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Joint statement by

Sanjeeb Drong

For

Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum and Justice and Peace Integration of Creation, Bangladesh



Agenda Item 4 (d): Human Rights

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me this opportunity to speak.

My name is Sanjeeb Drong and I am representing the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum, a national forum for indigenous peoples of Bangladesh. I speak on behalf of our organizations and my community Garo of northern part of Bangladesh.

As in many other parts of the world, the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh are facing serious human rights violations. Our land, forest and territory where we lived have been taken away without our free, prior and informed consent, to build National parks, dams, Eco-parks, reserve forests, protected areas, tourism and even establishing military bases and training centres. In some of the areas known as "reserved forests", not only are the original inhabitants regarded as encroachers and treated as serfs, but they are also victimized by assaults of Forest guards and hundreds of oppressive criminal cases. It is our misfortune perhaps that we are discriminated against not only as indigenous peoples, but also as linguistic and religious minorities.

Mr. Chairman, indigenous peoples are under heavy pressure from developments beyond our control. Land dispossession is a serious problem in other parts of Bangladesh as well, in the south, northwest, northeast, and north-central Bangladesh including the greater Mymensingh area, which is my traditional home. However, large parts of the territories of our Garo and Khasi peoples are still considered as a "reserved forest", which is guarded by Forest guards carrying guns. At one time our territory was constitutionally recognized as a specially administered area. That is no more, and without our consent.

In 2001, the Bangladesh government started a programme to establish "Eco-parks" on Khasi and Garo land in Moulvibazar district for so-called tourism development. 1,000 indigenous families are threatened with eviction from their ancestral land. Another Eco-park project has been taken in Modhupur forest to evict 25,000 indigenous peoples from their ancestral homeland. Similarly, many other aboriginal lands, even those with private titles, have been unfairly and illegally taken over by non-indigenous people, in violation of the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 (Section 97), which restricts transfer of aboriginal land title to non-aboriginals.

Mr. Chairman, we are fearful that the situation of human rights of indigenous peoples of Bangladesh will not improve without the constitutional recognition of the indigenous peoples, the implementation of the CHT Peace Accord, and the inclusion of indigenous peoples' representatives in the appropriate policy-making bodies, including the Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and the Special Affairs Division, in a substantive manner.

Mr. Chairman, we would urge the Permanent Forum to consider the following matters:

- Encourage reforms within the ILO system to enable indigenous peoples to have formal access to the body and to play a more direct role in helping monitor the compliance of the Conventions No. 169 and 107;
- States should have independent national human rights commission and indigenous representation should be ensured in the commission
- Permanent Forum should have role to monitor that states are maintaining and implementing the rights of indigenous peoples written in the conventions they have ratified

Thank you.
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