

BANGLADESH STATEMENT TO THE WORKING GROUP
ON INDIGENOUS POPULATION ON AUGUST 3, 1988

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Madam Chairperson,

Let me express our warm congratulations to you on your re-election. We are pleased to see you in the chair. You deserve our deep appreciation for your continuing tireless efforts in injecting in the work of this Working Group a degree of balance, moderation and pragmatism coupled with imaginative approach. We pledge to you our fullest co-operation.

My delegation has requested for the floor to respond to the observations made yesterday regarding Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The contents of that statement lack objectivity and impartially and do not correspond to the actual situation on the ground. It seems obvious that in his urge to abuse the sanctity of the forum, the speaker aired sweeping accusations in this Working Group without making any effort whatsoever to ascertain their veracity through the established practice of soliciting the comments of government concerned through the Human Rights Centre. This is reinforced by the fact that while baseless allegations were highlighted, the speaker conveniently remained silent about unprovoked attacks and atrocities on innocent tribal and non-tribal inhabitants perpetrated recently in the area by the so-called "Shanti Bahini" terrorists elements. These acts of barbarism were reported in international media. The list of atrocities perpetrated by the terrorists elements on the innocent men, women and children is contained in document E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1990/4 dated

8th of June 1990 circulated at this session of the Working Group on Indigenous Population. These facts of terrorism have also been reported by Amnesty International in its 1990 report.

To put the whole matter in the correct perspective, may I say that Bangladesh has a 110 million people of which less than 1/2% (half per cent) are tribal origin. 13 ethnic groups live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area and each is ethnically distinct from the other. The names of the tribes are contained in the document No. E/CN.4/Sub.2/AC.4/1989/2/Add.1.

You will not find, Madam Chairperson, any mention of Jhuma people in that document, for there is no people of that name in Bangladesh as claimed. May I also submit that to call the tribal people by imaginary names other than their distinct tribal names is an insult to them. The speaker has done so only to mislead the Working Group.

It may be mentioned that by its decision 109/1989 of 31st of August 1989 contained in Document number E/CN.4/Sub.2/1989/58 of 13th November, 1989, the Sub-Commission expressed satisfaction to Government of Bangladesh on the treatment of tribal population. This has evidently upset certain interested quarters, including the terrorist elements as they realised that their campaign to mislead and confuse the international community had failed. They became very desperate and the present statement is nothing but a demonstration of their desperation and contains old stories of false allegations which were considered and examined by the Sub-Commission. To put it simply, the content of the present statement is an "old wine in a new bottle" and deserves to be dismissed and our statement of 2nd August 1989 before this Working Group has

adequately replied to these baseless allegations already.

Pursuant to the recommendations of the National Committee, laws were passed in the Parliament for self-management of the areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts by the tribal people. Thereafter the elections to the local bodies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts were held amidst much enthusiasm on June 25, 1989.

The attempt made in the statement to depict the election of May 1989 as not free and fair simply contradicts the despatches of international media whose representatives freely covered the election. Representatives of VOA, New York Times, AP, Daily Statesman of Calcutta (India), Ananda Bazar Patrika of Calcutta (India). All India Radio, Press Trust of India, AFP, Time Magazine, BBC, Kydo News Service, Sunday of Indian Weekly and the representatives of the Diplomatic Corps resident in Bangladesh were given full access to cover the election to see for themselves the participation of the population of the CHT in the election.

All these despatches from the foreign media persons demonstrate that the election was fair, free and peaceful and the tribal population spontaneously participated in the election with much enthusiasm. They did not heed to the vote-boycott call by the Shanti Bahini - an armed wing of JSS. The tribal people knew very well that the election would lead to the setting up of District Councils which will manage their own affairs for the welfare of the tribal people of CHT.

Displaced persons from CHT

As I have just mentioned, there are 13 ethnic groups in the

tribal population living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. All tribes, except only a miniscule extremist terrorist group from the Chakma tribe, live peacefully and participate effectively in nation building activities. They live in complete peace and harmony enjoying fully all fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution and laws of Bangladesh.

Sometime in the past, a section of tribal population from Chittagong Hill Tracts area adjoining Indian state of Tripura were victims of false propaganda and senseless atrocities by terrorist elements and they had gone across the border. They cannot be called refugees because they left Bangladesh because of the lure and propaganda of terrorist elements. At one stage, total number of persons who crossed the border was 29,920. Once these displaced have found that they were grossly misled, they were disillusioned and decided to return to Bangladesh. Nearly 20 thousand (19,426 till April 1990) have returned and more are returning everyday to Bangladesh. Once they return to Bangladesh, the Government assists them in resettling in their own lands. If they are landless, they are provided with 5 acres of lands.

General Amnesty was declared by the Government for the misguided persons of Shanti Bahini. Many former regulars of Shanti Bahini surrendered to the Government as they became disillusioned by the motives and activities of the leaders of JSS and Shanti Bahini.

The return of all displaced persons to Bangladesh would have become complete by now but for the threats and violent physical attacks on their way to Bangladesh. This fact was corroborated by independent observers, such as Barbara Crossette who after visiting the area, filed a report in the New York Times of June 26, 1989.

The Government of Bangladesh, from time to time and at the highest level, reiterated its commitment to take back all displaced persons of Bangladesh origin.

The District Councils run by the tribal people are functioning smoothly since July 1989. Two most important rights i.e. right to transfer of land and the vesting of the police force have been given to the District Council. In no country of the region, such powers and authority have been given by laws to the tribal people.

In order to promote further the quality of life of the disadvantaged group in the country, the Government of Bangladesh has recently constituted a Ministry called "Ministry of Special Areas". The Hon'ble Vice President is in charge of this Ministry. This is a demonstration of the commitment, sincerity of the Government of Bangladesh to further improve the welfare of all disadvantaged people including the people of the Shittagong Hill Tracts.

It is regrettable that when the tribal people of CHT are now governing themselves with wide powers and when such revolutionary measures have been taken by the Government to promote the welfare of the people of CHT through self-management, some interested quarters, continue to spread malicious, distorted and motivated propaganda to mislead and confuse the reality.

Conclusion:

In the light of the situation explained above, it is clear that the contents of the statement are devoid of truth.

The speaker conveniently remained silent about the dastardly and cowardly attacks by the Shanti Bahini terrorists.

Is it not surprising that the speaker who claims to protect the rights of the tribal population is silent on these attacks on innocent men, women and children in Chittagong Hill Tracts area or about the revolutionary changes towards self-government which is unique and unprecedented in our region? It appears obvious that the purpose of the statement is to distort and twist the truth, to divert attention away from the heinous crimes of terrorists and to abuse the sanctity of this forum.