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BANGLADESH

REPRISAL KILLINGS OF TRIBAL PEOPLE IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS IN MAY 1989 — AN UPDATE

AUGUST 1990

AI INDEX: ASA 13/05/90

DISTR: SC/CO

In March 1990 Amnesty International published a short report, Bangladesh: Reprisal Killings of Tribal People in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in May 1989 (AI Index 13/02/90). At least 36 tribal people had reportedly died in May 1989 at Langadu in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in reprisal attacks by non-tribal settlers in the area and members of the Village Defence Party, a civilian defence force with official status. The attacks were apparently in reprisal for the murder of Abdur Rashid Sarkar (a non-tribal resident of Langadu and Chairperson of the sub-district council) by the Shanti Bahini, an armed tribal opposition group.

A report sent to Amnesty International by the Government of Bangladesh in June 1989, one month after the killings, was summarized in Amnesty International's March 1990 publication on the incident. It represented the attack as a spontaneous outburst by non-tribal people retaliating for the murder of Abdur Rashid Sarkar, which the security forces immediately tried to contain. Other reports received by Amnesty International, however, had indicated that the attacks on tribal people began more than two hours after the murder of Abdur Rashid Sarkar and continued throughout the night affecting between six and eleven villages, and that the Village Defence Party was directly involved in killing defenceless tribal villagers.

The government report to Amnesty International of June 1989 also said that an investigation committee was inquiring into events at Langadu at the time the report was written. Amnesty International requested information, from the government on the composition, terms of reference and findings of this committee.

In July 1990 the Government of Bangladesh submitted its response to Amnesty International. It said that the Inquiry Committee was headed by the Additional Deputy Commissioner of Rangamati, and also included representatives from the armed forces and police forces, as well as two tribal and non-tribal representatives of the local populations. It had questioned 57 witnesses to the events at Langadu. No details were given of the evidence it had collected.

The committee found that Abdur Rashid Sarkar had been shot in the evening, and had died in the local hospital at 9pm. The news of his death "incensed the non-tribal population of the area and as a result, before

security forces could intervene, some tribal homes were set on fire. There were also cases of looting."

The government also said that "Persons suspected of having participated in rioting were arrested and after due investigation a case was lodged against 39 persons, 10 of whom could not be apprehended. The case is now under trial in the Upazila magistrate's court at Langadu." In addition, "two cases are pending in connection with the murder of Mr Abdur Rashid Sarkar and the deaths in the rioting that followed."

With respect to the allegations that members of the Village Defence Party had participated in the killings, the government said that some members had been involved in rioting, "but they did so as individuals, out of spontaneous anger and excitement, and not as a group or in an organized manner. Cases are pending against 10 Village Defence Party personnel.

No details were given of the specific charges which had been brought in these cases. Amnesty International is requesting this and related information from the government and asking to be kept informed of the progress of the trials.

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