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PM



BANGLADESH

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Statement by Ms. Ishrat Jahan Ahmed, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations at the Fifth Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 24 May 2007, New York

Madam Chair,

Since I am taking the floor for the first time in this session, allow me to begin by congratulating you on your well-deserved election, and for chairing the Forum's sessions for these consecutive years with such a competence. Our appreciation is also owed to your colleagues and the distinguished members of the Forum.

Bangladesh attaches particular importance to the proceedings of this Forum. We believe it is an important platform for exchanging views on issues related to indigenous peoples. Such exercise would contribute to the promotion of their well-being. We have confidence that under your able stewardship the Forum would be able to contribute in advancing their cause.

Madam Chair,

As you are aware, in Bangladesh we have some tribal peoples. These tribes are the descendants of the settlers who had come from the region east of Bangladesh a few centuries back. They now live in different districts of the country.

Since her independence, Bangladesh is committed to maintain a society free from exploitation and discrimination. Bangladesh Constitution guarantees equal rights for all, but some special provisions are kept for particular section of citizens, including the tribal peoples. All citizens including the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh enjoy fundamental freedoms of religion, expression, association, occupation, movement, trade and so on.

The tribal communities are accorded various special privileges in order to enable themselves to attain sustainable development. These include fiscal, educational and social privileges and benefits. Three modern hospitals have been set up in the headquarters of the three hill districts. In the higher seats of the education institutions, including, universities, medical colleges and engineering universities, the tribal communities enjoy special quotas in addition to various scholarships. As a result of these affirmative actions, the literacy rate among the Chakmas, the largest of the tribes, has surpassed the national average.

Their privileges do not stop in education. Their work in the service of the republic is also guaranteed through quotas under the tribal category. Although they constitute approximately 1.5% of the total population, a full 5% of the government services are reserved for them. As you would see Madam Chair, the constitutional commitment to accord extra privileges to the tribal population extends to all sectors of development, education and work.

As you are well aware, Madam Chair, the majority of some two million tribal people in Bangladesh, lives in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Peace Accord signed in 1997 with the hill inhabitants ending 25 years of insurgency in the region is a unique example of the continued efforts by the Government to ensure their political, social, educational and economic rights.

Following the Accord, the Government not only declared general amnesty for the insurgents who surrendered their arms but also provided financial grants in national currency i.e., equivalent of 1,000 dollars to each of them to come back to normal life. Each of the 12,222 families who had returned from the neighboring country received financial and other benefits under a 20-point package programme. 71 members of Parbattya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) who surrendered their arms had been reinstated to their previous jobs in different government and autonomous bodies. Some 715 of them have been appointed in different posts in Police Service.

The Chittagong Hill District Regional Council, constituted by the leaders of tribal community, has been supervising and coordinating the work in the three hill districts of Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban. It is guided by the Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council Act 1998. A Land Commission has been established under the Land Commission Act 2001 to resolve land disputes in the region. The Chittagong Hill Tracts Regulation 1900 is also amended to set up District and Session Judge Courts in three hill districts. The temporary security forces camps are also being withdrawn in phases according to the provision of the Accord. 154 such camps have been withdrawn so far.

Madam Chair,

In order to facilitate the implementation of the Peace Accord, the Government has established a separate Ministry for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs. This Ministry has a clear and specific mandate to consolidate and further uphold the interests and rights of the ethnic minorities. Also a Parliamentary Standing Committee on the CHT affairs reviews the progress made in the hill districts on regular basis.

Since the Accord, the development activities in the region have been accelerated. The revenue budget allocation for Annual Development Programme (ADP) under the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts for the fiscal year 2005-2006 was more than 46 million dollars and in the year 2004-2005 it was more than 41 million dollars. In addition, there had been four bloc allocations of more than 19 million dollars each to implement 49 projects and 1200 schemes in sectors such as communication infrastructure, education,

health, agriculture, water supply, electrification, and other income generating activities. Various UN agencies including UNDP, UNICEF are also implementing development projects in the region. Many national and international NGOs are also active in the region.

Madam Chair,

We have noted the contents of some statements delivered in the Forum. I would like to draw, in particular, your attention to the joint statements which are made in the name of the 'Asian Indigenous Peoples Caucus'. We have noted with regret that in their statement they drew up a list of Asian countries, including mine, and attempted to link them with the list of certain political situations that are not true for all the countries in the list, particularly my own. We hope that the distinguished members of the Forum and the fellow delegates would discern the reality by taking into account the facts in the ground as well as be able to appreciate the sincere efforts by the Government. We would, therefore, urge you to reject any counter-productive propaganda in this Forum.

Madam Chair,

I would also like to draw your attention to the report submitted by the Special Rapporteur Mr. Rodolfo Stavenhagen. Some of the information that has been included in his report with respect to my country have not been able to fully reflect the reality in the ground. The declaration of the state of emergency in Bangladesh in January 2007 is within the framework of our constitution. This proclamation has overwhelming public support. The civil society and business and diplomatic community have also welcomed this declaration. The present caretaker Government has initiated a number of reform measures, many of which are structural in nature. The reform of the electoral process, the anti-corruption Commission among others is undertaken in order to administer a free, fair and transparent election, and to transfer power to the democratically elected government. This is the prime objective of the present Caretaker Government in line with the democratic tradition and aspiration of the 140 million citizens.

Madam Chair,

My Government remains in close consultations with the tribal communities and their representatives. We take pride in having versatile cultures and pluralist values coupled with our democratic ideals. Our efforts towards the socio-economic emancipation of tribal peoples as well as the commitments to preserve their inalienable rights are unflinching.

I thank you, madam chair.

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