

SHAHADAT PARVEZ

were homeless that they volunteered to be bussed to such a harsh environment for resettlement. They would soon find out that their fate was worse than what they had originally bargained for.

The first attack on a Bangali settlement happened a few months after the settlement in an area not too far from Kaptai. In a brazen attack after dark, the insurgents killed several settlers, burnt the newly built thatched-houses, and drove hundreds of men, women and children out of the "strategic village" to Rangunia in Chittagong. As deputy commissioner of Chittagong I had the misfortune of witnessing these refugees, and offered them what little relief I could. Again they were huddled in makeshift camps, and taken back to the hill tracts under police security.

Unfortunately, the "settlement operation" would not be stopped by this setback or the many other insurgent attacks that would follow in other parts of the region. The *Shanti Bahini* militants easily garnered support for their insurgency from the locals, because the entire program of "forced settlement" was an anathema to them. As retribution the army and the armed police battalion would undertake combing operations in the surrounding villages, further alienating the local population and baiting the insurgents to perpetrate even bolder acts. These acts of insurgency and counterinsurgency would dog the hills for two full decades.

I thought things would simmer down after the signing of the peace accord. I thought that our political leaders who were opposed to this accord would finally come to realise the value of preserving and promoting amity between the majority population and our ethnic minorities. To my sadness, however, I find that in the name of national solidarity and sovereignty these so-called leaders seem bent on fomenting suspicion and sowing the seeds of division in the hill tracts. Instead of allaying fears of subjugation, destruction of culture, and forced assimilation of the minorities, they are encouraging the reappearance of the same ideological forces that led to the predicament in the hill tracts.

Bangladesh is tiny for such an overwhelmingly large population. I understand why there would be a mad rush for open space in every direction. However, in doing so we have to learn and educate our people in respecting rights of others to life, property, and culture. Respect for rights and liberties of other human beings are an integral part of nationhood. The sooner our leaders inculcate these feelings and impart this training on their followers, the better it'll be for everyone who lives in Bangladesh.

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