

**Expert Workshop on Indigenous Peoples and Migration
Geneva, 6-7 April 2006**

Migration and Indigenous Peoples; A perspective of Bangladesh

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Background

Bangladesh is a country while multilingual, multicultural indigenous peoples living since immemorial times with enjoying their own culture and tradition. There are more than 45 Indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Sometimes they are also known as adivasi or 'aboriginal'. The government prefers the term "tribals" in official documents, although some legal documents also sometimes refer to them as aboriginals or indigenous hillmen or indigenous tribes. The term 'Jumma' is widely used in the CHT to refer to the indigenous peoples who live in the CHT. According to the official census of 1991, the total number of indigenous (officially "tribal") people in Bangladesh was 1,205,978. However, these figures are gross underestimates.

The largest concentration of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh is found in the southeastern border region of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The CHT is the only region in the country with an indigenous majority. It has an extensive semi-autonomous administrative structure that has no parallel in other parts of Bangladesh. Indigenous peoples in other parts of "plains" Bangladesh are located mainly in the border regions in the northwest (Rajshahi-Dinajpur), north (Mymensingh- Tangail), northeast (Greater Sylhet), south and southeast (Chittagong, Cox's Bazar and Greater Barisal). There are significant differences in the social, political, cultural and economic situation of the various indigenous peoples. However, the differences are more striking between those living in the CHT and those in the plains.

MAJOR PROBLEMS FACED BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Apart from dispossession of lands through development and forestry projects, the most serious problems faced by indigenous people in Bangladesh include limited access to education and other social services, discrimination at the hands of non-indigenous people, including government functionaries and the imposition of other inappropriate and socially and economically destructive development projects. Some of these issues are briefly described below.

Land Dispossession

Land dispossession is a problem faced by indigenous peoples in all parts of Bangladesh, but the process of dispossession has varied from place to place. In the CHT, apart from land dispossession caused by the Kaptai Dam and forestry projects, indigenous people have also lost their lands through fraudulent and coercive acts by non-indigenous settlers, and the resettlement of non-indigenous settlers through a government sponsored programme that was started in 1979 and concluded in the early 1980s.

Land dispossession in the other areas (except CHT) is perhaps the most acute in northwestern Bangladesh. In numerous cases land-grabbing was also accompanied by acts of arson and murder on the part of non-indigenous people. In the same region unscrupulous non-indigenous people have used the Vested Property Act to seize indigenous people's lands. Land-grabbing has also taken place in the southern and southeastern coastal plains and the Rakhaing indigenous people had petitioned the prime minister on several occasions to restrict transfer of IPs lands to others.

Education

Having to study in the national Bengali language - which is not the mother tongue of the indigenous people - is known to lead to learning difficulties. As a result a number of indigenous child drop out from the primary level for not catching up the learning subjects. These omissions are contrary to the provisions of the ILO Convention No. 107 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both ratified by Bangladesh.

Discrimination

Social discrimination operates at various levels and in various ways. Even where measures are undertaken by government agencies (and to a lesser extent, by NGOs) for indigenous peoples, the proposed beneficiaries are seldom consulted prior to the formulation of development projects or in the process of implementation. As a result of the administrative devolution in the CHT, indigenous people are now more in control of deciding their development priorities, but even here, major decision-making powers and financial authority are retained by the ministries based in the national capital. In northwestern Bangladesh, the social discrimination faced by indigenous people is so severe that many ethnic Bengalis refuse to serve food and drinks to indigenous persons in rural hostels and restaurants.

Migration and CHT Indigenous Peoples

Migration and eviction mostly faced in Chittagong Hill Tracts indigenous peoples. There are many categories on that incidents but two part are the most important for the CHT indigenous peoples to significant the issues;

1. In 1960, in the name of so-called industrial development the Pakistan government built the Kaptai hydroelectric project on the Karnafuli river in the heartland of the indigenous Jumma people which flooded 1,036 sq. km. of lands and submerged

54% (54,000 acre) of the best arable land and also displaced about 100,000 Jumma people from their ancestral hearth and homes for good. Among these some 40,000 Jumma IPs were forced to migrate into India and about 20,000 other Jumma IPs had to take refuge in Myanmar. The Kaptai dam damaged the agro-based main economy of the CHT and brought about a permanent disintegration of the Jumma people on one hand and led to the inroads on Bengali Muslim population in the region in large number on the other.

2. During the armed conflict region particularly since 1979, the government officially started to settle Bengali Muslim from the plain districts in the CHT to outnumbering the indigenous Jumma people and for using them (settlers) as human shield. The government declared that each settler family would be given 7.5 acres of lands and ration for unlimited period. Indeed, no cultivable land was vacant for settlement so the settlers started to forcibly occupy the land of indigenous Jumma people. A horrible legacy of violence, rape, loot, murder, arson, abduction and forcible conversion, sacrilege of religion and forcible occupation of Jummas' land and property as well as gross violation of human rights for more than two decades. Thousand of Jumma people were ousted from their own hearth and home. Of them about 70 thousands Jumma took shelter in India as refugee and hundred thousands in deep forest of remote areas within the country.

Present situation of Refugees

In 1997, under the 16 & 20 points packages programme agreement with the Bangladesh government and the Refugee leaders, 12,222 families return to Bangladesh from India. But 9780 families of repatriated Jumma Indigenous refugees who have not get back their land, orchards or gardens and homesteads. 3055 families still living inhuman condition in the schools.

On the other hand the Bengali settlers regularly are obtaining rations from the government but the repatriate Jumma IPs not getting the rations continuously. Even the repatriated Jumma IPs refugees are survived half-fed for six months with three-month ration having one square meal daily.

Conclusion and Recommendations

For CHT Jumma Indigenous Peoples Refugees, I would like to draw attention to the international communities that they are still living as *refugee in homeland* and for seeking a proper judgment while they would not ever face again refugee or migration to other countries. Particularly, the UNHCR, in order to their mandates, UNPFII as a body for Indigenous Peoples and other relevant humanitarian bodies for surviving for future generation.

As a member of Indigenous community I also am looking your kind assistance to make sure our rights on regarding the mentioning below for a better world of all us.

- Recognition to the National Constitution of IPs
- Demilitarize of the Indigenous Peoples region
- Ensure the ancestral land rights of IPs
- To implement the ILO 107 and ratify the ILO 169 as well as to implement other international instruments,
- Proper implementation of the CHT Accord.