

Madam Chairperson,

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I feel personally privileged to be able to make this intervention when you are presiding over this important Working Group dealing with Indigenous populations. The eminent qualities which you bring to your post are well known and we have every confidence that the Group's work will benefit immensely from your impartial, constructive and rich leadership. Infact, like many other delegations we also believe that one of the foremost responsibilities of this Working Group consists in evolving standards relating to the rights of indigenous population. The broad approach which you have tried to follow so far in conducting the work of this Group has positively contributed towards this end.

The Bangladesh delegation is, however, dismayed and amazed to note that in the course of general debate in this working group efforts have been made by some to divert this body from its basic purpose and to convert it into a chamber of complaints or a tribunal in individual instances. Attempts have thus been made to present before the Working Group baseless allegations regarding the current situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in my country. These attempts to tranish the image of my country through a deliberate misrepresentation of facts is unprecedented in its nature and hardly consistent with the professed sincere humanitarian vocations of those who have actually made them. The Bangladesh delegation has, therefore, no hesitation in rejecting them.

Madam Chairperson,

May I in this connection convey to you the position of my government on the whole gamut of issues relating to the situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts which, I hope, will help the Working Group to appreciate the existing situation in that area in its proper perspective. But before doing that I would like to reiterate our well known stand that any attempt to define the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts as indigenous populations is not only erroneous but is

also based on arguments having very scant respect for scientific reasoning. It is the considered view of my delegation that in defining the indigenous populations practical insight should be derived from the historical experience, in those countries where racially distinct people coming from overseas established colonies and subjugated the indigenous populations. No such situation ever existed in Bangladesh where the people coexisted through recorded history with complete communal harmony. The factual situation is that the entire population of Bangladesh falls under the category of autochthon and should be described as such in any objective analysis.

Infact, if any attempt had ever been made to isolate the tribal people in Bangladesh from the main-stream of life in Bangladesh it was the attempt made during the colonial period by the then authorities who tried to deny the tribal people the benefits of modern communications, agricultural and industrial development and other developmental activities. Colonial authorities also tried to isolate the area for strategic and security reasons. After the emergence of Bangladesh, this artificial separation was rejected politically as well as legally for practical considerations and for the benefit of the people in the area. The people in the area were guaranteed equal access to law and economic opportunities irrespective of residence or of tribal affiliations. They participated in national elections and held important posts in successive national governments. Only a few months ago that is in May this year, the people of Bangladesh, including the entire population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts participated in electing Upazila Chairmen, the elected head of the local administration, in a peaceful atmosphere on the basis of one man one vote.

My delegation naturally fails to understand the allegations made by some in this august body regarding programmes and action of my government in the area particularly the allegations implying that the policies and programmes of Bangladesh government have led to uprooting of the local people. These allegations are not corroborated by fact nor do they reflect the existing reality in the area. Infact, any movement of people to and from the Chittagong Hill Tracts is comparable to normal intra-regional migration in any other country and by no way assumed, at any point of time,

an overwhelming proportion so as to cause perceptible and substantive harm to local people. The movement of people to and from this area into other areas in Bangladesh is also perfectly consistent with the basic human rights of all citizens of Bangladesh including the Tribal people who have unrestrained right to freedom of movement.

I may here also stress that contrary to what has been alleged by some in this Working Group the basic objective of the enlightened policy of the Government of Bangladesh has ^{always} been to improve the quality of life of the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts and to assist them in their endeavour to accelerate economic development. This is reflected in many initiatives undertaken by the Government of Bangladesh. In addition to the normal development activities within the framework of the Annual Development Plan, the Government of Bangladesh has thus formulated and is assiduously implementing a Special Five Year Development Plan for the Chittagong Hill Tracts area with a total outlay of Tk.2,630 million (about US\$100 million) for which special budgetary provision has been made outside the normal Annual Development Plan. The genuine desire to help the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts reflected in these special efforts have an added significance as these efforts are being made at a time when Bangladesh is faced with a very critical situation with respect to availability of resources to be employed in different priority areas.

In addition to allocation of additional resources, the government of Bangladesh has also undertaken appropriate administrative reorganisation and provided necessary framework to promote developmental activities in the area. The government has thus divided the Hill Tracts Region into three administrative districts, namely, Rangamati, Khagrachari and Bandarban with a view to achieving all-round development in the administrative, socio-economic and cultural fields. Fruitful collaboration has already been initiated with the Asian Development Bank, an international agency for the rehabilitation of the tribal population. With a view to developing human resources, Government has sanctioned funds for construction of Schools, Colleges and students' hostels

in Chittagong Hill Tracts to promote education. Besides, seats have been reserved in the Engineering University, Agricultural University, all other Universities, Medical Colleges, Colleges and Polytechnic Institutions for the tribal students from this area. Certain percentage of all categories of posts, including the highest category in government services have been reserved for eligible tribal people.

It has also been decided to create a "Special Economic Zone" comprising certain areas of the Hill Tracts for over-all agro-economic development. Special facilities and incentives have also been provided in the form of customs and tax relief, exemption from sales tax on imported capital goods, reduced rate of interest on bank loans and tax holiday. As a consequence of these steps, the Chittagong Hill Tracts area have been witnessing unprecedented developmental activities during the recent years benefitting the tribal people residing in the area. It cannot be that those who have spoken about the situation in Chittagong Hill Tracts are unaware of these developments. What surprises us most is that although they profess to be impartial and objective and espousing the cause of economic and social wellbeing of the people of the area they have chosen to omit any reference to positive developments now taking place in the area.

We were also surprised at the deliberate attempts made in some of the statements to represent in a distorted manner the law and order situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Totally baseless and preposterous allegations have thus been made about so-called atrocities perpetrated in the area. We cannot but reject these allegations categorically. Such insinuations lead us to believe that there is some basis in thinking that the tribal people are being fomented by certain foreign agencies. In this connection it was worth noting that in this august forum on Human Rights attempts were made to inject extraneous political elements amounting to interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state which has nothing to do with humanitarian considerations relating to the people in the area.

At the risk of being repititive I may here underline the fact that the basic policy of the security forces in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has always been to ensure peace and security in the area and to ensure the rule of law for the benefit of the common people. There has been no attempt on the part of the government to coerce people in any way and the government has been trying relentlessly to improve conditions for all round social and economic development. Government has also announced a general amnesty for the misguided elements. These measures have been widely welcomed and even the most neutral of observers have recognised their positive impact. Following this amnesty more than 3000 misguided elemtns have returned to the fold of lawful activities and are pursuing peaceful professions as law abiding citizens. This development by itself speaks of the confidence now reigning in the area amidst local people about the government policies. Finally, peaceful elections in my country held barely two months ago to elect the heads of the local administration on the basis of universal adult francise in which the people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts participated enthusiastically also convincingly exposes the real character of the allegations made before this august body about situation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and their total irrelevance in the present day context.