

Peace-building in CHT

Imagination is more important than knowledge
— Albert Einstein

Dialogue on 'Peace Building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts'

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), Centre for Alternatives (CA) and The Daily Star jointly organised a **Daylong Dialogue on Peace Building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts** on 10 July 2000 at the BISS auditorium, Dhaka. The dialogue was participated by a cross-section of people - a minister, political leaders, intellectuals, academia, retired civil and military officers and journalists. The dialogue was divided into two sessions: the morning session and the afternoon session.

Session I: Putting the Accord into Practice

The sub-theme of the morning session was "Putting the Accord into Practice". Major General Jamil D. Ahsan, Director General, BISS, and Mr. Syed Fahim Munaim, Managing Editor, The Daily Star, were the co-moderators in the morning session.

Major General Jamil D. Ahsan, Director General, BISS, gave the welcome address. Then, Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Professor of International Relations, Dhaka University, presented his keynote paper. Participants in this session included Tajul Islam Hashmi of Independent University, Group Captain (ret) Dastagir, retired teacher Shamsul Haq, Prof. Mesbah Kamal of Dhaka University, Mithun Chakma, a student of Dhaka University and member of Pahari Chitra Parishad, Major General (ret) Z. A. Khan, Former Cabinet Secretary Mujibul Haq, retired civil servant Abdul Hannan, Dr. Mizanur Rahman Khan of BISS, former ambassador and BNP leader Rezaul Karim, Major General (ret) Ibrahim, Brigadier (ret) Sakawat, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury, JSD leader Hasanul Haq Inu and Chairman of the Task Force for Refugees in the CHT Dipankar Talukder MP.

In his welcome address, Major General Jamil D. Ahsan said that the peace agreement between the central authority and the insurgents and the termination of war situation through the surrender of arms of the insurgents constitute a crucial achievement in the peace process. Nevertheless ensuring enduring peace still requires a long way to go through the hurdles of peace process. In his keynote presentation, Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed highlighted on the achievements, the limitations and the contentious issues in implementing the Peace Accord that included areas like return of refugees, surrender of arms, rehabilitation, issues of governance, land dispute, gender and women security, culture, identity etc.

Withdrawal of Military Camps

The keynote speaker noted that the CHT Accord provided for the withdrawal of temporary army camps from the CHT. As per this Accord, only 50 camps out of more than 500 have so far been withdrawn. Dipankar Talukder pointed out that 62 military camps have been withdrawn till 12 May of this year. Eight more camps are expected to be withdrawn by this June. In fact, these statistics indicate that implementation of the accord in this particular area is not satisfactory. But at the same time one must appreciate that demilitarisation is taking place. Participants identified some problems in withdrawing these camps. Mr. Abul Hasan Chowdhury, the honourable State Minister for Foreign Affairs, said that for army in the CHT is for the security of the hill people. Maj. Gen. (ret) Ibrahim also held the same view. Fahim Munaim and Mithun Chakma said that no time frame has been given in the Accord for the withdrawal of army camps. Mr. Abdul Hannan pointed out that it would be too early to withdraw the army camps, because there are problems in the CHT which the police alone cannot resolve. Mr. Rezaul Karim observed that there are cross-border intrusions in the area that threatens state sovereignty. It is a conflict-prone area and tensions among different groups are always there. Therefore, army camps should remain there but the role of the army would be defined in a way so that they would not use force against the local people. Dipankar Talukder said that there are some strategic camps whose withdrawal would deteriorate the law and order situation. Therefore, no time frame has been given to withdraw the army camps, rather it will be done gradually. He said that as camps are being withdrawn, police is being strengthened.

