

# INTERNATIONAL DAY OF THE WORLD'S INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

## A strong social contract for indigenous peoples



PALLAB CHAKMA

**T**HIS year we are celebrating the 50th anniversary of our great independence. As a sovereign nation, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in economic growth, poverty reduction, life expectancy, the human development index, and many other social development indicators in the recent past. By keeping this momentum continuing, Bangladesh is also advancing towards fulfilling the Global Agenda 2030 with the theme "Leaving No One Behind".

But how far we have achieved the concerned goals and targets for our marginalised people, like our country's indigenous communities, is another question. They are not big in numbers compared to the total population, only around two percent, but they nevertheless deserve development and all basic rights that are enshrined in the national constitution. These communities also sacrificed their lives for the independence of the country, as did other citizens.

If we see government statements on indigenous peoples' situation—that the government is doing everything possible for the betterment of marginalised groups like indigenous peoples—and compare it to the reality, they would not add up. So far, through its 15th amendment of the Constitution the government has recognised indigenous peoples as "tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities". This is a positive development on part of the government as it recognises the identity of these marginalised groups. Further, the Ministry of Cultural Affairs has amended the controversial list of ethnic communities that was included in the Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act of 2010 and corrected it, as recommended by a National Advisory Committee. Now, 50 indigenous groups are officially recognised in the country.

Another remarkable step from the government was to introduce school textbooks in five indigenous languages to facilitate mother tongue based primary education as stipulated in the National Education Policy. Also, signing the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord of 1997 (popularly known as the "Peace Accord") was

another bold step to facilitating development, peace, and harmony in the southeastern part of the country, by establishing a kind of power-sharing mechanism with the indigenous and local people of the CHT. In the 50 years since independence, these are significant developments for the rights of the country's indigenous peoples.

However, if we observe the situation of indigenous peoples critically we will see the harsh realities in their lives. Indigenous communities, with their distinct languages, traditions, cultures, values, and customs, contribute significantly to the beauty, development, and sustainability of the country. Their contribution, manifested in all the elements that make up the country—including in the war of independence—in fact serves as its source of strength. Ironically, however, the overall situation of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh is decidedly poor. Like other parts of the world, indigenous peoples in Bangladesh are among the most disadvantaged, neglected, and vulnerable citizens in the country. They often face eviction from their ancestral lands in the name of development, tourism, bases of security forces, economic zones, eco-parks, national parks, and reserved forestland. Their lands are often taken away without their consent.

The best example of this kind of land grabbing is the construction of a luxury five-star hotel on Mro people's traditional land in the Chimbuk range of Bandarban hill district. The ancestral lands of the Mro people have been reportedly encroached jointly by a welfare trust and business corporate giant Sikder Group's R&R Holdings Ltd. The hotel and its accompanying modern recreational facilities—including a dozen luxury villas, cable cars, and swimming pool—will adversely affect an estimated 800-1,000 acres of land belonging to nearly 600 indigenous families. Some Mro families have already been evicted while others are under threat of losing their lands. Mro villagers as well as different national and international advocacy groups staged rallies and signed petitions addressing policymakers, including the prime minister, amidst the Covid-19 crisis. However, a positive response is yet to come from the authorities to address the matter. As a consequence, the affected Mro community is passing its days in great uncertainty. Similarly, indigenous peoples in Madhupur of Tangail district, the Khasi people in Moulvibazar



A group of Mro community members play their traditional musical instruments in the capital's Shahbagh, as a sign of protest over the luxury hotel that is being built on their ancestral land in Chattogram Hill Tracts.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

district, and the Rakhaine people in Barga-Patuaekhali are living under threat of eviction due to government-declared reserved forest or their lands, including cremation grounds, being grabbed by local goons. As a result, these communities are facing uncertain times.

Apart from land issues, indigenous peoples are also vulnerable in terms of gender-based violence, climate change, extraction of natural resources, accessing government facilities, and even in political representation. As a result, some indigenous-inhabited regions lag behind in accessing education, healthcare services, and social safety net programmes. Even during the government's Covid-19 response programmes, many indigenous communities did not get any support as they live in remote areas and do not have representatives among those implementing these programmes. Therefore, they are still leading miserable lives with food shortages and lack of income. The ongoing countrywide Covid-19 vaccination programme is also not accessible for many indigenous communities due to their remoteness and lack of information and awareness.

For the people of the CHT now, the historic CHT Accord has turned into an

illusion. Hope is now fading. The Accord is considered a constructive arrangement between indigenous peoples and the Bangladesh government. But even after 23 years, major issues of the Accord—such as making the CHT Land Commission functional, devolution of power and functions to the CHT institutions, preservation of tribal area characteristics of the CHT region, demilitarisation, and rehabilitation of internally displaced people—remain unimplemented. This is very frustrating for all indigenous peoples and their communities. We are observing how a state's promise is being violated and ignored.

