

Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission

Co-Chairpersons:

Sultana Kamal,
Lord Eric Avebury,
Elsa Stamatopoulou

7 May 2012

To
Sayed Ashraful Islam MP
Honourable Minister
Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and Cooperatives
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh
Bangladesh Secretariat, Dhaka

Subject: Directives on “celebrating the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People”

Dear Sir,

We refer to the letter dated 11 March 2012 issued by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development (MoLGRD) (memo no: 46.045.022.10.04.004.2011- xxx).

The letter titled “Regarding celebration of the International Day of the World's Indigenous People” and signed by Deputy Secretary of the MoLGRD, Dr Md Sarowar Bari, was addressed to all Deputy Commissioners (DCs) of Bangladesh. We understand that the letter was later forwarded by the DCs to the respective Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) and subsequently the UNOs forwarded it to all the concerned Union Parishads.

The letter refers to a Ministry of Home Affairs directive, which states that recently there has been a practice of celebrating the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People in Bangladesh and fairs, musical programs, seminars and rallies are carried out to mark the day. It adds that the “tribal leaders,” as in previous years, have taken preparations to celebrate the day this year and fairs, musical programs, seminars and rallies would be organized.

In this connection, the MoLGRD asked the DCs:

- a) to send necessary instructions to the concerned persons so that (on Indigenous People’s Day) high government officials do not give speeches that are contradictory to the policies of the government undertaken at different times.
- b) to provide no government patronization during the International Day of the World’s Indigenous People.
- c) to take steps to publicize in the print and electronic media that there are no indigenous people in Bangladesh, and directed that
- d) unnecessary celebration programs in the name of Indigenous Day in the month of August should be avoided as it is nationally recognized as the “Month of Mourning.”

We profoundly condemn the discriminatory and prejudiced nature of the directives, which contravene basic human rights, including freedom of expression and freedom of assembly and association of citizens, as well as the fundamental principle and right of non-discrimination. The constitution of Bangladesh stipulates that the State shall not discriminate

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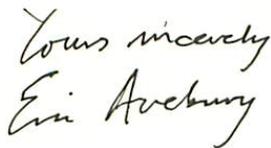
against any citizen on the grounds of, among others, religion, race or caste. Hence, we find the letter issued by MoLGRD a direct violation of the fundamental rights acknowledged in the Constitution.

August 15 marks a dark chapter in Bangladesh's history as on this day in 1975 Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated along with his family members, and the nation mourns the loss on this day. However, the letter very unfortunately terms the month of August as "nationally recognized Month of Mourning," in an apparent attempt to cast a shadow on the indigenous celebrations and to impugn their motives in celebrating the day. It can be noted that in August this year there are two major religious festivals of the Hindu and Muslim community, namely Jonmashtomi, a Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Krishna, and Eid-ul-Fitr, the biggest religious festival of the Muslims. There are expected to be rallies and musical programs for Jonmashtomi and extensive festivities, as always, to mark Eid-ul-Fitr. Obviously, no steps have been taken (nor there should be) to stop such *celebrations* in the alleged "Month of Mourning." We fail to comprehend why, if religious and cultural events and celebrations are not barred in the name of the "Month of Mourning," the indigenous peoples are being singled out in this fashion.

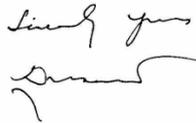
We note that the Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself, referring to the indigenous communities as "Adibashi," in her public messages on the occasion of the World's Indigenous Peoples' Day greeted all the indigenous peoples in the country. The Awami League's Election Manifesto also states that all laws and other arrangements discriminatory to indigenous people will be repealed. (Please see annex for details.)

We strongly protest against those discriminatory directives from the MoLGRD and demand that the ministry should revoke them immediately to uphold equal rights for every citizen and provide opportunity to freely practice everyone's distinct culture. The government should implement their election pledge to work for the rights of the indigenous people and the commitment to its international obligations.

On behalf of the CHT Commission,



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Co-chair of the
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