

Letter of Appeal

15 May 2003

The Honorable Begum Khaleda Zia,
Prime Minister, People's Republic of Bangladesh

Your Excellency,

We would like to express our deep concern regarding the violent incident that occurred in Bhuiochari Village, Khagrachari Hill District on the night of Saturday, 19 April 2003. According to reports from the media and the victimized community, a group of Bengali settlers led by the Bangladesh military attacked the Jumma peoples (indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, CHT), committing arson and plunder and seriously injuring one man. Earlier that day, the Jumma peoples (in this case, of the Chakmas) had protested the unauthorized construction of houses on their land by Bengali settlers. The victims are taking refuge in a nearby Buddhist temple and villages, and are facing harsh living conditions, unable to return to their land. To make matters worse, the Bengali settlers have taken advantage of this situation to illegally occupy surrounding lands. The people of nearby villages fear that they may be attacked next.

We are especially concerned to hear from the local community that the Bangladesh military were present when the incident occurred, and not only did not try to stop the settlers but in fact ordered the Jumma peoples to leave, and encouraged the settlers to attack, set fire to, and plunder the community. We strongly suspect that this unprovoked attack was carried out in a premeditated manner under the direction of the military, with the objective of violently grabbing land from the Jumma peoples. It closely resembles the pattern of frequent incidents in the 1980s when attacks led to massacres and fleeing of refugees. We fear that even more serious human rights violations may occur in the near future, if adequate countermeasures are not taken immediately.

Both Japan and the European Union (EU) have clear guidelines prohibiting aid to countries perpetrating serious human rights abuses. We have raised our concerns regarding this incident to the authorities concerned with official development aid (ODA), to ensure that these principles are adhered to, and that our tax money is used to promote sustainable development, and in no way contribute to human rights violations.

This incident is not an isolated occurrence, but is a sign of the still troubled situation of the CHT more than five years after the signing of the historical 1997 peace accord between the PCJSS and your government. It is another painful moment in the long history of suffering of the Jumma peoples from the forced evictions to construct Kaptai dam in the Pakistan era until the present day. The general populace suffered tremendously during the more than 25 years of civil war. Some people welcomed the peace accord with hope for a new era of peace and mutual understanding. However, to this day, the implementation of this peace accord has made almost no progress. Though the PCJSS has surrendered its arms in good faith, many of the key commitments of the peace accord, such as withdrawal of the deployed military to six cantonments, rehabilitation of the returnee refugees and internally displaced people, and the return of illegally grabbed land to its proper owners through the land commission, remain unfulfilled. Furthermore, there has been a serious decline in the law and order situation, and incidents of harassment, rape, abductions, false arrest, demands for bribes, etc. have become a daily occurrence. It should be recognized that this incident is the result of successive regimes'

long-term policy of military rule and transmigration of Bengali settlers into the CHT. There is an urgent need to protect the basic human rights of indigenous peoples, resolve land issues, rehabilitate the Bengali settlers in their places of origin, withdraw the military from the region, and establish democratic local administration.

In light of the above, we urgently call upon your government, as a respected democratic nation and responsible member of the global community, to protect the basic human rights of indigenous peoples in accordance with the Vienna Declaration of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights (paragraph 20), and to urgently take the following actions to resolve the crisis caused by this incident:

- 1) to conduct a thorough, independent investigation of the 19 April Bhuiochari incident with the involvement of local and international observers, and to strictly punish those responsible.
- 2) to evacuate Bengali settlers who have occupied the Jumma's land around the site of the incident illegally.
- 3) to fully compensate and rehabilitate the victims of this incident so that they can go back to normal life as soon as possible.
- 4) to take urgent measures to prevent any further illegal occupation of land by Bengali settlers or the military in the concerned area, and in the CHT as a whole.

Furthermore, we recommend the following actions to ensure that such incidents never occur again, and to establish a foundation for lasting peace in the CHT.

- 5) to improve the law and order situation through the deployment of an ethnically mixed police force (with an equal proportion of indigenous peoples and Bengali personnel) that can fulfill its duties without fear or favor.
- 6) and to take measures necessary to achieve the following objectives without delay, in accordance with the principles set forth in the 1997 peace accord, with the constructive cooperation of all stakeholders, including national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs):
 - a. the withdrawal of all non-permanent military and paramilitary camps to six permanent cantonments.
 - b. immediate return of illegally occupied lands to the returnee Jumma refugees and other rightful owners of the land.
 - c. proper rehabilitation of internally displaced Jumma peoples.

Sincerely,

- (NPO) Ayus: Network of Buddhist Volunteers on International Cooperation
- Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission
- Japan CHT Committee
- Jumma Net
- Jumma Peoples Network-Japan
- Organizing Committee CHT Campaign
- The Japan Citizens' Coalition for the UN International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples

* For further information, please keep in touch with Imamura Kimiyasu.

Address: 2639, Iitomi, Sodegawawa-shi, Chiba-ken(〒299-0256) Tel & Fax: 0438-62-5762

Appendix

<Details of the incident>

•Prior to the incident, Bengali settlers who had been settled by the Bangladesh government in Bhuiochari Cluster Village (guarded by the military and paramilitary forces) arbitrarily built seven houses on land of the Jumma peoples (in this case, the Chakmas). The Jumma peoples peacefully protested against this, clearly indicating that they have the ownership and usufruct rights over the land on which the houses were constructed, and demanding that they be dismantled. Some of the Bengali settlers who had faced the protest approached Major Soikot of the 51st Regiment, who is the military officer in charge of this region, to resolve the issue in their favor.

•On the day of the incident (19 April), at around 10:30 PM, 19 Bengali settlers supported by Major Soikot of the 51st Regiment attacked 41 houses in Bhuiochari Chakma Village. Nine houses were burned down, 32 houses were looted and destroyed, one person was seriously injured, and several others were also hurt. The victims escaped to nearby villages and a local Buddhist temple. Direct damage due to the incident is estimated to be worth between 12 and 17 lakh taka.

•After the incident, the local administration merely distributed a few kilograms of rice to the victimized families, and has taken no measures to rehabilitate them. Moreover, the area around the attacked village is under intensified surveillance by the military, and the Jumma peoples who inhabited the village are restricted from freely entering the area.