The 8th Five Year Plan undertaken by the Bangladesh government for the period 2021-2025 also brought some other promises for the development of indigenous peoples of the country in sugar-coated words. With the theme "Promoting Prosperity and Fostering Inclusiveness", the plan rightly observed the vulnerable situation of the indigenous peoples ("ethnic minorities" as used by government) by stating: "the ethnic communities in Bangladesh are the most deprived of economic, social, cultural and political rights, mainly due to their ethnic

status. Ethnic identities are creating barriers to ethnic minority peoples' inclusion in wider social networks... the result is that ethnic people are socially isolated, with little access to mainstream economic and political spheres."

Against this dire situation of indigenous peoples, the government proposed some strategic plans and commitments for the socio-economic and political rights, fundamental human rights, and social security of indigenous peoples, along with safeguards for their social, cultural, and traditional identities. The Five Year Plan also assured citizens that the rights to access education, healthcare, food and nutrition, employment, overseas employment, and protection of rights to land and other resources for indigenous peoples would be honoured. Furthermore, it mentions the formulation of a Perspective Plan for the development of the CHT through a consultative process with key stakeholders. It reiterates that the government will consider implementing the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007 and the ratification of the ILO Convention 169, among others. All these commitments are truly encouraging for all of us.

We have stepped into the sixth year of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, indigenous peoples are still invisible in SDG implementation processes. If we really want to fulfil the government's promises for the true development of the indigenous peoples in the country, we need to bring them on board and ensure their meaningful engagement in all development programmes. Their voices need to be heard and their issues need to be addressed without further delay. Without their active participation, it is not possible to narrow the gaps and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. To bring them into the development process, including for the realisation of their political rights, as those currently the furthest behind to where they should be now, requires a strong social contract among all stakeholders. Otherwise, all these promises will remain on paper only and the essence of our great independence will be meaningless for the indigenous peoples of this land.

Pallab Chakma is the Executive Director of Kapaeng Foundation.

## Suburban living the worst for carbon emissions



SABRINA ZWICK

**W**ORK, education, entertainment, or simply better connectivity all draw people to cities. By the end of this century around 85 percent of the world population are predicted to live in cities.

There are speculations that the Covid-19 pandemic will slow down this urbanisation trend, but I think it's unlikely to stop it.

Cities remain the primary location for job opportunities, education and cultural offers, and the continued rise in housing prices in many European cities over the past year indicates that city life is still high in demand.

Some find this trend worrying, as—globally—urbanisation has worsened the climate crisis, and cities are often blamed for boosting energy consumption and carbon emissions.

The World Bank estimates that 80 percent of global GDP is produced in urban areas. This results in higher income, consumption and associated levels of emissions.

It is certain that a considerable share of the global carbon budget will be used up for building new infrastructure, particularly in fast-growing cities. Further emissions take place when cities expand and land use changes—turning vegetation into city grounds.

On the other hand, cities cover only about 3 percent of the global land surface while, at present, accounting for 58 percent of the world's population. This compact structure can render emission savings linked to higher densities, connectivity, accessibility and land use. Copenhagen and Amsterdam, for instance, are great examples of cities that make good use of these compact structures and offer a low emission lifestyle.

**What's better for the climate?**  
Rural homes are surrounded by nature, but are often larger than urban houses or apartments and people who live in them require cars to get around. City homes are usually smaller and offer short distances, but also a world of shiny consumption goods, takeaway food and entertainment options—at least in non-Covid times.

But what does this mean for individual carbon footprints: are they bigger in the city or in the countryside, if the income level is similar?

To answer this question, my colleague Pablo Munoz and I looked at the consumption patterns of more than 8,000 households in Austria. We clustered them into urban, semi-urban and rural areas, estimated their carbon footprints, and found that people in urban areas, on average, had the smallest carbon footprints.

People in semi-urban areas had the biggest carbon footprints, with those in rural areas in between.

The main difference we found is that the city dwellers we analysed had lower

*Globally, we know that urbanisation has been a driver of higher emissions. But results like ours give hope that city life is the sustainable option after all, at least once countries reach a certain income level.*

direct emissions from transport, heating and cooking. They did have more indirect emissions, that is, emissions released upstream in the production chain—by factories producing TVs for example.

But in total, we found that the emissions of urban dwellers were still comparatively low. Even when controlling for other socioeconomic factors including income, we found that people in semi-urban areas in Austria emit around 8 percent more CO<sub>2</sub> than those in cities, and people in rural areas around 4 percent more.

This evidence that a city lifestyle is the

least carbon intense in Austria is replicated by other studies for high-income countries in Europe (such as the UK and Finland).

