

**The 24th Session of the United Nation's Working Group on Indigenous
Populations**

Palais des Nations, Geneve.
(31 July to 4 August 2006)

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Thank you Mr. /Madam Chairperson for giving me this opportunity to address the 24th Session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

Mr. or Madam, Chair, my presentation is on the issue of lands of the Indigenous Peoples of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) that are being constantly seized by the government of Bangladesh and utilized for military purposes.

Mr./Madame Chairperson, in a public meeting held in Panchhari of Chittagong Hill tracts on May 26, 1979 by the agents of military dictator Ziaur Rahman's army commander of the region said, "We want only the land of Chittagong Hill Tracts, and not the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts." , Islamization of Chittagong Hill Tracts by evicting its original inhabitants or indigenous peoples had been initiated 1947 violating the Chittagong Hill tracts Treaty of 1900 that prohibits non-indigenous people's buying of land and or settling in the region, and pursued by all Bangladeshi governments became an openly declared policy in 1979.

Pursuing this policy of ridding Chittagong Hill Tracts of its original inhabitants or indigenous peoples, successive governments have conducted a systematic campaign of religious & ethnic cleansing by using their party cadres, armed forces, and paramilitary forces, thus reducing the region's population from 98% in 1947 to 50% by 1997 (see *International Religious Freedom's* Country Report 2001). This violent campaign of Islamizing the region has gradually escalated particularly ever since the ruling government of "Islamic hardliners" {*The Guardian*, October 2, 2001) assumed power with absolute majority in October 2001. Violence against the indigenous peoples of the country has involved sending Muslim settlers backed by the armed forces to evict the indigenous people of that region through relentless persecution and continual pogroms and massacres, which have included burning down of entire villages after gang-raping their women, systematically murdering all their residents and then setting the entire village ablaze (e.g., Logang massacre of April 10, 1992, and Mahalchari pogrom of 2003).

The lands of the indigenous peoples or Jumma People of Chittagong Hill Tracts is not only being used to settle the Muslim settlers who are being continuously sent there, but also for the ever increasing number of military and paramilitary brigade head quarters or cantonments, and military outposts.

Mr./Madame Chairperson, four full fledged Brigade Head Carters or Cantonments have been set up in the region. They are Rangamati Cantonment, Khagrachari Cantonment, Bandarban Cantonment and Kaptai Cantonment. Each cantonment of Brigade Head Carter has three to four Battalion Head Carters like All Kadam , Naikkhyang Chari, Ruma etc. which have been set up in the forward regions deep inside the farm land of residential areas of the indigenous peoples. Please not that for each of these huge areas of land has been grabbed from the indigenous people by the government mostly by evicting them forcibly or seizing them after they fled in the face of brutal atrocities. Please note that if a battalion head quarter has a 50

miles area under its jurisdiction, it has to deploy at least four companies of soldiers each covering say 12 to 14 miles, and each company has to have several outposts. For all of them there are officers for whom full residential accommodations have been built. Throughout the region over 500 temporary military posts have also been set up which are used as check points to terrorizes the sons of the soil. While I do not have the exact acre figure of the total amount of land that has been grabbed by the government to be used for the armed forces, what I know that one of the four brigades of army deployed in Chittagong Hill Tracts is the 203rd brigade which is the largest brigade in entire Bangladesh. You can guess how much land would this one brigade need for its headquarter, battalion head quarters and outposts. All one sees in Chittagong Hill tracts are soldiers - - the place has become a virtual cantonment. In a sense the entire Chittagong Hill Tracts is owned by the armed forces, which controls everything from ration distribution, recommending students for admission to various prestigious schools in the country, and even the Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Board is headed by an army officer, who controls all and any money ever allocated for development of the region.

Besides the army there are two other major establishments of para military forces in Chittagong Hill Tracts. One of them is the Armed Police Battalion (ARP) which is composed of regular soldiers, and non-commissioned and junior commissioned officers and commanded by a Colonel. The other establishment is the Sector Head Quarters of BDR or Bangladesh Rifles (Border Security Forces) whose strength is better than that of Brigade. It has a forward Head quarter in Rangamati and Battalion Head Quarters' in three to five areas deep in the residential 'areas or farmlands of the indigenous peoples; and, each Battalion Head Quarters' has several BOP or Border Outposts.

As can be easily understood, the government has had to seize an enormous area of land from the indigenous people to house these establishments and accommodate the thousands of soldiers and support personnel who had to be brought in all to brutalize the son soft soil that is the indigenous people.

Mr./Madame Chairperson, in sum, the entire traditional homeland of the Jumma indigenous peoples of Chittagong Hill tracts, where they have lived for centuries, and where according to the 1900 Treaty with the British Government or the Peace Accord of 1997 no non-indigenous people should be able to buy land or settle there, is actually owned by the armed forces - it is they who seem to own it and the indigenous people live there as visitors, who have been ordered to leave as soon as possible.

In rapidly Talibanizing Bangladesh, where over three dozen home grown Islamic terrorist groups a Burmese separatist Islamic terrorist group, all linked with the global network of Islamic terrorists including Al-Qaeda are operating the majority of them using Chittagong Hill tracts as their base, there is no way for the original peoples of this region to stay there much longer unless the community of civilized nations help them continue to stay in their ancestral homeland of centuries.

Recommendation: I have single recommendation to make: Please leverage all your influence on Bangladesh Government to implement the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997, immediately.

Thank you Mr. / Madam Chairperson.