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Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission is Deeply Concerned about the attack on Paharis in Rangamati

Dhaka, 14 January, 2015: The International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC) observes with deep concern that on 10 January in Rangamati at least 30 people were injured when a rally of the Hill Students Council protesting the inauguration of a new medical college education program was attacked by cadres of the ruling party's Chattra League and other organizations. The local administration invoked Section 144 for an indefinite period of time in the municipality in the name of bringing the situation under control. However, even with article 144 in effect, a group of Bengalis carried out violent attacks on Pahari homes and stores in Bhedbhedi, Champak Nagar, Tribal Adam, Banarupa, Ananda Bihar and other areas. And this resulted in a communal riot between Bengalis and Paharis. The Commission expresses deep concern regarding this attack upon the Pahari people and obstruction of their local organizations' democratic programs.

In this regard, there has been no practical and reliable analysis of how much the Pahari community will be benefitted if a medical college is established in the hill region. On the other hand, it is not unfounded to think that more non-Pahari teacher-student-staff from outside the area will come in to the CHT and the discrimination against the Paharis will increase further. In our opinion, Pahari people rightfully feel that there are much more urgent and unfinished work at present than establishing a medical college or a science and technology university. Though already much delayed, the government needs to show true sincerity and commitment with regard to implementation of the Peace Accord. Though 17 years have passed since signing of the Accord, the Land Commission has still not been given powers to conduct its work properly by enabling eviction of illegal land grabbers and give the Paharis back their land. The Hill District Councils and the Regional Council have not been given powers by which these institutions can carry out their work fully.

It is extremely rare for those responsible for such violent incidents in the Hill Tracts to be identified and face justice. On the contrary, no unbiased and reliable investigation processes have been carried out regarding allegations that the army, intelligence agencies and security forces have been directly or indirectly involved in depriving the basic rights of the Paharis and no proper countermeasures have been taken against this. For this reason, communal attacks on the Paharis have continued unabated. It is also observed with regard to the present incident in Rangamati that the situation arising from differences of opinion between the ruling party's Chhatra League and the PCJSS's Hill Student Council in favor of or opposing the inauguration of the medical college was quickly transformed into a communal riot between Paharis and Bengalis. Attacks were carried out against the Paharis to suppress the protest. On the other hand, it is encouraging that local Bengalis prevented the attack of Bengali settlers on the Pahari houses in Tribal Adam and Kata Pahar areas. Nonetheless, it is evident from this occurrence that the Paharis are unable to undertake and carry out their programs without fear. Any kind of protest activities of the Paharis faces obstruction from the local administration and extremist Bengali organizations or otherwise is subject to atrocious attacks.

At the root of all of the problems in the CHTs are the issues related to loss of Pahari land rights over many years. The issues regarding the medical college are no exception. The government will acquire land for the college, as a result of which the Paharis may be adversely affected. Though the Peace Accord stipulates that the government must consult with the Regional Council before conducting any project in the Hill Tracts, this has not been complied with in this case. Due to such government decisions forced upon them in violation of the Accord without consulting them, the Pahari people and in particular the youth desired to express their objections on the basis of their constitutional rights. This violent incident took place in a manner that was linked to the power structure in such a way as to deny their rights to do so. This raises questions as to why the student group of a local political party cannot be allowed to carry out a peaceful protest? Why the Chattra League, which is a front organization of the ruling party, would carry out such an attack? In general, why

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Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission

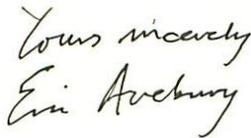
were differences in political opinion transformed into a violent struggle between Paharis and Bengalis in a pre-planned manner?

The problems of the Chittagong Hill Tracts are increasing day by day due to such ill-intended schemes. The same sort of violence was perpetrated against the Paharis with regard to land acquisition by the BGB in Babuchara of Khagrachari as well as in Rowanghari in Bandarban. Such continuous land grabbing by the government has given rise to a crisis in credibility among the Paharis. Neither is the communal incident in Rangamati merely due to rising tension on a particular day. It took the form of protest due to the mistrust accrued over many years.

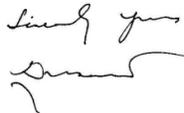
The CHT Commission strongly urges the government and the local authorities to take the following measures to prevent land grabbing and communal attacks against the Pahari people in Rangamati and the CHTs:

- In order to bring lasting peace to the Hill Tracts, the government must be more sincere with regard to immediate implementation of the basic un-implemented clauses of the accord, and must take decisive and effect steps in this regard without delay.
- It must take immediate steps to amend the articles of the Land Conflict Resolution Commission Act that go against the Peace Accord. The newly elected chairman of the commission must take fully unbiased and effective steps with regard to resolution of land conflicts, and to this end favorable conditions must be created for the Paharis to exercise their rights.
- Efforts should be made to establish a police force and village defense party comprised of both Paharis and Bengalis in order to improve the law and order situation in the CHTs.
- Those who instigated the communal violence should be found and brought to justice under the law.
- The current communal conflict should be resolved not by use of force but through dialogue among all communities in an atmosphere of mutual trust.
- The local authorities should provide suitable treatment and compensation to those who have been injured or harmed by the attack.

On behalf of the CHT Commission,



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CHT Commission



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