

Sixteen session of the UN Working Group on Indigenous
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Agenda Item 4: Review of Developments

By
Pradhir Talukder

Honourable Chairperson, distinguished participants. I will provide an update on the recent developments in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh.

The most significant event is the signing of a Peace Accord on 2 December 1997 between the Government of Bangladesh and the *Jana Samhati Samiti (JSS)*. After two decades of violence and massacres during which thousands of indigenous peoples lost their lives, this Agreement provides hope for peace and stability in the region.

The Jummas welcomed the Agreement although it did not meet the major demands of the indigenous for self-determination.

It is with deep regret that I have to inform the Working Group that the implementation of this Accord, which to some extent elaborates our minimum demands only, has not even begun. The expectations of the Jumma people is still a remote reality because of the slow implementation process of the Agreement which has been hampered by the obstructionist activities of the opposition political parties lead by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

One of the bills for the enabling legislation was not amended as negotiated with the JSS and remains with the contentious provision facilitating the permanent settlement of illegal settlers in the area.

The Peace Agreement Implementation Committee has met a number of times with little results. Eight months after the signing the peace accord, no steps have been taken to form the Regional Council (RC) - an apex body responsible for the administration and coordination of the development of the CHT with members drawn from the different indigenous peoples and the settlers. Another important institution, the Land Commission to resolve land disputes, also remains to be established. Even the Interim Regional Council has not been formed although the JSS submitted a list of 22 persons to the government as had been agreed.

Ever since the Peace Agreement has been signed, not one single military camp has been dismantled although the Agreement provides for their gradual withdrawal. The 460,000 plains settlers who were transferred to the CHT by a population transfer programme continue to threaten the process of implementation of the

Agreement. The rehabilitation of the repatriated Jumma refugees, members of the JSS and the internally displaced evacuees also remains to be finalized.

All these factors provide an environment which does not encourage the Jummas to trust the Government's commitment to the implementation of the Peace Agreement.

In another development, the Government formed a Needs Assessment Committee to assess the needs of the indigenous people. This Committee made public its findings and recommendations in May 1998. The views of the Jumma people on the priority areas of their development were not reflected in the work of the Committee.

In spite of this, the Government organized a UNDP-sponsored international conference on June 21-22, 1998 in Dhaka to persuade the donor countries and organizations to provide funds for development in the region as per the guidelines given in the Findings of the Committee. We, the Jumma people welcome the initiative of many donor countries and the Government of Bangladesh for their efforts for the overall development in the region. We also welcome the proposal made by some donors to assist through the local representative institutions of indigenous peoples. However, this development should be as per the aspiration and needs of the people concerned.

In conclusion, I would like to request the government of Bangladesh to take the necessary steps for the immediate and proper implementation of the Agreement. I would also urge the donor countries and funding agencies to take into account the views of the Jumma people regarding development in CHT.

Thank you very much for your kind attention.