

ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY
FOR THE
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

REPORT TO THE WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS, 1989

Chittagong Hill Tracts

This Society has reported year after year on the physical assaults perpetrated by the civil and military authorities of Bangladesh on the minority hill peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. A strand running through the turmoil has been a lack of trust on the part of the indigenous peoples in the assurances of government. A recent event illustrates this sorry situation.

On the night of 10 May this year soldiers of the East Bangal Regiment, armed with light machine guns and under the command of a non-commissioned officer, entered the compound of the rajbari, the residence of Raja Devashish Roy, the leader of the Chakma people. Soldiers, varying in number from eight to over 30, stayed in the compound for three days and two nights; some even ventured on to the verandahs. The troops were eventually withdrawn by a second lieutenant. During this period of occupation by the soldiers, the Raja and members of his family were not allowed to leave and visitors were forbidden to enter the rajbari. Also confined in the residence was Rajmata Benita Roy, a former cabinet minister and adviser on tribal affairs to the government of President Zia-Ur-Rahman who was assassinated in 1981. There was no official communication from the military authorities and the soldiers could give no reason why they were on private property. During this effective house arrest the telephone was mysteriously out of order but, just as mysteriously, it started functioning again when the troops left.

When the Anti-Slavery Society asked for assurances about the Raja's safety from the High Commission for The People's Republic of Bangladesh in London it was told:

"The Government of Bangladesh has categorically denied reports about house arrest of Chakma Raja Dewashish Roy."

News of the house arrest has appeared in the Indian press, and the Anti-Slavery Society has in its possession signed statements by eye witnesses that the Raja and his family were definitely confined in the rajbari by armed soldiers.

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Trust is also essential to the functioning of democracy. It is a widely-held view in the hill tracts that the results of the 25 June district council elections were known before polling took place, and it is equally widely believed that the army was instrumental in selecting the candidates, both tribal and Bengali. What are not matters of opinion are the facts that government employees were not allowed to leave the tracts capital, Rangamati, from 5 June until after the elections, and that there are no residential qualifications for voting. Any newly arrived Bengali from the plains was entitled to vote.

According to the recently published World Bank's World Development Report, Bangladesh's defence budget almost doubled between 1972 and 1987. Information reaching the Anti-Slavery Society suggests that up to 100,000 soldiers may be currently based in Rangamati, and as many as two-thirds of the nation's armed forces may be policing the hill tracts. For a country not at war, the numbers are disproportionate, even though Rangamati's population has increased by some 60 per cent during the last decade to about 20,000. The increase has been caused by hill people and Bengalis, the former seek refuge and food there after being robbed of their land at gunpoint by both the army and Bengali settlers; the latter are shopkeepers, teachers, government employees and settlers en route to their promised new lands.

But many of the settlers, illiterate and impoverished, are as deserving of sympathy as censure. Currently there are between 500 and 1000 Bengali families in Rangamati working as labourers, in fact doing whatever they can. For them, neither the promised land nor the material support was forthcoming; the standard government promise - "some" land, seven seers (roughly seven kilos) of rice and three to four hundred takas (50 takas equals £1) per family - proved empty. But their mere presence in the hill tracts helps the ethnographical manipulation.

The Anti-Slavery Society, in this forum and elsewhere, has long supported the contention of the 13 tribes of the Chittagong Hill Tracts that their ethnic and cultural identity is under threat. It is in our view significant that the Raja's house arrest prevented him from officiating at the opening of an extension to a Buddhist temple on 12 May. On that day some 1000 people from outlying villages returned home without attending the ceremony - If the Raja could be prevented from attending what could happen to them?

Currently, outsiders can visit Rangamati only with official permission which is obtained with great difficulty in Dhaka. Anyone discovered talking to the rare foreigner is later questioned by security or military personnel. The hills around the capital are being deforested by Bangalis who do not plant anew. In so doing they are not only destroying the traditional lands and lifestyle of the tribespeople, they are also inflicting ecological damage and ensuring that the floods that wreak so much damage in the plains will become a feature of a previously environmentally stable area. Since late spring the traditionally clean and well-stocked waters round Rangamati have been full of dead fish. There has so far been no official inquiry into the cause of this and, in the meantime, a source of protein for the poor has been lost and fisherman further impoverished.

The hill people did not and do not want elections for the councils of the three districts that will comprise only a tenth of the tracts. They fear that not only are the elections rigged, but that Dhaka is using a seemingly democratic process further to deprive the indigenous inhabitants of power over their own lives.

The Anti-Slavery Society recommends that:

1. any future elections be held under the auspices of the United Nations;
2. all the peoples of Bangladesh be free to practice their religion and maintain their distinctive cultures;
3. consultations on equal terms be held between the government and hill people representatives to see how far the present administrative divisions are acceptable to those who will be governed under them;
4. the hill tracts be demilitarised;
5. no further Bengalis are settled in the tracts and those settlers already there who do not pre-date the Bangladeshi state be encouraged to return with compensation;
6. re-afforestation - perhaps with funding from UNDP and expertise from FAO - be started immediately.

The fact that some of these recommendations are not new, only adds to their urgency.