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COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection of
Minorities
Working Group on Indigenous Populations

Geneva
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Statement on behalf of the Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of
Human Rights.

Mr Chairman,

The Anti-Slavery Society wishes to draw the attention of the members of the Working Group to the situation of the tribal minority peoples habitually living within the Chitagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh. Based on our own research and a flow of information from the area we have previously drawn attention to grave violations of the basic human rights of the tribal populations of the CHT. To date our efforts have been mainly concerned with documentation and diplomatic representation to the Government of Bangladesh urging them to investigate the serious accusations of abuses made by members of the Bangladesh Parliament and others against Bangladesh army personnel, government officials and bengali settlers in the area. However we fear that militarization has increased despite our representations and those of other respected NGO's and we are now concerned that unless steps are taken urgently to find a political solution acceptable to the hill tracts tribes and protective of their land rights and other basic rights then there is a grave danger of the present military confrontation escalating towards a military solution to the hill tracts question. This we fear could lead to the total destruction of the economy and cultures of the tribal populations and further loss of life. The CHT is traditionally inhabited by 13 tribal groups different in race, religion and culture from the muslim bengali majority of Bangladesh. There are more than 600,000 tribal peoples in the district and up to 1960 they constituted more than 90 per cent of the local population. In 1964 the then administration of East Pakistan abolished the Special Status of the Hill Tracts and so paved the way for an influx of Bengali settlers and developers.

A major hydro electric power project based on a dam near Kaptai in the CHT was conceived without consultation with the affected population. International financing was made available from the USA and elsewhere and a United States company was contracted to build the dam. The reservoir that was created inundated 40 per cent of all the irrigated agricultural land in the CHT. More than 100,000 tribespeople were displaced. There was grossly inadequate provision for relocating or compensating the affected people. The displacement of one fifth of the total hill tracts population created severe pressure on the remaining land resources. Empoverishment and environmental degradation have been the result. It is estimated that up to 40,000 people fled to India while tens of thousands remained to create a large landless class in hill tracts society.

Since the independence of Bangladesh conditions for the tribal peoples have deteriorated further. While thousands of tribal peoples remain landless and uncompensated from the Kaptai dam there has been a growing influx of bengali settlers and businessmen seeking land in the hill tracts. Government officials and agencies have encouraged this invasion and have offered land and other incentives to muslim settlers and have awarded resource

WGIP 82/SAS-BGD/M

exploration contracts and concessions to national and international concerns without consultation with the local population. Reports even suggest that international aid has been made available to support this settlement programme. As a result by 1981 more than 225,000 bengalis had been settled in the district; more than 100,000 in 1980 alone. It is now a real local fear that new bengali settlers will soon become a majority within the tribal lands which could in turn remove all tribal representation from the national parliament and could lead to the detribalisation of the hill tracts district.

Tension has risen with the settler influx and it is estimated that one third of the total Bangladesh army are deployed in Chitagong District. Numerous operations by the army against tribal communities have been reported and army personnel have been accused by tribal political and religious leaders and by members of Parliament of numerous abuses including murder, rape, arson and sacrilegious attacks upon temples and monks. Two particularly well documented cases, the first concerning incidents during March 1980 in Kalampati Union and more recently during and since June 1981 in Matiranga Police Station district both brought to international attention by members of the Bangladesh Parliament have still not been officially investigated despite government promises to the contrary.

In both these cases and others the army is also accused of tolerating or even inciting rioting and looting by bengali settlers against tribal communities.

The abuses against tribal peoples and the resultant tensions has already caused some foreign staffed development programmes to withdraw from their projects in the hill tracts. United Nations agencies particularly the UNHCR have also become involved when during last year 18,000 tribals fleeing from army and rioting settlers crossed into Tripura state in India. The Anti-Slavery Society appeals to the distinguished Working Group to give this matter urgent attention.

We offer the following recommendations for consideration by the Working Group and the Government of Bangladesh.

The aim of these recommendations is to reduce the fear in which the tribal peoples in the CHT are presently existing and to make moves towards a political solution to the problem. We recommend that efforts be made to:

1. establish an independent investigation to examine the cases of abuse against the tribal peoples in the hill tracts;
2. reduce the number of troops operating in the CHT;
3. immediately halt the influx of bengali settlers into the hill tracts;
4. investigate and ensure that international aid and internationally financed projects are not used to the detriment or contribute to the destruction of tribal society in CHT;
5. immediately enter into discussion with all concerned including all sectors of tribal society with a view to reaching a political settlement which would respect the landrights, culture and identity of the indigenous peoples.

Finally, we feel it would facilitate these recommendations and reduce the present level of fear and suspicion if a UN mission could visit Bangladesh and be allowed free access to the hill tracts, and further feel that journalists and other international observers should be once again allowed access to this troubled region.