Land

Land is considered to be the most important problem in CHT. In fact, loss of lands due to state-sponsored development projects and the policy of Bengali settlement were important factors that fuelled the feeling of alienation among the hill people and ultimately shifted their loyalty from the central authority. The CHT accord provides that no land including leaseable "khas" land in hill districts can be leased out, sold, purchased or transferred. The Accord also stipulates that a Land Commission headed by a retired Judge as the Chairman will be formed for the settlement of disputed land. But it is reported that no significant progress has yet been achieved in the settlement of land disputes. With the death of Justice Anwarul Haq, the Chairman of the Commission, it is not functioning. Hasanul Haq Inu suggested that the Land Commission should be reactivated. It was observed that hill people lack proper documentation which the Bengali settlers have. Regarding hill people's lack of proper documentation about land, Dr. Mizanur Rahman Khan gave a historical analysis of the problem. He said that the CHT Manual of 1900 and the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 restricted private property rights of tribal people. A tribal was not able to sell his land to a non-tribal. So

unlike the plain land's people, even private property rights were restricted within the tribal community. The main problem is that after independence, the state conception of property rights conflicted with the communal system of property rights. In fact, due to the communal system of property rights, the hill people did not have documentation for centuries. Prof. Mesbah Kamal said that land is being leased in the CHT which is contrary to the CHT Accord. Although the district administrations of Rangamati and Khagrachari are not doing this, the district administration of Bandarban is particularly responsible for this. Even land that is being leased out is often not used for the given purposes. Mr. Fahim Munaim said that government has promised to provide at least 2 acres of land, upon availability, to each of the landless Pahari families and also to those having less than 2 acres. But progress is yet to be made. Dipankar Talukder said that three chiefs of three circles of the CHT are important members of the land commission. Except the chief of the Chakma circle, the rest two are still disputed. There are cases in the court against the appointments of Augustha Puri as the Mong Chief in Bandarban and Prialapho Chowdhury as the Mong Chief in Manakhari. So until the court gives the decision, the Land Commission cannot work. In addition, dismissing the allegation that afforestation program has been reducing the amount of cultivable land in the CHT, he said that participatory afforestation is being done in those lands which had been deforested earlier.

Bengali Settlers

Partial views were found on the issue of the status of the Bengali settlers. Mithun Chakma said that Bengalis had been politically pushed in the CHT. They should be withdrawn to another place. Mr. Rezaul Karim said that Bengalis were not forced to go to the CHT, they were just offered some facilities and they went there voluntarily. Maj. Gen. (ret) Z. A. Khan, Gr. Capt. (ret) Dastagir, Maj. Gen. (ret) Ibrahim suggested that Bengalis should be assimilated in the CHT. The people of CHT should live in harmony with Bengalis.

Confidence Building Measures

It is important to build confidence among the different parties. The government of Bangladesh has won the confidence of the insurgents through signing the CHT Accord. But the problem is mainstream opposition political parties and some Pahari groups have opposed the CHT Accord. Even there are disputes between the government and Shantu Larma on some issues in the implementing of the Accord. In this backdrop Mr. Mujibul Haq suggested the adoption of a national approach for implementing the Accord. The approach would include all the mainstream political parties and all the Pahari groups. The main task here involves confidence building among all the parties concerned. Mr. Abul Hasan Chowdhury said confidence building measures are far more powerful than inter-continental ballistic missiles and noted that for the success of the CHT accord, a change in mindset is needed. It was also noted that a constitutional guarantee to the Accord is needed to create trust among the tribal people so that nobody can repeal the Accord with the change of government. There was also the



The participants

First row (from left to right): Tajul Islam, Dastagir, Shamsul Haq, Mesbah Kamal, Mithun Chakma, ZH Khan, FR Klaus Beurle, Mujibul Haq, Abdul Hannan, Second row (from left to right): Rezaul Karim, General Ibrahim, Abul Hasan Chowdhury, Shakhwat, Hasanul Haq Inu, Dipankar Talukdar, Shakhawat Hossain, Abdus Sabur, Anwar Hossain, Third row (from left to right): Salim Samad, Dr Iftekaruzzaman, Dr Masud, Salahuddin, Manish Dewan, Major General Azizur Rahman, Professor Masuda Chowdhury, Major Kamrul and Dr Maniruzzaman Mian

suggestion that there should be constitutional recognition of the identity and culture of the tribal people. However, such constitutional measures need two-thirds majority which the government does not have in the parliament. In this context, participants stressed on the need for consensus among the political parties.

