

## **BANGLADESH DEVELOPMENT FORUM 2003 AND THE QUESTION OF DEVELOPMENT IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS<sup>1</sup>**

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS<sup>2</sup> are meeting on 17-18 May 2003 at the **Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF)** in Dhaka to provide aid to the Government of Bangladesh for development for the financial year 2003-04.

It is extremely imperative to understand the development perspective of the Jumma indigenous people for any development in their ancestral homeland, the **Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)**. The indigenous people were subjected to Bangladeshi colonial practices over the 25-year long armed conflict in the region. Its impacts on them are damaging. The **CHT peace accord** reached between the Government of Bangladesh and the Jumma political party, **Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS)**, in 1997 has brought about an end to the conflict. It is widely seen as a step to redress some of their damages.

It is true that presently there is no armed conflict between the two sides. But peace is still a remote reality in the region. And this is largely due to manipulation as well as violation of the CHT peace accord by the Government of Bangladesh. The Government continues to maintain a double standard on the accord. Some two years or so back, a Government spokesperson publicly claimed that 98% of the accord was implemented, and the CHT was “peaceful”. But in reality, it is not the case. Most of the fundamental points of the accord remain unimplemented till today. Such points, among others, include **effective enforcement of the CHT Regional Council and Hill District Councils Acts of 1998, settlement of land-disputes between Jummas and Bengali Muslim settlers, rehabilitation of the Jumma refugees and internally displaced Jummas, withdrawal of the Bengali Muslim settlers and the “temporary” military and paramilitary camps from the CHT etc.** In its “**Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - Bangladesh 2002**” issued on 31 March 2003, the **U. S. State Department** says,

“Tribal people have had a marginal ability to influence decisions concerning the use of their lands. The 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord ended 25 years of insurgency in the CHT, although law and order problems continued. The Land Commission that is to deal with land disputes between tribal individuals and Bengali settlers did not function effectively in addressing critical land disputes... Until 1985 the Government regularly allotted land in the CHT to non-tribal Bangladeshi settlers, including land that was claimed by indigenous people under traditional concepts of land ownership. This led to the displacement of many tribal groups, such as the Chakmas and Marmas. Bangladeshi inhabitants in the CHT increased from 3 percent of the region's population in 1947 to approximately 50 percent of the area's 1 million persons in 1997.”

Experience gained over the last five years or so indicates that the Government has **no political commitment** to implement the accord. Rather, the Government has been **manipulating** the whole implementation process of the accord in a way in which more Bengali Muslims are migrating into the

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<sup>2</sup> International development partners: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, U. K., U. S. A., Asian Development Bank (ADB), European Commission, International Finance Corporation (IFC), International Monetary Fund (IMF), Saudi Fund for Development, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Bank (WB) etc.

CHT and development programs are becoming increasingly Bengali Muslim-oriented. Its impacts on the socio-economic condition of the local Jumma people are damaging.

Examples of how the Government is manipulating or violating the peace accord are given below:

1. The Government held the 2001 general elections with a voter list, in which all the “non-permanent residents” (Bengali Muslim settlers and the members of the security forces) of the CHT were included in violation of the accord. For this reason, the PCJSS boycotted the elections. A Bengali Muslim settler, **Wadud Bhuiyan**, was elected from the Khagrachari hill district of the CHT as member of the Bangladesh National Parliament! In violation of the accord, he was subsequently appointed as the Chairman of the **CHT Development Board (CHTDB)**, the institution responsible for major development programs in the region!

2. As per the accord, three Hill District Councils are to be formed with directly elected members. But the Government formed these councils with its selected party workers! Now these bodies are functioning as a regional political party office of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). This is how democracy has been killed in the region.

3. As per the accord, an indigenous MP is to be appointed as Minister to the **Ministry on CHT Affairs**. But the Prime Minister **Ms. Begum Khaleda Zia** has kept the forth-folio under her charge, and appointed MP **Moni Swapan Dewan** to the post as Deputy Minister, who has practically no power in the Ministry. The Ministry works against the interest of the indigenous people. For example, on 21 December 2000, the Ministry served a notification No. 62/99-587 empowering the District Commissioners (DC) of the three hill districts in the CHT to issue “**permanent resident certificate**” to the Bengali Muslim settlers!

The Government is directly and indirectly encouraging more and more Bengali Muslims to settle in the CHT. As a result, Bengali Muslim population has increased in great number (more than 60% according to some indigenous sources) in the region. It should be noted that in 1947, when the Indian Sub-continent was partitioned into India and Pakistan, 98.02% of the total population of the CHT was non-Muslims (Buddhists, Hindus and Christians). Madrassas (Islamic schools) and mosques are mushrooming everywhere in the CHT with funds from some national and international Islamic organizations. A systematic Bengali Muslim demographic and cultural invasion is being carried out against the Jumma indigenous people to destroy their ethnic identity.

