

Item No 5

Speaker : Ms. Chanmayo Jajo, Executive Member, NPMHR
Organisation : Naga People's Movement for Human Rights

Statement made at the 17th session of the UNWGIP, GENEVA, 26-30 July, 1999

Madame Chairperson, honourable delegates and indigenous brothers and sisters and the communities they represent.

In 1978, the NPMHR was formed with an 11 - point charter declaration, where point 3 declares, 'the right to live together as a people and the unification of all Naga lands'. We have recently celebrated 20 years of our movement. Thank you to all those nations from whom we have received solidarity for all these years. Thanks also to the friends who helped us to get here for this session.

As many of you know, the Naga homeland is located at the meeting point between South Asia, South-East and East Asia. The boundary lines that cut across the traditional Naga homelands are a legacy of British colonialism. In post-independent India, the contiguous Naga homeland has been further divided into parts of the state of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and the whole of the state of Nagaland and some parts of south west Burma.

The Nagas are concerned that even as the new millennium approaches, they are separated under different systems of administrations and are subject to the laws of different countries for more than a century. Obviously, such state policies have kept the Naga people apart from each other. At the same time, our knowledge systems, land utilisation and management have been undermined. We are still experiencing displacement, dislocation and dispossession from our ancestral lands due to the pursuit of state policies which are in violation of international covenants and agreements. Obviously, in this case the problem lies with the refusal by the Indian Government to recognise the indigenous peoples ~~living~~ in India. Similarly, many of our indigenous sisters and brothers are caught in this predicament in other parts of the world. We urge the Working Group therefore to use the fresh and updated insights that have been offered by the indigenous communities in the past few days. We realise that the adoption of an acceptable definition will have potent political implications, but we believe that the Working Group will bear in mind the rights of the indigenous peoples above every other consideration.

Currently, the Land Acquisition Amendment Bill, 1998 is going to be introduced in the Indian Parliament. Another Draft Forest Bill which is being circulated is called the Conservation of Forests and Natural Eco-System Act. These new Bills, if enacted, will have profound consequences upon the underprivileged sections of the society and will in particular hit the indigenous people. This will further marginalise them. They will have the effect of rendering the ownership of forests by the forest dwellers and the indigenous tribal communities precarious as they by and large favour industry.

It may be pertinent to state here that in the contiguous Naga territory in Manipur, out of the total land area, 70% is well within the ancestral boundaries of the Naga villages. It is a telling fact that more than 90% of the sawmill industry in Manipur is located in the ~~contiguous~~ valley area. Our forests are feeding these mills. Our people are also concerned over the repeated attempts by the state government to extend acts such as the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms Act, 1960 to the hill areas. These laws do not incorporate and recognise the ownership, customary laws and traditional practices of the indigenous hill people. In the Naga homeland, there is no 'khas' or government land except those areas and forests which were acquired or declared reserved, often without the free and informed consent of the people and by flouting the provisions of the land acquisition laws. Madam Chair, can boundaries be created between the people and the land/forest? The tensions and conflicts generated by such state policies and laws over the indigenous lands have resulted in ethnic conflicts. Presently, the Naga territories in the Moreh and Senapati areas of Manipur are under threat of alienation. The Manipur state government is in the process of further bifurcating the Naga territory in the Senapati district into Kangpokpi/Sadar Hill district. The Nagas stand to lose a substantial area of their ancestral land. Where is the right to our life and land? Even the Indo-Myanmar border trade along the Naga territories in Moreh is not accessible to us due to the ethnic violence which has gripped the area in the past few years. The tacit support of the state government to those who seek to divest us of our land rights is compounding the problem of land alienation.

Madam Chair, we will continue to inform you of further developments.

In closing, I reiterate the Naga desire to come together and live together as one people in a united Nagalim. Please join us in our struggle.

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