

# Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission

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## **Press Statement of CHT Commission Report and recommendations of CHT Commission's mission to Chittagong Hill Tracts 8 July 2014**

On July 2, 2014, the International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC) started its seventh mission to the CHT starting from Khagrachari district. On July 4, the members of the Commission traveled to Rangamati as per schedule. They planned to stay one night in Rangamati where they would meet different groups and individuals in there and leave for Bandarban on July 5 and complete their mission on July 8. However, due to violent attacks by certain organizations, the CHT Commission returned to Chittagong without visiting Bandarban where a major part of the mission was scheduled to visit field sites, and then left for Dhaka the next day.

The following five 5 members of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission participated in this mission: 1. Sultana Kamal (Co-Chair), 2. Khushi Kabir, 3. Dr. Shapan Adnan, 4. Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, and 5. Barrister Sara Hossain. Apart from this, coordinator of the CHT Commission Hana Shams Ahmed, and Research Officer Ilira Dewan completed the team.

### **The objectives of the Commission in this mission were as follows:**

- 1.** To conduct field investigation on the incidents of land grabbing and human rights violation and to make public the reasons behind and the results thereof.
- 2.** To identify the unimplemented sections of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord and to identify the reasons behind it.
- 3.** To propose recommendations to stop illegal dispossession (acquisition) of land, human rights violation and further delay in the implementation of the peace accord.

Due to the violent incidents mentioned above, the Commission could only partially complete its mission. As a result, the objectives of this visit could not be achieved completely. Nevertheless, the summary of the observations and findings of the Commission is being presented here:

### **Eviction of hill people from their land for the purpose of construction of BGB Sector Sadar in Babuchara of Dighinala:**

Since 2005, Border Guards Bangladesh (BGB) has been trying to forcefully take possession (acquisition) of the land of the local indigenous people to establish its Sector Office. Recently on June 10, 2014 there was a clash between the local indigenous people and members of BGB and the police regarding taking possession of this area. As a result, a number of Pahari (Hill Peoples) men and women got injured. On 11 June BGB filed a case against the local hill people. In this regard the police arrested some elderly women and one minor girl among others. The twenty one evicted families are now living in two rooms in a high school near the village. These destitute families described their experience and misery to the members of CHT Commission.

Thereafter, the Commission went to the office of 51<sup>st</sup> Battalion of BGB and talked to Major Kamal, Captain in Charge (II-IC) and his colleagues who were present there. BGB refused to

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accept responsibility regarding the eviction of the hill people. The BGB officer said that the hill women initiated the attacks on the BGB members with sticks. He also claimed that some rifles belonging to the BGB members were broken due to this attack by the women. They also showed some photographs of those through power point slide. However, the statement of BGB officer and his colleagues did not appear to be credible to the members of the commission.

## **The Armed Force and administration obstruct the construction of *Bhabna Kutir* (meditation centre) in Tokedmara Kizing:**

On 27 April 2014, the Buddhist people of Ojolchug or Duitila of Todekmara Kizing started the construction work of one meditation center. The Chief of the local military camp immediately objected to this. Thereafter, when the construction work was continuing, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2014 the UNO of Baghaichori imposed Section 144 at on the hill of the meditation centre and the surrounding areas. As a result many Buddhist followers are not being able to go to that area. it needs to be mentioned here that, the centre is situated inside the reserve forest area of the Forest Department. In this regard, on 29 April 2014 the Forest Department filed a case against 400 to 500 unnamed local people.

When the members of the CHT Commission were visiting Duitila, the local hill people staged a silent procession with various placards holding in their hands. They raised demand to have the freedom to go to the meditation centre in order to observe their Buddhist religious practice. For this purpose, they demanded that Section 144 should be withdrawn. They also demanded to take measures to withdraw the false case filed against them and relieve them from the harassment.

## **Other activities, interviews and visits:**

On 2-4 July 2014 the CHT Commission members met and exchanged opinion with local administration and representatives of civil society organizations of Khagrachari and Rangamati. Mr. Masud Karim, Deputy Commissioner, Khagrachari and Mizanur Rahman, Superintendent of Police, Khagrachari were among them. On 4 July, after going to Rangamati, one exchange of opinion meeting was held with the Regional Council Chariman Jyotirindra Bodhipriyo (Santu Larma) and with the members of CHT Citizen's Committee under the leadership of Goutam Dewan. The Commission members had an informal discussion with the Chief of Chakma circle Raja Devasish Roy. Later, on 5 July, the Commission met Md. Mostafa Kamal, Deputy Commissioner, Rangamati and Amena Begum, Police Superintendent, Rangamati.

The Commission had a series of prescheduled programs for Bandarban as well but it could not be conducted due to the violence. There was a plan to meet the government administration and various civil society organizations and their representatives. There was a plan for a discussion regarding eviction of hill people due to land grabbing (acquisition) by BGB. Apart from that, the members of the Commission also met with the Chittagong GOC of the 24 Infantry Division in Chittagong.

