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Statement by Mrinal Kanti Tripura

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Agenda Item: 5 General Statement

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Thank you Mr. Chairman for giving me the floor.

My name is Mrinal Kanti Tripura. I am from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. I am speaking on behalf of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), the political organization that represents the 11 different indigenous peoples, commonly known as Jumma, who have been living in the CHT since time immemorial.

Mr. Chair, members of the Permanent Forum, representatives of the member states, representatives of UN specialized agencies, indigenous brothers and sisters of the world please accept heartiest greetings from the indigenous peoples of the CHT.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to congratulate you on your election as the chairman for this first historic session of the Permanent Forum.

I am grateful to the UN Voluntary Fund for the Indigenous Populations for providing me financial assistance to attend this forum.

Mr. Chair, ladies and gentlemen, the Jumma people have had to struggle for more than two decades under the leadership of the PCJSS for the establishment of the self-determination of the indigenous peoples. Some of you may be aware that an agreement was reached between the PCJSS and Government of Bangladesh in 1997, generally known as the CHT Accord. It was hailed by the international community as a positive step towards re-establishment of peace and the revival of self-rule in the region.

However, almost five years after the signing of the accord, major provisions of the Accord remain unimplemented. These include: (i) hundreds of army and para-military camps remain stationed in the region; (ii) the government-sponsored non-indigenous settlers still remain in the region who have been receiving regular free rations and other benefits from the government since 1978; (iii) many of the international Jumma refugees and all of the internally displaced Jumma people remain unrehabilitated; (iv) the Land Commission, which was to start its work to resolve land disputes – especially between Jummas and settlers – has not begun its work; and (v) powers, as per concerned Acts have not been transferred to the CHT Regional Council and the three Hill District Councils, including Law and order, Civil Administration and Land Administration.

A non-indigenous settler has been elected in the 8th Parliament from the CHT through an election that included non-residents as voters. This Member of Parliament has also been

appointed as the Chairman of the CHT Development Board, although the CHT Accord provides that this post would be reserved for an indigenous person

Discrimination against indigenous people still continues at various levels of government. Indigenous peoples' NGOs and other organizations are constantly put under Police and intelligence agencies' surveillance. For instance Six of such organizations have been put under strict surveillance. The GOC, 24 Infantry Division, commander of the area, recently started collecting information from indigenous NGOs regarding their membership, political and ideological affiliations, ethnicity and etc. According to the NGO Bureau Circular dated 29th May 2001 the CHT Regional Council and the three Hill Districts Councils are responsible for the supervision and coordination of the NGOs working in the CHT. The CHT Regional Council Acts also empowers it to take care of these NGOs. We do not understand why the military should interfere on the NGOs. This move testifies the presence of military rule in the region.

The NGO Bureau Circular, which was issued on 29th May, 2001 by Hasina government has some clauses which are bright examples of racial discriminatory policy of the government towards the CHT indigenous peoples. The CHT based indigenous NGOs are the victim of racial discrimination. They are often denied of NGO Bureau registration for receiving foreign funding or hurdles for years through frustrating investigations. One voluntary organization, **Trinamul** I am associated with has been refused for NGO Bureau registration for receiving a small fund towards an innocent project from the UN Voluntary Fund on Indigenous Population. Registration is necessary to receive foreign funding.

Almost 500 army camps remain in the area, making the CHT one of the most militarized areas in the world. Human rights violations by military and Police personnel still happen without any adequate measures by the government to prevent them or to punish those are found guilty. Instances of rape of indigenous women have gone unpunished as the Police refuse to accept a case against military personnel. This happened in 2001 in Matiranga sub-district of Khagrachari district. The people of the CHT and Bangladesh and also the donor community are looking at the new government led by Begum Khaleda Zia for a pragmatic policy towards the CHT to ensure peace and development through the proper implementation of the CHT Accord. The CHT Accord provides a firm basis to establish peace and justice in the CHT hence, the active involvement of civil society of Bangladesh and the international community including the UN is very urgent and important.

I recommend that the Permanent Forum monitor/supervise the implementation of Peace Accords and other agreements entered into between member states and Indigenous Peoples.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.