Session II: Vision for a Sustainable Peace by Sharif Atiqur Rahman

Peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) remains a tremendous challenge. After a prolonged armed conflict, the Peace Accord was signed on 2nd December, 1997. But it will not be wise to think that the Accord has brought peace in the CHT, rather it has only started the process. Peace matures through a long and tortuous path. Culture of peace needs to be nurtured before we can achieve the final stage of peace. It needs vision for a sustainable peace. And this was the theme of the second session of the Daylong Dialogue on Peace Building in the CHT. Dr. Syed Anwar Hossain, Director General of Bangladesh Academy, moderated the session while Prof. Dr. Imtiaz Ahmed, Executive Director of Centre for Alternatives was the co-moderator. The keynote paper on "Vision for a Sustainable Peace" was presented by Mr. A. K. M. Sabur, Senior Research Fellow of BISS. He conceptualised peace building in its broadest term as the initiatives which foster and support sustainable structures and processes strengthening the prospects of peaceful coexistence. Moderator of the session observed that the CHT problem was not unidimensional, rather multidimensional. In this context we do need multi-pronged peace offensive to achieve the final peace. Participants at the dialogue came up with some highly imaginative and visionary thinking to sustain peace in the CHT. The comments, remarks, proposals and suggestions voiced by the participants in the dialogue can broadly be divided into three categories - (a) vision for institutional and administrative reconstruction, (b) vision for development, and (c) vision for peaceful coexistence.

(a) Vision for institutional and administrative reconstruction: Visionary planning

It was pointed out that the approach adopted for CHT, from the beginning was neither imaginative nor visionary. Actions were taken on an ad hoc basis. What would be the ultimate result of today's action after 30 or 50 years had never been conceptualised. The vision for sustainable development must have a life span of 50-100 years, else our posterity will pay for it. Ms. Masuda Chowdhury, a Ph.D. researcher on the CHT, also opined that conflict broke out in the CHT due to unplanned rehabilitation of Bengali settlers in the CHT. We should not commit the same mistakes by advancing with peace implementation process without a well thought out plan.

Reconstructing the administrative structure

Mr. Sabur stressed the need for institutional reconstruction to accommodate the minorities. Prof. Imtiaz observed that the present parliament of 300

members for 120 million people has become unworkable in terms of proper representation. A wide gap has been created between the voters and the person who is voted for, resulting in the emergence of a powerful group of "middlemen" who are in most cases political mastans. Within 20 to 25 years of time, Bangladesh population will reach 200 million. It is high time to rethink about making the parliament sensible, effective and transparent in terms of demography. He proposed divisional parliaments for all divisional headquarters. For the proper representation of the mass in the law formulating body of the country, when such a divisional body will be formulated, it will ensure the proper representation of the mass and will result in the eradication of public grievances which will ultimately support the efforts for sustainable development.

Appropriate presence of army in the CHT

There was discord among the participants over the number of camps that should be removed from the CHT. Failure to have a time frame for the removal of army camps was termed as a major flaw of the Peace Accord. Secretary of the Ministry of CHT Affairs explained that due to the geographical realities of the CHT, such as borders with India and Myanmar, uneven terrain, remote and inaccessible areas, this place can turn into a haven for anti-social elements from Bangladesh, India or Myanmar. Besides, the presence of army is required there not to interfere in the civil administration, but in aid of the civil administration in situations that the law enforcing agencies find difficult to cope with, or in times of natural calamities. For these reasons the necessary presence of army cannot be ignored. According to the accord, some camps will be withdrawn in phases, but we cannot keep our eyes shut to the hard realities. Mr. Hasanul Haque Inu pointed out that the number of army camps deployed in the CHT should not be the question; there might be more to safeguard our sovereignty or to patrol the border areas. What we need is to monitor whether they are involved in any type of atrocities or whether they are abusing their power as it was alleged in the past. Prof. Maniruzzaman Miah, ex-Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University, rejected the provision of withdrawing army camps from the CHT as it can be done only by the unilateral decision on part of the government. He maintained that there cannot be any treaty on creating a demilitarised zone within a country.

(b) Vision for development: Ensuring harmonious sustainable development

The notion of development implies economic, social, political and cultural development in a balanced and integrated way embracing the diversity of social, ethnic and linguistic groups, religious communities and geographical. Some of the speakers suggested the need to flood the CHT area with various development activities. Both Prof. Mesbah and Prof. Imtiaz pointed out that these development initiatives need to be sustainable - not just simple development. The development activities applicable for any other part of Bangladesh may not be effective for the CHT as the area is different both in terms of geography and life-style. NGOs go-

ing there and pursuing their development models as like other areas of the country may result in development, but not sustainable development.

