

The fragility of peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

by Thomas Feeny

This year, Bangladesh celebrates its 30th birthday as an independent nation state. Compared to other countries in South Asia it is still a relative newcomer, and yet the journey so far has been difficult.

For over 20 years, 10% of the entire country was effectively shut down as a bloody insurgency was fought by tribal groups from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who felt themselves severely threatened by the government's construction of a national, homogenous identity around Bengali Islamic values. Over 400,000 Bengali settlers were transferred to the CHT in the early 1980s — accompanied by approximately one-third of the entire Bangladeshi military for 'counter-insurgency measures' — and the issue of minority insecurity suddenly became an international concern. 30,000 people lost their lives as the politics of ethnicity and its related issues of territoriality, religion and culture within a 'one-nation' context were played out among the thickly forested hills. Only recently was an apparent resolution reached, in the shape of a Peace Accord signed by both government and tribal leaders on 2 December 1997. Since then, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has issued numerous assurances that "Absolute peace prevails in the CHT" and that "the people living there are not only happy, but jubilant. Life has returned to normal."¹

This paper sets out to refute these simplistic notions, not merely by

exposing the inadequacy of the Accord itself but also by showing how factors such as displacement, terrorism, communalism, militarisation, small arms and drug abuse continue to seriously destabilise the CHT. Even after apparent peace has been declared, conflict still persists in various forms at a micro level, and is likely to do so until larger issues securing constitutional protection of ethnic minority groups are addressed.

Background

The CHT has long been a problematic region of Bangladesh, firstly because of its strategic location between India and Burma and secondly because of its unique topography of thick forest. The ethnic inhabitants of the CHT are divided into more than a dozen different tribes (mostly Mongloid/Arakanese origin), and are completely different in appearance, language, religion and culture from Bengalis. While the region was afforded special autonomy under British colonial rule, after Partition it fell to Pakistan and was the target of ill-conceived development initiatives such as the 1963 Kaptai dam, which submerged 40% of the total arable land in the CHT and



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Dighinala transit Camp, CHT

displaced 100,000 tribals. After the 1971 War of Independence, the new GoB rejected requests by tribal leaders for autonomy and relocated 400,000 Bengali settlers into the CHT, intensifying competition for resources. Over 120,000 soldiers were also relocated to the CHT to 'protect' the new arrivals but in fact they simply joined forces in carrying out a variety of human rights atrocities against the tribal people, including more than 12 major massacres. Around 80,000 tribal refugees subsequently fled into the neighbouring Indian state of Tripura.

The Peace Accord

When the Accord was negotiated in December 1997, it included the following salient features:

- decommissioning and deposit of arms by Shanti Bahini (the tribal militant group) under a general amnesty
- rehabilitation of the international refugees and IDPs
- dismantling of non-permanent military camps and the return of soldiers to their regular barracks

- self-government through district and regional councils
- land and resource rights
- recognition of the cultural identity of the indigenous people

There were also a number of important issues that the Accord did not address:

- The Accord is not protected by constitutional safeguards, and is open to amendment or revocation at any time.
- It makes no provision for environmental protection, despite long-term damage from uncontrolled resource exploitation.
- It ignores the issue of continuing infiltration of illegal settlers into the area.
- It makes no provision for social reconciliation between tribals and Bengalis.

The reaction to the Accord was very mixed. The Awami League (the ruling party at the time) refers to it as a mark of their success, while the BNP opposition refuses to recognise it. It has also caused rifts between tribal groups: while most support the PCJSS (their original political party who negotiated and signed the treaty), many have since transferred their loyalties to the splinter-group, the United Peoples' Democratic Front, who assert that full autonomy is the only satisfactory outcome. A violent power struggle has ensued, with each of the groups accusing the other of numerous attacks, kidnappings and killings. This 'internal terrorism' has not only strained the social cohesion of the tribal people but has also heightened levels of mistrust and suspicion between different communities.

