



## HILL OF HOPE

*Deem Pahar -- hill of egg, that's how it is known to the locals. And there is a curious story behind the naming. When the Chittagong Hill Tracts region was surveyed by the British, the peak of this hill was found to be at least 'one-egg taller' than Chimbuk, the tallest hill in Bandarban. And so the name went. On papers it is Kra U Dong, near the Thanchi-Alikadam road. Once it was a dense forest. Ageless Gazari and numerous kinds of fruit trees stood tall. It was also teeming with wildlife. Leopards used to roam here. Bears, gibbons and langurs were its residents. Hornbills carved out holds in the tall trees and built nests. Old timers can recall all of this. Today they are all gone. The Mro ethnic group people started Jhum cultivation and soon the trees were gone and gone were the wildlife, most of them killed and eaten. Many years down the line, a new dawn came to the Deem Pahar when Mro and Marma people pledged not to do Jhum any more here and keep it as a sanctuary for wildlife. Hla Phaw Shu, a headman, took this initiative to declare it a sanctuary. It took him long to convince the villagers to give up Jhum that harms the environment as trees are slashed and then burned to clear patches for cultivation. It is a unique gesture from these forest people whose lives are so intertwined with nature. From Saturday morning they started gathering at the remote hill. It took some to walk for three hours. Then they stood by a mysterious cave where they think the hill god lives here. They offered Puja. They sacrificed pigs to the god so that this land again regains its vitality and is covered with tall trees and teems with animals and birds and snakes. But this is a tall task and headman Hla Phaw Shu knows it too. That is why he feels that the government and NGOs should come forward for the reforestation and restoration of the land that gives so much.*

Photo: SHAWKAT JAMIL