Balanced development for all ethnic groups

There is wide gap among the 13 nations/tribes that live in the CHT - some have literacy rate exceeding the average of Bangladesh, while some are yet to be brought to the modern way of life. Mr. Sabur opined that when the Bengali-Tribal conflict is over, these groups will compete with each other to grab the limited resources and this may result in conflict situation due to the grievances generated by the backwardness of some groups. Prof. Maniruzzaman Miah also pointed out that there is the fear of only one or two already advanced communities enjoying the benefits of the Peace Accord depriving the other smaller and backward ethnic groups. So while planning for sustainable peace in the CHT, policy makers should bring this division into consideration and emphasise on bringing all the groups to a similar development footing.

Rehabilitation of refugees and IDPs

Secretary of the Ministry of CHT Affairs informed the peace accord that according to the Peace Accord, the Task Force has successfully identified members of 1,28,364 families as internally displaced persons (IDPs) and has sent the proposed plan of action for their rehabilitation to the concerned ministry. Some speakers expressed their dissatisfaction over the slow progress in this field, but according to the Secretary, it needs some time as a huge financial involvement is required for the rehabilitation of such a large number of IDPs. Similarly Maj. Gen. (ret) Ibrahim thought it would be difficult to rehabilitate the IDPs from the CHT to other parts of Bangladesh as the IDPs are living there for about 20 years and already a second generation is there who were born and brought up there with a lot of emotional attachments. Rather, he suggested that all persons who had lived in the CHT prior to signing of the Peace Accord as the inhabitants of the CHT, and then freezing the number and conducting development initiatives for all of them.

(c) Vision for peaceful coexistence: Healing the scars of Conflict - Truth & Reconciliation Commission or White Paper on CHT

Due to past history of tension between the members of armed forces and the hill people, army is not popular among the hill people despite their involvement in many development sectors or in times of natural calamities. Prof. Imtiaz opined that the situation could not be changed overnight. They are still suspicious about a force in which the number of Hill people representation is only a few. Their memories in terms of oppression and atrocities against them are still very fresh. Similarly, there are memories of atrocities conducted by the members of the Shanti Bahini among the Bengalis and the hill people as well. According to Lt. Col. (ret.) Manish Dewan, there is not a single tribal family which has not suffered either by the army or by the Shanti Bahini. This has got a psychological social

dimension and the memories, particularly of the victims persist far long and are transmitted from generation to generation.

Mind set in favour of the peace accord

Secretary of the Ministry of CHT Affairs emphasised on adopting a unanimous approach in interpreting the Peace Accord. He opined that the accord has upheld the spirits of sovereignty, democracy and human rights. Though the accord was signed by two contracting parties, the responsibility to implement the accord and ultimately to restore peace in the region lies upon the entire nation - not only the government or the hill people or the Bengalis. It is time that the gains from the peace accord should be sustained, understood, well-comprehended and consolidated. As the entire nation owned the Language Movement or the Liberation War, similar support from the entire nation is required to implement peace in the CHT. There should be a sense of belonging and participation by all the communities concerned to the peace building initiatives in the CHT.

Prof. Maniruzzaman Miah proposed the holding of similar dialogues at different levels all over the country to make people understand why peace was a necessity in the CHT and what this accord will bring for the country. There should be attempts to create a national consensus on the issue so that both the hill people and the Bengalis will have the feeling of ownership about the accord. He opined that such steps on discussing about the accord should be taken, but it is still not too late.

Prof. Mesbah pointed out that political parties should put national interest over local political interests. It is alleged that as PCJSS is going to emerge as a strong political force in the CHT in future elections. Local political interests are becoming a major factor in implementing the provisions of the peace accord.

It was suggested that all concerned groups, not only the political parties, but also the military and the bureaucracy should set their minds in believing in the Accord and act accordingly. Mr. Salahuddin pointed out that despite signing the Peace Accord, we have not yet succeeded to disabuse our mind.