Rehabilitation of refugees

The total funds allocated for rehabilitation of the repatriated Jumma refugees was Bangladeshi Taka 370 million (approx US\$6.5 million) comprising cash sums and minimal material assistance. Commitments for the creation of employment and provision of educational facilities were also set down in the Accord but there is very little information on their implementation or success so far. What is known is that many returnee families 'rehabilitated' from India are having great difficulty in rebuilding their lives, for a great deal of change was effected in their absence in terms of how the region operates both socially and economically. New demo-

graphic and economic pressures have introduced different agricultural methods and demands, and the traditional 'self-provisioning' economy of the tribals has been replaced by a market economy determined by external economic forces. Tribals lack the skill and knowledge base to participate effectively within this market, and have been marginalised to remote

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areas of the CHT where traditional *jhum* (slash and burn) cultivation is still possible.

Land disputes

Prior to the conflict, tribal communities owned land on a communal basis, and very little documentation was deemed necessary. The new Bengali settlers introduced a new framework of land demarcation whereby written proof was required, which then led to widespread illegal 'land grabbing'. Many settlers used the conflict to 'negotiate' false contracts in the real owner's absence, while the minimal official documentation that did exist was destroyed in the looting and burning. Today, 3,055 repatriated families (25%) are still unable to reclaim their land, with 40 entire villages occupied by Bengali settlers refusing to leave.

Many families remain in Refugee Transit Camps, where three years have passed without any progress in their cases. Food provision has become a serious problem, and GoB assistance will soon finish. This is in sharp contrast to Bengali settlers living in cluster villages, who have been receiving food rations ever since they arrived. In Khagrachari district alone, where the majority of refugee transit camps are located, there are 80 Bengali villages holding 26,262 families, all of whom continue to receive free rations.²

The internally displaced

According to the GoB Task Force on Refugees in the CHT, there are still 128,364 internally displaced families throughout the region, of which 90,208 were classed as 'tribal' and 38,156 'non-tribal'.³ Failing to qualify for government rehabilitation ration packages, the majority of IDPs continue to suffer starvation conditions, with little or no access to any kind of service. In 1998, a Jumma

NGO, Taungya, reported on the IDP populations in Langadu thana and Baghaichhari thana in Rangamati district, where they investigated the deaths of 40 people from malnutrition and lack of medical facilities. Concern was also expressed a year later in the Report to the 17th Working Session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations:

*"Most of these displaced people are now living in remote and inhospitable hill and forest areas without a decent livelihood and with no access at all to health-care facilities from the government or other agencies. Many of these people have suffered from severe malnutrition, diarrhoea, dysentery and malaria... The condition of the children, mothers of infants and elderly persons is especially acute."*⁴

The GoB's expansion of 'Reserve Forest' areas in the CHT (where agricultural practices are forbidden and where even collecting fuelwood is a crime) also adds to the IDP population, and brings the land crisis to new levels of desperation. Almost the entire Khyang tribe has been evicted without compensation or assistance under this scheme, with tens of thousands of others also at risk.⁵

Communalism

Ethnic tension continues to make the CHT particularly vulnerable to incidences of communal violence, and personal security remains low. Numerous attacks upon houses, villages and temples have been recorded in the last few years, and small-scale disputes have quickly assumed much larger proportions, with a typical pattern of continued aggravated retaliation.

For example, on 6 April 1998, two Bengali children drowned while bathing in the Mayani river in the CHT. Officials who investigated their deaths announced they had died of natural causes but Bengali settlers staged a demonstration the next day, claiming the children had been killed by tribals. Four tribals were then attacked, prompting a protest meeting of tribals on 9 April. While returning home they were again attacked by settlers, and army soldiers, who set fire to many houses.⁶

Continued militarisation

During the conflict, the CHT underwent unprecedented heavy militarisation. In the early 1980s the total strength of the Bangladeshi army and auxiliary forces in the CHT was calculated to be over 120,000, which at the time provided for one armed soldier for every tribal person.⁷ Military presence infiltrated every pore of society, and the number of police stations in the region also doubled.