But it doesn't mean that it applies to everywhere: research shows that urbanisation in low-income countries usually increases emissions.

This isn't to say we should discourage urbanisation in these countries. One of the principle reasons for this pattern is the income gap between urban and rural areas in these countries: higher urban incomes lead to more consumption and resulting emissions.

In high-income countries on the other hand, the urban-rural income gap is much smaller as consumption levels are high everywhere. So, in countries such as Austria or the UK, living in cities tends to be better for the climate, as dense living can reduce transport and heating emissions.

**Curse or cure**  
Does this mean that urbanisation is good or bad in the long run? There is no simple answer to this. The link between urbanisation and income, to take just one factor, is very complex.

Globally, we know that urbanisation has been a driver of higher emissions. But results like ours give hope that city life is the sustainable option after all, at least once countries reach a certain income level and when doing it right.

Key to this is a strong commitment to climate action and implementing it fast. Governments around the globe should make best use of high densities, connectivity,

accessibility and land in urban areas—and plan cities and their surroundings in a smart and climate friendly way.

But efforts should not be limited to cities, given that semi-urban areas are the worst for emissions. This is especially true in light of increasing housing prices in cities and a post-Covid digitalised world, which make suburbs increasingly attractive for many of us.

Ways to decrease emissions are numerous: good public transport systems and bicycle routes, short distances to basic infrastructure, efficient buildings, and green heating and cooling systems are all proven ways of cutting carbon costs.

In addition, carbon pricing can create incentives for greener value chains and more sustainable consumption. When planning land use, rural-urban migration trends and other behavioural aspects should be taken into account.

The way urban and rural areas are designed will affect people's choices—such as their preferred mode of transport—and associated emissions.

But ultimately, we as individuals determine our own consumption patterns and our carbon footprint can be large or small, whether we live in the city or elsewhere.

Sabrina Zwick is Research Associate at United Nations University. This work was partially supported by the Austrian Climate Research Programme (ACRP) of the Austrian Climate and Energy Fund through the project "Innovative climate policy instruments to reduce consumption-based emissions to complement territorial emission reduction efforts".

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### ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



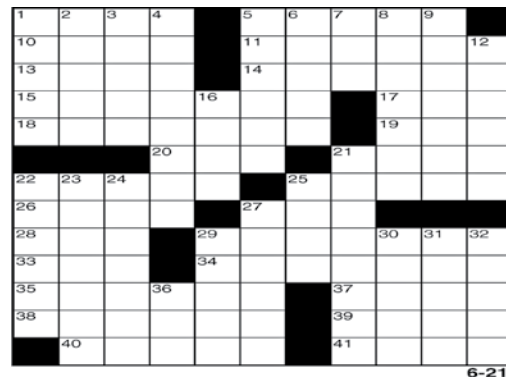
**AUGUST 9, 1945**  
Second atom bomb dropped on Nagasaki

On August 9, 1945, a second atomic bomb was dropped on Japan by the United States, at Nagasaki, resulting finally in Japan's unconditional surrender to the Allies in World War II. The bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima (on August 6) together killed between 129,000 and 226,000 people, most of them civilians.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Diamond corner
  - 5 Accumulate
  - 10 Singer Fitzgerald
  - 11 Stumble
  - 13 Mimic
  - 14 Warm sweater material
  - 15 Frozen dessert
  - 17 School org.
  - 18 Pudding dessert
  - 19 Part of RSVP
  - 20 Negating word
  - 21 Swimming spot
  - 22 Pharmacy stock
  - 25 Band-leader Goodman
  - 26 Agents, for short
  - 27 Used a chair
- DOWN**
- 1 Savage creature
  - 2 Greek vowel
  - 3 Get some shuteye
  - 4 Jewelry sold in pairs
  - 5 Have an influence on
  - 6 Mediterranean island
  - 7 Pub pints
  - 8 Nero, to Augustus
  - 9 Newspaper part
  - 12 In truth
  - 16 Derisive calls
  - 21 Funnel-shaped flowers
  - 22 Chauffeur
  - 23 Stops working
  - 24 Posh
  - 25 Farm sight
  - 27 Kicks off
  - 29 Fragrance
  - 30 Disco's Summer
  - 31 Rocker John
  - 32 Detroit team
  - 36 Black or Baltic

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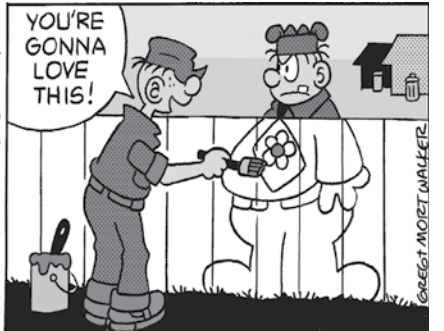
### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



### BETLE BAILEY



### BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES



### BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

