



The Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) Accord was signed between the then Awami League government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) on December 2, 1997.

FILE PHOTO

IMPLEMENTING THE CHT ACCORD

Will the government listen to the UN call?



Mangal Kumar Chakma is information and publicity secretary at the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS).

MANGAL KUMAR CHAKMA

The 22nd session of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) was held on April 17-28, 2023, at the UN headquarters in New York. During this session, the PFII called upon the Bangladesh government to make further efforts towards the full implementation of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord. It also welcomed the progress made so far to implement the accord.

Based on a press statement from the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the UN, The Daily Star (alongside other media outlets) published a news report on this issue on April 30. In this context, CHT Development Board Chairman Nikhil Kumar Chakma posted partial information on Facebook, only stating that the government's efforts to implement the CHT Peace Accord has been welcomed at the PFII.

But Mr Chakma seems to have carefully sidestepped the PFII's call for Bangladesh to "make further efforts towards the full implementation of the CHT agreement." By sharing only a fragment of the PFII's message, he tried to convey to the countrymen that the UN is satisfied with Bangladesh's progress in implementing the CHT Accord.

At the PFII session, the Bangladesh government delegation highlighted that this year, 40 projects have been implemented for the CHT region's development, and 1,555 more projects have been approved. But how sustainable will the development plan be for the Indigenous Jumma people? Will the Jumma villagers lose their land, be evicted from their ancestral land and homesteads, be deprived of their right to self-governance as well as self-determination of development priorities, as per the CHT Accord? Will the biodiversity, environment and water resources of the region be protected, or will the Jumma people be deprived of their traditional farming and livelihoods?

According to what the government delegates told the UN forum, 65 clauses out of the 72 in the CHT Accord have been fully implemented, three clauses have been partially implemented, and only four remain unimplemented. If that were true, then why is the special governance system and the overall situation in the CHT region still as fragile as the pre-Accord period? On the 25th anniversary of the signing of the

treaty last year, the government presented information about the full implementation of 48 clauses, so it is really surprising how another 17 clauses got fully implemented over the last five months.

If what the government delegation said at the PFII session is true – that 65 clauses out of 72 are fully implemented – why are the characteristics of tribal-inhabited areas in the CHT, as recognised in Clause 1 of Part A of the accord, slowly deteriorating? Why are the laws, rules, and regulations applicable in the CHT, including the CHT Regulations, 1900, not amended in line with the CHT Accord, which was stipulated in Clause 2 of Part A? Why has the settlement of the case filed with the High Court against the CHT Accord been pending for so many years?

The elections to the three hill district councils, as stipulated in Part B of the accord, has not been held over the past 25 years. The voters' list with the permanent residents of the three hill districts has not yet been made either, which is also stipulated in the accord. Even the electoral roll rules and election rules for the hill district councils have not been formulated. Furthermore, law and order, police, land and land management, forest and environment, development of a communication system, etc have not been handed over to the hill district councils. The hill district police force has not been formed. Despite the decision of the Accord Implementation Committee, the jurisdiction to issue Permanent Resident Certificates, vested upon the deputy commissioners in violation of the accord, has not been abrogated.

And if only four clauses of the accord remain unimplemented and three partially unimplemented, why is the process of coordination and supervision of the CHT Regional Council over the general administration, law and order, and development of the three hill districts not being executed as per the provisions inserted in Part C of the accord? Why has the process of overall supervision and coordination of the matters entrusted to the three hill district councils – including all development activities by the regional council – not been introduced? Why is the CHT Development Board not performing its duties under the general and overall supervision of the Regional Council?

On the other hand, the India-returned Jumma refugees have not yet gotten their land back, violating Clause 1 of Part D of the accord. The internally displaced tribal families (IDPs) were not rehabilitated on their own land either. One of the main problems in the CHT is the land problem. If 65 clauses of the accord have been fully implemented, why hasn't a single land dispute been resolved over the last 25 years? Why are the Jumma people constantly losing their land and being evicted from their homesteads? Why is the land lease given to non-locals cancelled? Why has two acres of land not been allocated to the landless Jumma families? Why are there more than 400 temporary camps and "Operation Uttaran" in the CHT still? Why are the innocent Jumma people constantly being subjected to arrest, jail, oppression, house searches, extrajudicial killings?

