

ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY
FOR THE
PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

REPORT FOR 1984 TO THE
UNITED NATIONS WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

BANGLADESH

At last year's session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations the Anti-Slavery Society drew the attention of the experts to the situation of the tribal minority peoples living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. In that submission we stated that numerous human rights violations were being perpetrated by the armed forces against the tribal peoples, including murder, torture and sacrilegious attacks on Buddhist monks and temples. A full report has now been completed and presented to the Human Rights Centre.

This year the Society wishes to address itself to the two matters under discussion during this session: the question of definition and of land. In the working definition proposed by the Special Rapporteur, Mr Martinez Cobo, indigenous populations are described as "the existing descendants of the people who inhabited the present territory of a country at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived." In various submissions by indigenous peoples organizations, in Convention 107 of the International Labour Organisation, and implicitly in various United Nations instruments, it has been stated that these people have a right to their own land.

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The distinguished representative of Bangladesh stated last year that Bangladesh had no indigenous peoples. He also stated that the Bengali-speaking majority had been settled in the area from prehistoric times. He maintained that the Working Group should be addressing itself to those situations such as Australasia where, and I quote, "a colonising and racially distinct people coming from overseas established settlement and entered into conflict with the autochton population."

The Chittagong Hill Tracts have been inhabited since time immemorial by hill tribes different in race, religion and culture from the Muslim Bengali majority of Bangladesh. They retained their autonomy during Mughal and British occupation of the region. Until the 1950s more than 90 per cent of the population was tribal. Bengalis from the plains have only begun to settle in the hill tracts in the last two decades.

When Bengalis came in small numbers they were always welcomed by the tribespeople but in recent years they have come in thousands; they arrive poor and unfamiliar with their new environment and completely unaware of the culture and traditions of the inhabitants of the region. They have no knowledge of the communal land base of the tribal communities, they have no skills in living in the forests and hills as shifting cultivators and they regard with suspicion and derision the clothing, way of life and customs of the tribespeople.

In the last decade the clashes between these two distinct cultures have led to at least two serious massacres of tribespeople: in 1980 at Kaokhali and in 1981 at Matiranga. The inhabitants of the hill tracts fear for their lives. Tribal villagers hide themselves when soldiers of the Bangladeshi army are reported in the vicinity such is the terror now prevalent in the tracts.

The Anti-Slavery Society is quite willing to take the situation in Australia as the paradigm for the work of these sessions, as the distinguished representative of Bangladesh urges. We know as well as any what happened to the Aboriginal population of Australia in the first century of occupation. A population of 300, 000 was reduced by 4/5ths and the Aborigines were excluded from all but the most inhospitable areas of the country. The European settlers there did not acknowledge land held communally, just as in the hill tracts today land that is untitled is claimed as government land and disposed of accordingly. In the last two decades the indigenous peoples of the region have faced persistent land alienation.

More than 100,000 tribespeople were displaced in the 1960s as the result of a hydro-electric power project on the Karnaphuli River. The reservoir inundated 250 square miles and 40 per cent of the cultivable land of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. At no time was there consultation with the hillpeople. Indeed, a study undertaken in 1979 discovered that 93 per cent of those affected believe that their economic condition has deteriorated as a consequence of that development.

Since the independence of Bangladesh in 1972 there has been a rapid growth of new settlements by non-tribal Bengalis from the plains. By 1981 it is estimated that nearly 200,000 had been settled. In July 1982 a new settlement programme was authorised by the Bangladeshi government by which a further quarter of a million Bengalis would be transferred to the district. This massive programme of settlement will make the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts a minority in their own land.

The people of the hill tracts are not seeking independence, nor the creation of a separate state apart from Bangladesh, but the recognition that they have the right to their traditional way of life, their own land and some measure of control over their own development. The present situation of terror and violence cannot be allowed to continue. A new policy from the Bangladeshi government aimed at providing some tribal autonomy and guaranteeing rights is a necessity. The Anti-Slavery Society recommends most earnestly that the Government of Bangladesh:

- 1) enter into discussion with all sectors of tribal society in the Chittagong Hill Tracts with a view to reaching a political settlement which would respect the land rights, future and identity of indigenous peoples;
- 2) bring an immediate halt to the influx of settlers into the tracts;
- 3) Investigate human rights violations against tribal peoples in the hill tracts.

Finally, the Anti-Slavery Society urges the Government of Bangladesh to allow free access to the troubled region to international observers and journalists. This measure alone would do much to reduce the level of fear and suspicion felt by the tribespeople of the hill tracts.