The situation post-Accord has not changed very much, and military presence has become a normal phenomenon of life in the CHT. Although Section 4 (17) of the Agreement provided for the removal of “*all temporary camps of army, ansar [paramilitary] and village defence force in the Chittagong Hill Tracts excepting Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and permanent cantonments*”, it did not

tribes since the Accord, with small arms playing a prominent role. In February 2001 the lack of security in the CHT became an international concern when three foreigners were kidnapped by guerrillas while working on a project funded by the Danish government. Though they were eventually released unharmed, many innocent civilians fled their homes following military ‘rescue’ operations.

Drug abuse

It appears from a number of sources that the incidence of drug abuse in the CHT is increasing, notably among unemployed tribal youth.⁹ Although the Peace Accord provided that tribal adolescents would get special consideration in terms of finding jobs, little has been done and unemployment has become a huge problem. Most adolescents now spend their time drinking, smoking and hanging around in the

national security warranting forcible repression. In the case of the CHT, if the tribal peoples had been accorded basic constitutional recognition and authority concerning the development and exploitation of resources in their area, 20+ years of insurgency might well have been avoided. The problem now is that the very same factors that prompted the original conflict — displacement, ill-conceived development, communalism and resource competition — are once again creating unrest in the CHT.

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specify a deadline by which time this withdrawal should be completed. According to the CHT Commission, three years after the agreement only 32 military camps from over 500 have been dismantled.

Small arms

Bangladesh is sandwiched between the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent (the world’s largest producer of drugs and repository of small arms and light weapons respectively), without actually being the primary supplier or user of either. More than 20 insurgent groups are also active along its borders and a large number of the arms destined for these areas pass through the CHT.⁸

23 years of insurgency also brought a significant amount of small arms into the CHT, mainly from bases inside the Indian border. While some of these weapons were handed over to the government after the Peace Accord, a large number have been kept in secret caches, which have been sporadically looted since then. Increasingly easy access to small arms has caused the law and order situation in the CHT to deteriorate in many ways.

Incidents of abduction, highway robbery, killing and extortion have become rampant in the three CHT dis-

bazaars, and are particularly vulnerable to drugs. It has also been alleged that political groups such as the PCJSS give away money in order to attract supporters, and are indirectly helping to finance and prolong drug addictions. Some even suspect the police and military of actively encouraging drug abuse among tribal youths, benefiting both financially and socially by propagating the tribals as a dependent underclass, as well as justifying their own presence in the process:

“The military continue to spread it, and the police have chosen to ignore it. More and more tribal adolescents are becoming involved because it offers them an escape from the current futility of their situation. This is just one of the ways in which the military continues to oppress our people after the Accord.”¹⁰

Conclusion

Many of these problems relate to the difficulties experienced by all minority groups in securing their rights under majority rule. Ethnic minorities are often identified today as sub-national groups with potential for sub-state formation, and the response of government state machinery has tended to turn this into a threat to

1. Statement of the Press Wing, Prime Minister’s Office, Government of Bangladesh, ‘The Chittagong Hill Tracts: The Post Accord Situation’, 1999.

2. Statistics from the Jumma Refugee Welfare Association and the District Commissioner’s Office, Khagrachari, 1999.

3. Philip Gain ‘Facts that Count for the Chittagong Hill Tracts’ in Philip Gain (ed) *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk*, Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), July 2000, p120.

4. Intervention by Mr Mrinal Kanti Tripura, Secretary, Trinamul, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Agenda Item 6 (Indigenous Peoples & Health: Follow-up and Recent Developments) to the 17th Session of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Geneva, 26-30 July 1999.

5. See Philip Gain ‘Expansion of Reserved Forests Complicates Land Issues in the CHT’, Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), *Earth Touch*, No 5 October 1999, p26.

6. Information taken from CHT Commission *Life is not Ours: Land and Human Rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*, 2000, p42.

7. Survival International ‘Genocide in Bangladesh’, *Survival International Review*, No 43, London, 1984, p13.

8. See Dipankar Banerjee (ed) *South Asia at Gunpoint - Small Arms and Light Weapons Proliferation*, Regional Centre For Strategic Studies, Sri Lanka, 2000.

9. Interviews with Rupayan Dewan (CHT Regional Council) and Indrani Chakma (UNICEF), Rangamati, March 2001.

10. Interview with Rupayan Dewan, CHT Regional Council Member, 20 March 2001.