IN late 1979, probably around October, I was asked by the Chittagong divisional commissioner at the time to attend a meeting in his chamber at the commissioner's residence. Meetings at the divisional commissioner's residence were not unusual and I never asked what the topic of the meeting was. When I arrived at the bungalow I found the deputy commissioner of Chittagong Hill Tracts there as well. As soon as I entered the meeting room, the doors were closed, with only three of us there. Without much ado, the commissioner broke open the subject of the meeting, but with a request that the matter remain at least temporarily within the four walls of the room. The subject was relocating people affected by erosion in Sandwip and Kutubdia to the CHT.

The news startled me. The erosion of Sandwip and Kutubdia, along with the neighbouring Hatyia Island in Noakhali, had been going on for years, with hundreds of people losing their homesteads. The affected people had been moving inland without much government support. We in the district administration had been coping with the affected people's requests to help in whatever way we could. Initially, it pleased me to learn that the government was directing its attention to this problem, but relocating these people to the CHT? What about the CHT regulations that govern and restrict non-hill people settlements in that district? Answering my questions the commissioner simply stated that the government had decided that people of the islands who had lost their homes to erosion would be settled in designated areas of the hill tracts. The deputy commissioner of the CHT had identified the areas of relocation. I was required to find volunteers from the displaced people of the islands, who would later be transported to the designated areas in the hill tracts. They would be given cash and housing materials to construct their new homes.



SHAHADAT PARVEZ

The news was astounding! I could not believe that we were participating in a plan to destroy the very foundation of a regulation that the government had been following, at least officially, for last so many decades.

It was not like there weren't Bangali settlements in the hill tracts prior to 1979; but there had never been a massive transplantation of people to the area. The Bangali population had been steadily increasing, particularly after war of liberation. Officially these settlements required permission from the deputy commissioner, with limitations on leases for land holding. But even with these restrictions, the non-hill population had been rising due to the growth in trade with the main land, land grabbing, and often-illegal settlement in the forestlands at the connivance of government officials.

However, I was very disturbed that we would be shipping loads of non-hill people to the tribal areas and thus officially flouting a regulation that had governed the area for such a long period. I was particularly surprised that this plan was being thought of at a time when the government was battling an insurgency in the hill tracts that had been going on for three years. How could we think of transporting civilians to the mouth of this Vesuvius? I was told that the government had already drawn up and agreed upon this plan to counter the insurgency. The