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## **Somo Odhikar Andolon and other Bengali organizations:**

Since 2008, CHT Commission has been conducting field visits to the Chittagong Hill Tracts and meeting the representatives of the Bengali communities there. The CHT Commission had face to face meetings with the Somo Odhikar Andolon in Khagrachari, Rangamati and Bandarban districts and their representatives also came to Dhaka to talk to the Commission. This time the CHT Commission proposed a meeting with Somo Odhikar Andolon in Rangamati on 4 July 2014. Though they initially agreed, no further response was received from them regarding the meeting afterwards.

Instead, the members of Somo Odhikar Andolon started to threaten the CHT Commission to drive them away from the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Along with five other so-called Bengali organizations, they also called for protests to stop the program of the Commission in Rangamati and Bandarban. This antagonism took a fierce form when the activists of these organizations entered the Rangamati Parjatan Motel premises and started to verbally abuse and threaten the members of the Commission who were residing there and were ready to leave for their scheduled meeting. It is to be noted that, they conducted these aggressive incidents in presence of Police Sub Inspector Mr. Yusuf and his force. The members of the Commission tried to go out once but the police did not escort them then. Being obstructed, the members of the Commission returned to the motel. Under the very visible leadership of one woman agitator, Ms. Nurjahan, the Bengali activists again started to verbally abuse and threaten the members of the Commission. They also obstructed the journalists who were present there from talking to the members of the commission. Under the leadership of S.I. Yusuf, the police remained silent and did not try to stop them this time either.

At noon, Imtiaz Hossain Monu, Officer in Charge of Rangamati Police Station came to the Motel and assured them of police escort and accompanied the members of the CHT Commission towards Rangamati town. However, within a few minutes, in spite of having police escort, stones and bricks were flung from a small hill nearby towards the vehicle of the Commission. The windscreen and the side glasses of the car broke from the attack and pieces of the broken glass hit the members of the Commission. Ilira Dewan was injured in the head, Iftekharuzzaman's finger was cut, Sara Hossain was injured on the neck and broken glasses hit Sultana Kamal and Hana Shams Ahmed. The Officer in Charge of the Police was hit on the face and the driver also received injury. At this stage the police fired blank shots but did not catch the perpetrators.

The members of the CHT Commission were taken to the Kotowali Police Station first. Later Ilira Dewan was taken to the military hospital and four stitches were required for the injury in her head. Thereafter, all members of the Commission were taken to Chittagong town with police escort. That night Ilira Dewan was required to be taken to the emergency unit of Chittagong Medical College Hospital since her health condition was deteriorating.

## **Corollary:**

From these incidents, it appears that there is no freedom to conduct inquiry and express opinion in a democratic manner regarding the complaints of people in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Not only

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that, when the members of the CHT Commission wanted to meet people and express their opinion, some so-called organizations who claims to protect “Bengali” interest did not stop from carrying out the violent attack. They are able to do this because the police administration of Chittagong Hill Tracts does not stop them from carrying out such violence. Now the question is, what is meant by the interest of “Bengalis” in this case? A large part of the land of Chittagong Hill Tracts is not in the hand of general hill people or Bengalis. Most of them have gone to various government organizations, security forces, private companies and violent land grabbers. They don't want any change in the situation or in the power mechanism. Therefore, if the hill people protest regarding any illegal possession of their lands, it goes against the interest of the influential group. Many of them do not live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. But they possess land, rubber gardens, Segun forest and other commercial properties of this area. The program of the CHT Commission goes against the interest of this group. For this same reason, they do not want the implementation of Land Commission and other important Sections of the Hill Tracts Peace Accord.

## **Recommendations:**

On the basis of the experience of this visit to the Chittagong Hill tracts and the review thereof, the CHT Commission is proposing the following recommendations:

- In order to prevent government organizations, private companies and other land grabbers from illegally taking possession of the land of the hill people, a pressure group should work collectively to pursue the government.
- Where land acquisition is essential for the interest of the state, no land should be taken in addition to the necessary amount of land required for state interest.
- The present and future land acquisition plans of various government agencies including BGB should be declared to the public and public opinion should be taken into consideration.
- The people whose land will be taken through acquisition, be it Hill people or Bengalis, should be provided with appropriate compensation, alternative land and complete rehabilitation.
- The compensation and rehabilitation of all evicted families should be taken into consideration during land acquisition specially in case of the land of the hill people who do not have any government documents though they have customary land rights.
- Speedy measures should be taken to withdraw the false cases that have been filed against local indigenous people to suppress the protest during land acquisition.
- Necessary measures should be taken to prevent in a democratic way the clash and communal dispute between hill people and Bengalis.