Understanding and integrating the hill people

Dr. Iftekaruzzaman suggested the introduction of topics related to ethnic and minority studies in school curriculum. If we really want to change our mind-set we must inform our next generation about the true identity of the smaller ethnic groups living in the CHT or in any other part of the country.

Prof. Imtiaz proposed that a thematic dictionary on different languages like Bengali, Chakma, Marmas, Tripura etc. Institute of Modern Language of Dhaka University conducts language courses on French, German, Japanese, but not on the languages of people living in the CHT. It is unfortunate that we do not have any idea about the languages of our neighbours living within this same geographical entity. Such

a thematic dictionary will go a long way in understanding the hill people and their different life-styles. He also proposed that independent study and research on the languages of the ethnic groups within the structure of the Bangla Academy may be conducted, or renaming the Bangla Academy as Desha Bhasha Academy or Language Academy. A department on indigenous studies in different universities of the country should be created immediately and the indigenous people can easily take the initiative. Prof. Imtiaz also clarified that the myth that the hill people were against the liberation war of 1971 is not true - the story has other side as well. It was the feudal leaders among the hill people who took decisions defying the overall opinion and general feeling of the tribal groups. Prof. Anwar Hossain (DG of Bangla Academy) informed the session that Bangla Academy is going to publish three volumes on the role of three hill districts in the liberation war of Bangladesh which will help in changing the mind-set about the hill people.

Maj. Gen. (ret.) Ibrahim proposed more business and communication with Hill people. This will help them to think more as Bangladeshis and reduce the psychological barriers. Similarly, Prof. Maniruzzaman Miah commented that the tribal communities needed to be integrated with the process of 'modernity'.

Looking beyond extreme Bengali nationalism

Prof. Mesbah stressed on thinking beyond extreme Bengali nationalism. Though the liberation war of 1971 was fought with the spirit of Bengali nationalism, different ethnic groups living within this territory took active part in the war. Research showed that there are about 70 ethnic groups living in Bangladesh, but the constitution formed in 1972 totally ignored their rights and identity as separate ethnic groups and upheld the Bengali hegemonic nationalism. He opined that as Bangladesh is a 'multinational state' and the Bengalis are the majority, their responsibility is much more. Unless we bring ourselves out of the extremities of hegemonic nationalism, permanent peace in the CHT would remain unachievable. Mr. Sabur disagreed on terming Bangladesh as a 'multinational state' on the basis of numeric.

Dr. Iftekaruzzaman also agreed that we have a spontaneous Bengali hegemonic tendency amongst us. This needs to be changed so that we can show proper respect to the ethnic groups and create a space for them. He stressed on rethinking the concepts of nationalism, Bengali nationalism in particular, and the components or the founding pillars of the Bengali nationhood.

Speakers at the dialogue pointed out several weaknesses of the Peace Accord signed. Still most of them termed the signing of the Peace Accord as historic, the very first right step towards the right direction. It was argued that it has created a golden opportunity before the nation to learn lessons from the past misdeeds and to build sustainable peace in the CHT.

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More pain than pleasure

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Reports indicate that women Hill members continue to suffer from insecurity, including sexual harassment, unlawful punishment and even rape. Failure to publish the inquiry report on Kalpana Chakma has added to the Hill women's state of insecurity.

5. Identity and Culture: There has been a significant retreat in this field, particularly in the Accord's depiction of the Hill people as 'tribal'. Critics maintain that the use of 'Jumma nation' would have gone a long way in diffusing the tension in the CHT since the change would have eroded the age-old sense of inferiority that is so much a part of the word 'tribal'. Moreover, the failure to give constitutional recognition to the cultural distinctiveness of the Hill people has kept alive the tension and the rationale for a continued struggle on this issue. Finally, 'culture' being a mere construction there is also an absolute lack of imagination and innovative intervention in this area, reproducing further the tension between urban dwellers and cultivators, elite and underprivileged, modernists and traditionalists, relatively advanced and backward communities, and the like.

Time possibly has come to reflect on and work imaginatively in the areas of relative success and the areas of stalemate and contention and not be blinded by some of success areas of the Accord. Anything less could rob and submerge the latter!

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