



BANGLADESH

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Statement by Ms. Ishrat Jahan Ahmed, First Secretary, Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations at the Fourth Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues on agenda item 4 (a): Human Rights, 24 May 2005, New York

Madam Chair,

Let me begin by congratulating you for your well-deserved election. I am certain that the deliberations in the Forum will come to fruition under your able stewardship.

Bangladesh attaches particular importance to the proceedings of this Forum as a platform of exchanging views on issues related to indigenous peoples. Such exercise, we are sure, would contribute significantly to the promotion of their well-being.

Nevertheless, my delegation feels that it is critically important to distinguish between 'Indigenous people' and 'Tribal people'. The former, by definition, are the original inhabitants of any given territory or country. The tribals, on the other hand, are the population having distinct ethnic entities.

Bangladesh does not have any indigenous people. We have some ethnic minority groups who cannot be termed as 'indigenous people' in the context of its real meaning. They are tribal people. It is a historical fact that these tribes are the descendents of the settlers who came from the region east of Bangladesh a few centuries back.

Madam Chair,

Since its independence in 1971, the successive governments of Bangladesh have undertaken numerous positive measures to promote and protect the rights of the tribal community, including their customs and cultures. The constitution of Bangladesh while guarantees equal rights for all, some special provisions are kept for women, children and backward section of citizens, which also include of the tribal peoples. All citizens including the ethnic minorities in Bangladesh have freedoms of religion, expression, association, occupation, movement and so on.

The tribals are accorded various opportunities in order to enable themselves to attain sustainable development. These include fiscal, educational and social privileges and benefits. In educational institutions, including universities, medical colleges and engineering universities they enjoy special quotas as well as scholarships. As a result of these affirmative actions, the literacy rate among the Chakmas, the largest of the tribes, has grown even higher than the national average. Also in public services there are quotas for tribal communities. At the last civil service recruitment the religious and ethnic minorities constituted more than 12 percent of the total intake, which also included the tribals.

As you are well aware, Madam Chair, there are some two million tribal people in Bangladesh. The majority 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 effort 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 them financial grants in national currency equivalent of 1,000 dollars to each of them to come back to normal life. 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. As per the Accord, temporary security forces camps are also being withdrawn in phases.

Madam Chair,

In order to facilitate the implementation of the Peace Accord, the Government has established a separate Ministry for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs headed by the Prime Minister herself, and is deputed by a representative from the majority Chakma tribe. This Ministry has a clear and specific mandate to consolidate and further uphold the interests and rights of the ethnic minorities. Since the Accord, the development activities in the region have been accelerated despite financial constraints. The revenue budget allocation for Annual Development Programme (ADP) under the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts for the fiscal year 2004-2005 is more than 2.5 million dollars. Various UN agencies are also implementing development programs in the region.

As all are aware, Madam Chair, Bangladesh is a land of communal harmony and peace. To our knowledge, there is no report of desecration of temples or other religious places in our territory. Just yesterday we joined our Buddhist brothers and sisters in the UN to celebrate the Vesak Day Ceremony as one of the sponsors of the event. Bangladesh's commitment to peace is now well known. We table, for last couple of years, the UN Resolution on Culture of Peace. Our peacekeepers are contributing to maintain peace in the conflict areas around the globe.

Madam Chair,

We have noted the contents of some statements made in the Forum. It is a matter of regret that most of those made on human rights situation in Bangladesh in the context of CHT are deliberately targeted and baseless. It would be our hope that the Forum would be able to distinguish between the constructive arguments and the malicious propaganda, which would not support anybody's cause. We would also be in a position to provide further information in due course, if becomes necessary.

Madam Chair,

My Government remains in close consultations with the tribal communities. We take pride in having versatile cultures and pluralist values coupled with our democratic ideals. Our efforts towards the welfare and socio-economic emancipation of tribal peoples are indeed unshakable. Our commitment to preserve the inalienable rights of all our peoples, including the tribals, is unflinching.

I thank you.