Can the government delegation answer these questions?

The main question here is: will the government step forward to implement the CHT Accord hearing the call from the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues? Already, at its 10th session in 2011, the PFII made recommendations regarding the implementation of the CHT Accord. In August 2022, the UN high commissioner for human rights also called on the Bangladesh government to implement the accord and allow independent actors unrestricted access to the CHT region. On December 2, the UN special rapporteur on the rights of Indigenous peoples also highlighted the overall situation in the CHT region due to non-implementation of the accord, and strongly called upon the government for proper and full implementation of the treaty. The UN specialised agency ILO and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of the Human Rights Council have also urged the government for the full implementation of the CHT Accord. But the government remains ignorant to all these calls.

It must be mentioned that there is no room to think that the deluge will stop if the government continues to ignore international calls for CHT Accord implementation. The Jumma people are being oppressed in the country, and attempts have been made to suppress the voices of Jumma rights activists through surveillance and intimidation at international platforms like the United Nations.

It is not possible to resolve the CHT issue by suppressing and spreading false propaganda at home and abroad. The only way to resolve it is politically and peacefully through the proper, speedy and full implementation of the CHT Accord. By doing this, there is no doubt that the sovereignty and integrity of Bangladesh will be stronger, as mentioned in the preface of the CHT Accord.

SATIRE

This election year, why not opt for rose-tinted glasses?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The media should take a sabbatical this election year. Everyone knows what happens when elections are coming up. It is only natural that the party in government will want the media to put on those rose-tinted glasses and focus on the "phenomenal" achievements in taking the country forward – the shiny new bridges, metro rail that will even have underground routes just like in London, the magnanimous amounts of money poured into social safety net programmes, the abundant food reserves, the unprecedented empowerment of women (just look at the number of women in parliament, in the garment sector, in the banks, NGOs), the unprecedented remittance flows and RMG exports, and our glorious strides into the digital, smart stage of development. And why not?

They will harp on about workers in the garment factories not getting minimum wages and how they cannot cope with the spiralling prices of essentials and healthcare. Don't they realise how important this sector is – that Bangladesh exported garment products worth over \$42 BILLION in the last fiscal year? On second thought, that may be a little counter-intuitive ...

Basically, instead of looking at the RMG miracle, they will focus on nit-picking on living wages, non-payment of Eid bonuses, unpaid arrears of wages, and so on.

There is also this tendency to talk to "experts" for every little thing and rely on data for every little observation, which is a reflection of this unnecessary negativity. So, instead of focusing on



ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

Most of these things are true – there is no need to really dig deep to find dirt. Just stay on the surface and all will be well.

So it's a little mean when, instead of appreciating the fact that we have electricity in Dhaka city – practically all the time, especially in the areas where there are English newspaper readers – we bemoan that our relatives in the villages have forgotten what it's like to have continuous electricity throughout the night, that it makes a guest appearance only for a few hours, if at all. Are these people starving? Are their children not going to school? Are there not leafy trees even after massive deforestation and ponds to cool off in even after all the major rivers have been encroached upon and dumped with garbage? Do they not know what a "hurricane lamp" is? And is it not true that practically everyone has a smartphone these days – especially the young ones who can use TikTok and Imo to their hearts' content, as long as they remember to charge their phones during the short stints of power supply?

Plus, it's a good thing that people in rural areas don't stay up late watching TV. Villagers have a million different things to do in the morning – they need to get up early and go to the fields, prepare the grains to ensure that the rest of us are fed. They can't tire themselves out watching rubbish on the tube – well, alright, maybe a little BTU news on the unbelievable accomplishments of the government. The media should focus on the gleaming grins of the farmers as they harvest high yields, not their whining about the low prices they will have to sell their crops for that barely cover the production costs.

