urgency of which is emphasised by the fleeing to India of former Member of Parliament and past Adviser to President Ershad on Tribal Affairs, Mr Upendra Lal Chakma, the Anti-Slavery Society recommends that a UN Rapporteur be selected to visit the Chittagong Hill Tracts at the earliest possible moment. There is a very real fear that few members of the 13 hill tribes will be left alive if the Bangladeshi government continues with its present policies.