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STATEMENT

BY

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CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH**

Thank you, Chair and distinguish participants.

First of all, I would like to introduce myself I am Lal Dawnsang Amlai, Chairman of the Bawm Literature Forum (BLF) and belong to the Bawm indigenous people in Bangladesh. I am indeed happy to be able to represent my people's issues at this 3rd session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

Mr. Chair,

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) is the territory of free hill-dwelling indigenous peoples and was unknown to the lowlander tribal peoples and Aryans (Bengali) for a long time. The CHT, which had been outside the authority of any state till the British invasion, was separated from the Chittagong district in 1860 due mainly to the Bawm (Kuki/Chin group) rebellion. In 1947 it was incorporated into East Pakistan. Then, in 1971 it was included into a new-born country, Bangladesh and till today it is under the governance of the Bangladesh Government.

The Bawms are one of the most neglected and under-privileged groups in the CHT in terms of education and development in spite of the assistance being provided to the CHT by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) and NGOs. Since the Bawm people's habitat is mostly situated in inaccessible regions or high in the mountains where transport is very difficult, their everyday cries have remained unheard. Their rights are not only dishonored by the GOB but also by the majority groups in the CHTRC (Chittagong Hill Tract Regional Council). The Bawms are indeed a backward group in the field of education in the greater CHT compared to other indigenous peoples. Therefore, today they need assistance from the UN and other international bodies to pursue development and protect their rights.

In CHT there are 11 indigenous peoples/nations who are living side by side. The total population of these people is about six hundreds thousand. In earlier periods, the indigenous groups were in the majority in the CHT, but they are now, due to the Bengali people's influence, influx and intrusion, gradually and systematically becoming a minority in their own territory. The Bengalis have increased in numbers in the CHT.

Mr. Chair,

The indigenous peoples started losing their lands due chiefly to their unconsciousness and lack of their political foresight as to their own indigenous rights as declared by the UN. The Bangladesh govt. systematically grabbed CHT lands by extending military camps. A large area of the land has already been occupied by the GOB by establishing cantonments and infiltrating illegal settlers from low lands. The hill peoples have now been feeling insecure on account of the huge military presence in the area. The illegal settlers are grabbing the lands and sometime burning the villages of the hill peoples with the help of the military. In addition, the GOB is attempting to design a blueprint in a bid to evict the most remote indigenous peoples by grabbing their ancestral land and setting up so-called 'Eco-Park' or using other pretexts. The indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are on the brink of total extermination in their ancestral lands and other important places like cemeteries and holy places. Many indigenous people have received physically injuries, some have been killed and women have been raped during the struggle to protect and establish their own rights on their own lands against illegal settlers.

After Bangladesh independence in 1971, the leaders of the CHT submitted a five points demand to the Bangladesh government. But the government rejected their fair demands. The CHT leaders were then obliged to take their own way to support their demands. In 1997, after two decades of armed struggle, the leaders of the CHT agreed to sign a "Peace Accord" with the GOB. Although the accord was signed, it was controversial among the indigenous minority groups (the Bawm, Pang, Lushai, Khumi, Khyang, Mru) in the CHT. The smaller groups (Bawms) are not satisfied as to the composition of the CHT Regional Council's (CHTRC) representation in which their rights have been neglected and dishonored. The Bawms, therefore, are disappointed with unequal distribution of representation in the CHTRC. But the Bawms would like to see the Accord fully implemented by the present govt. as soon as possible. At the same time, during the period of implementation, the Bawms would heartily welcome CHTRC pressure on the GOB to amend the Accord so that equal representation can be assured.

We, the Bawm Literature Forum (BLF), therefore would like to draw the Chair's kind attention to the above statement and take necessary action. And to protect and promote the Bawms literature, culture, customs and human rights.

Thank you