

From Dr. R.S. Dewan,
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Sub: An appeal to save the Chakma and other tribes of the
Chittagong Hill Tracts from the total annihilation by
the Bangladesh Government.

Dear Sir,

May I present to you a copy of the article, "Racism in Chittagong" from the New Life (Britain's biggest Asian weekly) of 6 April 1984. Mr. Alan Whittaker, an official of the Anti-Slavery Society has accused the Bangladeshi military regime of practising racism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. He has claimed that 600,000 or so tribespeople, who are ethnically, religiously and culturally different from the Muslim Bengalis, "are dying proof" of this prejudice.

The Bangladesh Government has been waging a blatant racial war against the indigenous nationalities of the CHT. "Hillmen are killed and wounded" in the CHT area. For example, "In March 1980, at the tracts town of Kaokhali Bazaar, a small detachment of the Bangladeshi army ordered leading tribespeople to gather in the square and then shot them." This was a typical example of many cold-blooded racial massacres committed by "an alliance of Bangladeshi soldiers and Bengali settlers". Mr. Brian Eads wrote in the Observer of 20 August 1978 - "During the Bisu Buddhist Festival the army entered Rangapani in the north-west of the hill tracts. They surrounded the house of the headman and beat him and his four sons to death. His two daughters, one of them seven months pregnant, were raped and then shot. The bodies were buried in hastily dug graves in the family's vegetable garden." Tens of thousands of innocent tribal men, women and children have been murdered during the military campaigns at Panchari (1971), Kukichara (14 Dec. 1971), Merung, Hazachara, Boalkhali (Jan. & Feb. 1972), Feni valley (1971-1981), Matiranga, Guimara, Manikchari, Lakshmichari etc. (1977), Dumdumya Mouza, Panchari Mouza (Dec. 1978 and Jan. 1979), Subalong valley (Jan. 1979), Gargajyachari (Mar. 1979), Rangamati (9 Apr. 1979), Rengkhayang (5 Jan. 1979), Kamalchari (12 Aug. 1979), Kamugopara (23 Apr. 1979), Khabong Paria and Khagrachari (16 Mar. 1979), Pujgang (21 Feb. 1979), Dhudukchara and Logang (Feb. 1979), Udalbagan and Logang (13 Mar. 1979), Durgachara (29 Mar. 1979), Mubhachari (15 Oct. 1979), Adharakchara (Nov. 1979), Bhangahata, Thakujoyamakalak, Gulshakhali Nala etc. (23 Dec. 1979), Kalampati Union (25 March 1980), Banraibari, Beltali, Belchari etc. (26 June 1981), Telafang, Ashalong, Gurangapara, Tabalchari, Barnala etc. (19 Sept. 1981), Golakpatimachara, Machyachara, Tarabanchari, Logang, Tarabanya, Maramachyachara, Jedamachyachara etc. (26 Jun., 11, 26, 27 July, 9, 10 and 11 Aug. 1983) and so on. This information is just the tip of the ice-berg.

The/-

The tribal people are being persecuted because of their religions. For instance, on 25 March 1980, the Bangladesh army and the Muslim Bengalis destroyed the Buddhist temples, shattered the images of the Buddha and killed many monks at Betchari, Headmanpara, Kashkhalimukhpara, Tanghapara, Puapara, Rangeypara, Chote Dalu, Bara Dalu, Tripuradighi etc. U. Chandra Griya Bhikkhu, 60, of the Chaitaraja temple at Kashkhalimukhpara was left for dead. He was beaten, had a head injury made by a sharp instrument and his both hands were broken. Hundreds of Buddhist temples have been destroyed, and many monks have been detained without trial, tortured and some of them murdered. The people of the CHT have lost their temples and also their monks. So in these circumstances they cannot practise their religions. On the other hand the government has built hundreds of mosques in the CHT. With the financial help of Saudi Arabia an Islamic cultural centre has been set up at Rangamati, the headquarters of the CHT, with a view to converting the hill people to ^{Islam}. The military junta has a plan to force the tribal people to embrace Islam.

