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Religious Persecution

Statement by

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Mr. Chairperson, distinguished government delegates, honorable indigenous sisters and brothers, in the beginning I would like thank to the Voluntarz Fund who gave me a chance to attend the 24th Session of UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

I am an indigenous women and representing Jumma indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. It is mentionable that the Jumma peoples of the CHT are Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Animists. These religious groupings reflect ethnic differences. The Chakma, Marma Tangchanya and Chak are mainly Buddhists, the Tripuras Hindus and some smaller groups such as the Bawm, Khiyang, Lusai and Pankhua are Christians. Mro and Khumi practise what is known as Animism, though some of them also follow Buddhism.

It is worthy mentioned that the constitution of Bangladesh does not recognize the distinct identify, language, religion and culture of the indigenous peoples. Islam is the only state-religion recognized by the constitution of the country. Of course, "other religions, the constitution says, may be practiced in peace and harmony in the state." But in practice, the indigenous peoples and religious minorities have no religious freedom. Its reason is political as well as religious. The government of Bangladesh pursues a policy of systematic integration of the indigenous peoples and religious minorities and their territories and resources with the Bengali nation-state. This policy locally known as

"Islamization" encourages and sponsors Muslim population transfer (demographic invasion), land grabbing, militarization and spread of Islam against the indigenous peoples and religious minorities. Its political, economic, social and cultural impacts on the indigenous peoples and religious minorities are damaging.

The constitution of Bangladesh says, "All citizens are equal before law and entitled to equal protection of law." This provision is applied only in regard to the "people" (Muslims) of Bangladesh. Because of such system, Bangladeshi army, police and fundamentalist groups commit systematic atrocities like rape, murder, arson and land confiscation against the indigenous peoples and religious minorities with complete impunity. Particularly the destruction of Jumma peoples' religious and cultural life in the CHT has been a marked feature of the CHT conflict since the early 1970s.

Due to non-implementation of the CHT Accord, the human rights violations on the indigenous Jumma people including religious persecutions are continuing in CHT. For instance, on 27 May 2003, the BDR (Bangladesh Rifles) led by Major Md. Rashid, the commander of Barkal BDR Zone of 34 rifles battalion set up a camp damaging and demolishing the Falitangyachug Bipassana Meditation Center and Buddhist Temple in Barkal upazila (sub-district) under Rangamati district.

On 5 March 2005 the Bengali Muslim settlers with the help of local army camp occupied land of Buddha Shishughar Anath Ashram (Buddhist Children's Orphanage) in Mahalchari upazila. This land was recorded in 1965-66 and donated to the orphanage. Objection was put to the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachari district and Brigade Commander of Khagrachari brigade, but no action has been taken by them.

Thank you Mr. Chairman and all for hearing patiently.