The Jumma indigenous people are neither enjoying the benefits of development programs nor they are getting back their lands (their main source of livelihood) from the occupation of the Bengali Muslim settlers and military. Many Jumma youths are finding themselves in a difficult socio-economic situation in which they are losing their traditional ways of livelihood without any sustainable alternatives. As a result, crime rate is increasing rapidly, and the whole CHT is moving toward a serious humanitarian crisis-like situation. This is leading them to adopting anti-social professions such as, organized armed robbery in case of young men and prostitution in cities in case of young women. Unemployment is increasing in hitherto unknown rate. Many Jumma youths are choosing to migrate to other developed or developing countries in search of livelihood. Cases of mental disorder and suicide of youths due to lack of living conditions within the CHT have been reported. Many Jumma women are being forced to work in private and corporate sectors run and managed by Bengali Muslims in cities outside the CHT, for example, garment factories in the Chittagong city, where they are grossly exploited economically and sexually.

There can be no development in the CHT without proper implementation of the CHT peace accord. So it is vital to implement the accord fully for sustainable development and peace in the hills. For this purpose, the Government of Bangladesh and international development partners should recognize and respect the indigenous people's right to choose their own development priorities. The **Peace Campaign Group (PCG)**, a human rights organization working for protection and promotion of human rights and peace in the CHT over the years, has identified such priorities on the basis of its wide consultations with grass-root indigenous people and organizations including the CHT Regional Council. These priorities include, among others, the followings:

1. First Priority:

- (a) Returning lands occupied by Bengali Muslim settlers and Bangladesh security forces to the original Jumma owners. It is directly related to the indigenous people's right to livelihood, as land is their main source of living;
- (b) Rehabilitation of the Jumma refugees, internally displaced Jummas and those Jummas who were affected by the long running armed conflict in the CHT;
- (c) Rehabilitation of the Bengali Muslim settlers outside the CHT region (in plain districts). Without this, implementation of the two priorities shown in No. 1 (a) and (b) will be impractical and virtually impossible because of massive land-encroachment by the settlers in the CHT;
- (d) Withdrawal of the "temporary" military and paramilitary camps from the CHT and freeing the local administration from all kinds of military interference;
- (e) Effective enforcement of the CHT Regional Council and the three Hill District Councils Acts of 1998 and taking effective steps for establishing functional democracy in the region;
- (f) Employment of Jummas in all governmental and semi-governmental posts in the CHT.

2. Second Priority:

- (a) Land, agriculture, horticulture, livestock and fishery
- (b) Education, human resource and culture
- (c) Health and sanitation
- (d) Electricity
- (e) Drinking water
- (f) Environment and forestry

3. Third Priority:

- (a) Transportation
- (b) Telecommunication
- (c) Tourism
- (d) Trade and small-scale industry

In the past, the Government of Bangladesh used a major part of the international development aid against the Jumma indigenous people. Such practice must be stopped from being repeated again. To ensure it, full and effective participation of the local Government (CHT Regional Council and other people representative bodies) and indigenous NGOs in the development process is vital. In other words, international development partners should ensure that their aid directly goes to the local Government and indigenous NGOs. There should be no noodle agencies or entities between the aid and its beneficiaries.

Last year (2002), the PCG had submitted a paper, “**Bangladesh Aid Consortium and the Concerns of the Indigenous Peoples and Religious Minorities in Bangladesh**”, at the BDF held on 13-15 March in Paris. The paper outlines some of the basic problems of the indigenous peoples and religious minorities in Bangladesh, and makes some concrete recommendations for its solution. But there has been no substantive progress in this regard till today. Particularly, the current situation of the Jumma indigenous people is worse than it was in the last year. It happened due to non-compliance with the CHT peace accord and other **international conventions on indigenous peoples and minorities** by the Government of Bangladesh. International development partners should address this issue very seriously. They should provide aid to the Government of Bangladesh on the condition of its compliance with the CHT peace accord and other international conventions on indigenous peoples and minorities. They should also have a monitoring group/mechanism to check whether or not the Government is complying with such condition on the ground.

The Jumma indigenous people should be given the right to design, implement and evaluate their own development policies and programs according to their needs, aspirations and cultural values. The Government of Bangladesh and international development partners should support them financially and technically in this regard for sustainable peace and development in the CHT.

[The end]

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