Thousands of tribal women have been kidnapped, raped and many of them forcibly converted to Muslims. The government has circulated a secret notice to all army officers stationed in the CHT urging them to marry tribal girls as a part of the government's plan to assimilate the people of the CHT. Raping of tribal women is a commonplace and detention of tribal women in military camps means rape. In every market place there is a military or police camp and all tribal people going to the market place are thoroughly searched. They are often detained, tortured in pits without food and water and thousands of hill men died during torture. Rapes have been so frequent that the tribal women are afraid to leave their villages and they do not dare to go to either the market place or government centres. Even the wives and daughters of the tribal government officers are not exempted from raping. For example, on 9 April, 1979, at 0200 hours, the Bangladesh Army raided civilian quarters of Rangamati and took away 70 tribal people including many government officers' wives and their daughters (some of them were students of Rangamati Govt. College) to the Rangamati concentration camp. The detained women were raped and tortured. One of them was Mrs. Ramani Chakma, w/o a senior government officer. She was detained for about a fortnight leaving her four month-old baby at her home.

The Bangladesh government has been usurping the tribal farm lands by unfair means for the outsider Muslim Bengalis. Tens of thousands of tribal plough-land farmers have been forced to live in concentration camps and their farm lands have been given to the Muslim Bengalis. It is, perhaps, worth mentioning that the government provided these outsiders with free transport, food, money, land and protection. During the British period a tribal farmer could own 25 acres of farm land. The government has reduced the land holding ceiling to 5 acres in the CHT only in order to accommodate the Muslim Bengalis. Although Bangladesh is very crowded the government has never applied this law/-

law in Bangladesh except the CHT. The Muslim Bengali farmers can own unlimited land and they do not have to hand over their lands to the government.

The Bangladesh Government does not give the benefits of development works to the indigenous people of the CHT. For example, 40% of farm lands of the CHT was submerged due to the construction of the Karnafuli Hydro-electric Dam at Kaptai and over 100,000 people were uprooted. The tribal people were neither employed in the project nor given opportunity in fishing and fish farming. Sweden withdrew its aid for the Forest Development Project on the ground that the government did not want to employ the hill people. The tribespeople are not permitted to own business and they are not allowed to buy more than 2 kilograms of rice per family per week. They are required special permit to carry medicine. Although the government does not admit it the tribal people must always carry identity cards.

The government is intent on exterminating the indigenous people on the one hand and Islamising the CHT on the other. It is, perhaps, worth noting that the Bangladesh Government is vociferously critical of South Africa's racial policy. But it is not ashamed of practising worst form of racism with the usual Islamic ferocity and brutality against the defenceless people of the CHT. The tribal people have been deprived of their political, economic and social rights which they enjoyed during the British period. Now they are facing the prospect of total extinction under the racist regime of Bangladesh.

In view of extreme hostility of the Bangladesh Government the following measures are deemed absolutely necessary for the survival of the tribal people:

1. immediate release of all tribal people detained in different parts of Bangladesh.
2. immediate removal of non-tribal settlers from the CHT.
3. immediate withdrawal of the Bangladesh armed forces including the non-tribal police force from the CHT.
4. retention of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation of 1900 and constitutional provision restricting amendment of the Regulation.
5. autonomy for the CHT with its own legislature and recognition of the hill peoples' right to self-determination.
6. deployment of the UN peace keeping force in the CHT and implementation of this programme under the auspices of the UNO.

The indigenous people of the CHT need your help in their just struggle for survival from the violent Muslim Bengalis invasion.

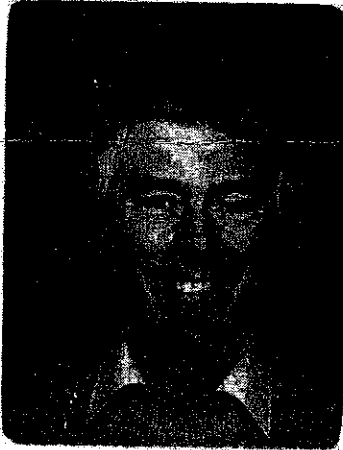
To
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Yours sincerely

Ramendu Keman

Racism in Chittagong

- ALAN WHITTAKER



Alan Whittaker is currently editing a book on the Chittagong Hill Tracts for the London-based Anti-Slavery Society. He has lived in the Third World and spent some time in Karachi working in advertising. He was the only non-native in the Karachi Amateur Dramatic Society.