It's a question of seeing the cup half full or half empty. Journalists who take their profession too seriously will incorrigibly choose the latter perspective. It's not just that bad news sells better, it's because journalists are a bitter lot and are out to be killjoys of any party, especially the ruling one. So they will keep talking about the sorry state of public hospitals, the 51 percent of girls marrying before 18 and dropping out of school, the lack of teachers in government schools, the increasing costs of megaprojects, the broken roads, dilapidated buses, lack of jobs for the youth, "inefficiencies and anomalies" in various public service sectors. The tirade never ends.

the government providing Tk 500 each to a whopping 5.7 million elderly people and 2.5 million widows under its social safety net programmes, they will rain on even this parade by talking about 30 percent of the elderly and 33 percent of widows who are ineligible beneficiaries, with 12 percent of the beneficiaries getting multiple allowances.

Such "think tanks" have the audacity to suggest increasing the allowances (of what they think are eligible beneficiaries) from Tk 500 to Tk 2,500 in view of the rise in prices of essentials! As if all those extra crores needed to cover this will just magically "appear" like the crores of taka from local bank loans fattening up accounts in banks in Singapore, Switzerland, Canada or Dubai.

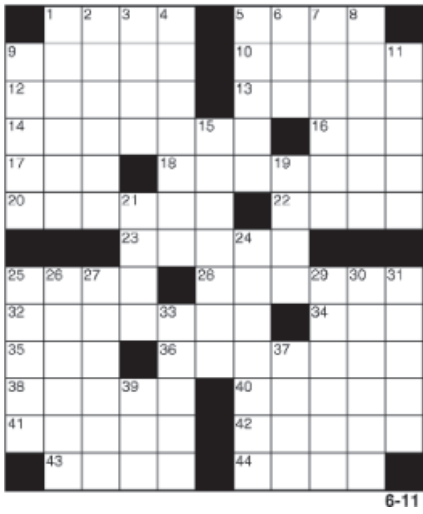
Journalists who take their profession too seriously will incorrigibly choose the latter perspective. It's not just that bad news sells better, it's because journalists are a bitter lot and are out to be killjoys of any party, especially the ruling one.

By the way, during an election year, is it really necessary to bring up the Digital Security Act (DSA) so many times? Yes, it is a bit draconian, has been misused and led to many people going to jail, even being tortured, some of them being journalists. But what did they expect? How can a government trying so hard to change the trajectory of a country, towards an ascending economic growth and eye-catching infrastructural development – at least in the eyes of the relevant public and the world – allow people to just say what they like and have their own opinions? This is election year, you dummies; can't you just keep your opinions, your fact-based reporting to yourselves and avoid them going viral on social media? Can't you exercise a bit of restraint and wear those rose-tinted glasses that many of your smart friends have chosen?

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Unruly groups
5 Take cover
9 Old gold coin
10 Keats, for one
12 Houston player
13 Strong suit
14 Recited, as from a list
16 Poetic contraction
17 Affection, informally
18 Determined
20 Pilot Earhart
22 Money sources
23 Fidgeting
25 Forest youngster
28 Encourage to buy add-ons
32 Galena, e.g.
- 34 Mad, in Marseilles
35 Form 1040 org.
36 Move toward
38 Jeweled crown
40 New Hampshire city
41 Cavalry sword
42 Spanish hero
43 Existence
44 Solemn act
- DOWN**
1 Curator's place
2 Music range
3 Poet-singer
4 Was a replacement
5 1992 Nicholson film
6 Wedding words
7 Most dreadful

- 8 High regard
9 "Little Rascals" girl
11 Scout shelters
15 Trait
19 Year parts
21 Touch down
24 House leader
25 Moves like a moth
26 Reception aid
27 Pungent condiment
29 Upshot
30 Canadian coin
31 Enticed
33 Midwest hub
37 Pastrami emporium
39 Foul caller



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.