

**THIRD MISSION  
OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS COMMISSION<sup>1</sup>**

**Press statement**

The International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission (CHTC)<sup>2</sup> appreciates that after 12 years since the signing of the CHT Accord some important measures have been taken to implement the Accord. These include specifically the setting up of the National Committee for Implementation of the CHT Accord, re-establishment of the Land Commission and the Task Force for CHT Refugee Rehabilitation Affairs, the cancellation of plantation leases that have not been properly developed, and the withdrawal of temporary military camps. This has generated a sense of momentum which the CHTC appreciates and encourages. The CHTC congratulates the Prime Minister on her statement on the occasion of the International Indigenous Peoples' Day in support of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This statement encourages not only the indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, but also all over the world.

Between 11-16 August members of the CHTC<sup>3</sup> visited all three districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Commission members met with government representatives, the three brigade commanders and their zone commanders, senior police officers, politicians and civil society leaders, including both Pahari and Bengali representatives.

During meetings with the brigade commanders and their staff the CHTC members were informed that they saw no security risks with compliance to the government policy on the withdrawal of the camps. This view was confirmed by the police and local authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> The International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission is composed of concerned experts from inside and outside Bangladesh. The members are (in alphabetical order): Dr. Shapan Adnan, Lord Eric Avebury (CHT Commission co-chair), Vice-Chair Parliamentary Human Rights Group, UK; Mr. Lars Anders Baer, President of The Sami Parliament, Sweden; Ms. Victoria Tauli Corpuz, Chair, UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; Mr Robert Evans, Member of the European Parliament; Ms. Sara Hossain, Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh; Professor. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Shahjalal University, Science and Technology, Sylhet, Bangladesh; Ms. Sultana Kamal (CHT Commission co-chair); Dr. Ida Nicolaisen (CHT Commission co-chair), Senior Researcher, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Denmark; Mr. Lee Swepston, former Senior Advisor on Human Rights of the International Labour Organisation (ILO); Mr. Hideaki Uemura, President, Shimin Gaikou Centre, Japan.

<sup>2</sup> The CHTC has the following mandate: "To promote respect for human rights, democracy and restoration of civil and judicial rights in the CHT in Bangladesh, including examination of the implementation of the CHT Accord of 1997. The CHT Commission will build on the work by the first CHT Commission. (1990-2001)."

<sup>3</sup> Of the eleven Commission Members those undertaking this visit were Lord Eric Avebury, Dr. Ida Nicolaisen and Ms. Sultana Kamal (Co-Chairpersons), Mr. Lars Anders Baer, Mr. Hideaki Uemura, Dr. Shapan Adnan and Ms. Sara Hossain (Members). In addition, Dr. Meghna Guhathakurta, Ms. Jenneke Arens and Mr. Tom Eskildsen, advisors to the CHTC, and Christina Nilsson and Hana Shams Ahmed of the CHTC secretariat participated in the visit.

In meetings with all parties the land issue was presented as the main concern. The CHTC therefore considers it of utmost importance that the Land Commission becomes fully activated and funded, including its function as a tribunal to settle land disputes, which should be disposed of before the cadastral survey is undertaken.

The CHTC is disappointed, however, at the rate of progress towards activation of the Land Commission; the Commission's lack of progress on the determination of disputed land claims; its apparent decision to hold the cadastral survey beforehand and the absence of proposals for electing the Hill District Councils.

The CHT Commission hopes that the Land Commission will establish a database of all disputed land claims, providing the claimants with forms on which they can supply the information required for this purpose. This might be the subject of an approach to international agencies such as UNDP for financial and technical assistance. Because of the complexity of overlapping titles on the same land plots granted in different circumstances, a definitive set of rules should be developed by the Land Commission to rank the relative priority of different kinds of land titles. For those whose claims to land are disallowed, the government should draft rehabilitation measures for discussion with community leaders.

The CHTC was alerted to the necessity of activating and properly funding the Task Force for CHT Refugee Rehabilitation Affairs. Moreover, there is a need for a speedy development of government guidelines for the interaction and division of labour between the Task Force and the Land Commission.

The CHTC further urges continuing measures to enhance access to justice within the CHT, including the activation of legal aid committees.

It is imperative that elections are held for the CHT Regional Council and Hill District Councils and the CHT Commission recommends that alternative electoral methods are explored promptly.

The CHTC has collected a large amount of information including documents given to us by Bengalis and Paharis which remains to be analysed, and as usual will be producing a report on this visit utilising these data. We have a further international visit planned for the coming year.

We are convinced that the vast majority of the people of all communities in the CHT are determined to maintain the peace and harmony of the region, and that they will cooperate with the processes that are essential for the purpose. Peace is an essential human right, and all the efforts of both government and people should be devoted to its achievement.

## **List of meetings**

Civil society in Bandarban

Tribal Muslim Welfare Association

Hill District Council Chairman, Bandarban

Deputy Commissioner, Bandarban

Brigade Commander, Bandarban

Civil society in Rangamati

CHT Regional Council Chairman  
Jana Sanghaty Samity (JSS)  
United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF)  
CHT Forest and Land Committee  
Hill District Council Chairman, Rangamati  
Deputy Commissioner, Rangamati  
Brigade Commander, Rangamati  
Civil society in Khagrachori  
Brigade Commander, Khagrachori  
Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina  
Finance Minister, Abul Mal Abdul Muhith  
Foreign Minister, Dipu Moni  
CHT Land Commission Chairman, Khademul Islam Chowdhury  
Parliamentary Standing Committee on CHT and Cultural Minister, Promod Mankin  
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh  
CHT Minister, Dipankar Talukder  
Law Commission, Justice Mohammad Abdur Rashid  
European Commission  
Donor de-briefing meeting