In his column in NEW LIFE (9 November 1983) Mr A Haque made a very important - and frequently unrecognised - point when he said:

'Possibly a majority of people in any country are prejudiced against their minorities.'

Regrettably, in the land of his forefathers, 600,000 or so people are dying proof that Mr Haque is right - at least in the case of Bangladesh.

There, the 13 tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are different from the majority Bangali Muslim population in many obvious ways. In appearance, they have more in common with the Burmese; in religion they are mostly

growing food for their families and not for sale at a profit; and land, which has a special spiritual significance for them, is mostly held in common.

The hillmen of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are conscious of their difference from the Bengalis and cling with pride of their way of life. A way of life, it is worth emphasizing, which is in sympathy with nature and which is beneficial to the environment. The tribespeople make up less than one per cent of the total population of Bangladesh and it is the smallness of their numbers which contributes to their vulnerability. Prejudice thrives on the weakness of minorities and it goes on the rampage when it is condoned - or at least not seen to be actively countered - by a military government.

In March 1980, at the tracts town of Kaokhali Bazaar, a small detachment of the Bangladeshi army ordered leading tribespeople to gather in the square and then shot them. The exact number of the dead is not known, but at least 50 people are buried in mass graves at the western corner of Poapara High School, just behind the army camp.

Although martial law was not imposed on Bangladesh until March 1982, the 5,000 square miles of the hill tracts have been under military rule - undeclared, illegal but nevertheless real and effective - since their "special status" was abolished by Dhaka in 1972.

during the Mughal Raj. Until 1964, the hill people had enjoyed wide powers of self-government, had collected their own taxes and run their own police force. Entry into the hills by non-tribespeople had been rigidly controlled and the hillmen had always made up nearly 100 per cent of the population there. Now they are just over half of the

tribespeople. The artificial lake created behind the dam submerged 40 per cent of the best agricultural land - land traditionally farmed by the hillmen. The project as a whole displaced 100,000 people, about a sixth of the



VICTIM: Hillmen are killed and wounded in the Chittagong area



DESECRATION: A holy image lies shattered on the earth after the vandalising of a temple in the Chittagong hill tracts. Photo by Anti-Slavery Society

people living in the tracts and, if government policy of offering land and other inducements to settlers is not changed, they will soon be outnumbered by Bengalis. They will become a minority not just in Bangladesh, but in their own homelands.

After independence in 1947 and, with increasing speed after 1964, the tribespeople lost control over their land, their lives and their future. Since the 1970s an undeclared but bloody war between them and an alliance of Bangladeshi soldiers and Bengali settlers has been taking place. Since 1976 the number of police stations (manned, of course, by Bengalis) has more than doubled; there are at least 100,000 members of the armed forces in the tracts; checkpoints are commonplace and visible evidence of a form of occupation run by the G.O.C. Chittagong. Although settlers are actively encouraged, journalists and visitors are banned.

Bangladesh is a desperately poor and overcrowded country and the promise of "development", especially when made possible by loans from such bodies as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank, must seem irresistible to the bureaucrats of Dhaka. But what is the price of development in human terms?

In 1962 one of the sub-continent's most ambitious hydro-electric schemes was comple-

tribal population. They were not consulted before work began and they were often removed at gunpoint. No one was adequately compensated and many are still waiting for even a token recompense. Most of these families have become landless wanderers as no alternative land was provided for them by the government.

Because the authorities of Bangladesh offer them no protection, the minorities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are now fighting back and a militia, the Shanti Bahini, is their only on-the-ground defence.

If the unrest in the hill tracts is really just the reaction of people to change which, according to the official stand taken by Dhaka, is for the greater economic good of Bangladesh as a whole, then what is the justification for such acts as the desecration of temples and the attacks on Buddhist priests? Is it progress, an unavoidable byproduct of development, to slaughter a cow on the saffron robe of a monk? This happened in the Kattali Temple, 70 miles north-east of the hill tracts town of Rangamati.

Economic change is often accompanied by human casualties. But are the almost daily occurrences of rape and bloodshed and arbitrary arrest simply such casualties? Or is something else happening in the Chittagong Hill Tracts?