

26TH ANNIVERSARY OF CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS ACCORD

How long must we wait for CHT Accord implementation?



Dipayon Khisa is a political activist from the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

DIPAYON KHISA

On December 2, 1997, the historic Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord was signed between the then Bangladesh government and, on behalf of the Jumma people of CHT, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), ending more than two decades of armed conflict. But 26 years on, the basic elements of the agreement have yet to be implemented, and the region's preservation and development as the natural domain of Jumma people remains incomplete. To say progress has been slow would be flattering it.

Last year, on the 25th anniversary of the agreement, a platform named "Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Implementation Movement" was formed with the collective effort of various political, social and human rights organisations, igniting hope among the Jumma people after many years. This platform has given a new perspective to the struggle for the agreement's implementation. For a long time, the CHT accord has been considered as the issue of the people of *Jhums* hills only, and so it is thought that only Jumma people are to fight for its implementation. But the platform broke out of that conventional shell to spread the spirit of the struggle across the country, with the support of progressive forces.

The two joint coordinators of the platform, human rights activist Jakir Hossain and Dhaka University professor Dr Khairul Islam Chowdhury, said they completed solidarity rallies and marches in the capital Dhaka, as well as Chattogram, Rangpur, Mymensingh and Sylhet

divisions. According to sources, each of these events saw spontaneous attendance of various progressive political parties and their affiliates, as well as various social and human rights organisations. The platform also reportedly organised other programmes such as views exchange with professionals, meetings with progressive students, etc.

Last month, the CHT Peace Implementation Movement sent an open letter to the political parties calling on them to play an active role in the implementation process. In the letter, it raised seven points: a) prepare a time-bound action

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plan to implement the accord quickly and properly; b) discontinue military supervision in the region permanently; c) empower regional councils and the three CHT district



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

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councils (zila parishad) in accordance with the accord to ensure local governance and their democratic function; d) ensure land rights in the hills by rehabilitating internal refugees and Jumma refugees from India by operationalising the hill land dispute redressal commission; e) ensure the participation of CHT residents in the mainstream economic progress and sustainable development programmes in the country; f) reserve special seats for the Indigenous people of the plains in all local government bodies, including union parishads, and take special steps to improve the quality of their lives; and g) set up a separate land commission for the Indigenous people of the plains.

The letter further said, "We hope that our political leaders, from their respective parties and positions, will take necessary steps to put pressure on the government and relevant parties for CHT Accord

implementation fully and properly." To this end, a four-point request was made: a) announce specific programmes in light of the seven points raised by the CHT Peace Implementation Movement; b) every political party should include the seven points in their manifesto for the 2024 general election; c) create the positions of a spokesperson and organisational secretary on the issues of Indigenous peoples in the political parties and their affiliates; and d) give party nominations to Indigenous people at all elections, including the parliamentary and local government ones. The leaders of the movement said the letter had already been sent to the party offices of Awami League, BNP, Jatiya Party, left political parties, and other registered parties.

The CHT Peace Implementation Movement has been making efforts to raise awareness around the country. CHT's problems are also problems of

the whole country, and if the accord is not implemented, these problems will not be resolved. Full and proper implementation is in the best interest of the country. Those associated with the platform understand that the rights of the people of *Jhums* hills are intrinsically tied with the rights of the rest of the population.

Regarding the current status of the accord, sources at the PCJSS say that on September 28, 2022, the CHT affairs ministry prepared recommendations on the next course of action bypassing the PCJSS and the CHT Agreement Implementation and Monitoring Committee. They also say the government shared "untrue" and "one-sided" information at the 22nd session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Affairs in April this year by quoting a report prepared by an inter-ministerial committee, which claimed that 65 of the 72 articles of the accord had been "fully implemented." But in

reality, only 25 articles have been implemented, and 18 clauses have been partially implemented; the remaining 29 clauses are completely unimplemented. Twenty-six years after the accord was signed, this is where the implementation process stands.

PCJSS President Jyotirindra Bodhipriya Larma has been saying for some time that the ruling regime has been carrying out various strategies to cancel out the agreement. One reigning argument in this regard has been that the problem of the hills would be a political problem. But any problem cannot be seen through the security lens alone. The accord exists to remind us of the mistake of looking at CHT through the security lens. But 26 years after the treaty, the state and the regime again seem to be on the wrong track, causing its implementation process to come to a standstill.

The agreement was signed by the then Awami League-led government. Because of her involvement and leadership in this, the then Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina received the Unesco peace prize. After the Awami League returned to power in 2009, those associated with the CHT affairs in the government remarked that the BNP-Jamaat government had left the CHT Accord in the freezer and that Awami League had retrieved it, so it would take a while for the ice to thaw. But what did they do after they retrieved the agreement? Interestingly, in all the general elections held since 1997, Awami League has routinely promised to implement the agreement in its election manifestoes. Now, another general election is around the corner. Shall we again see more promises about it, or will there finally be a genuine push to get it over the line?

Translated from Bangla by Sumaiya Binte Shams.

The legacy that Prof Saleemul Huq left behind



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INA F ISLAM

October 29th, 2023—it's a day that disrupted our world of climate action, both in the Global South and Global North. It was the day Prof Saleemul Huq suddenly left us.

Prof Huq was "a giant," "a titan," "a visionary," and so much more. The veteran relentlessly fought for climate justice, representing the underdog: those who faced the harsh impacts of climate change without having contributed to it significantly. Empowering vulnerable people and communities through his empathetic representation of their situation and needs, Prof Huq spoke in their language, listened to them, understood them, and voiced their concerns and demands with a deep sense of urgency. He could relate and communicate with everyone, whether they were a farmer or head of state. He never hesitated to express himself boldly and firmly, especially when it came to climate change issues such as adaptation and loss and damage, causes he was passionate about.

It is because of all these qualities that tributes have poured in from around the world after this huge loss.

I had the privilege of joining Prof Huq on his long and difficult journey of helping those who desperately needed to know how to tackle climate change. I will share the story of how the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD), one of Prof Huq's most impactful creations, came to be.

Prof Huq was truly an extraordinary man with amazing foresight, determination, and ability to drive climate change issues to positions of prominence in public discourse—locally, nationally, and internationally. He had envisioned creating a place that would become the epicentre for climate change



VISUAL: AMREETA LETHE

adaptation, capacity-building, and research. This vision led him to want to set up an international centre in Bangladesh, a nation well-versed in facing climate change disasters like floods, cyclones, droughts, and sea-level rise. It was also the country that had already taken steps to address these disasters by completing its National Adaptation Programme of Action and developing the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan. As a result, Bangladesh became the perfect setting for the climate change centre he had conceptualised.

I had the honour of working with him to establish ICCCAD, becoming his first hire as assistant director in October 2009. At that time, Prof Huq was still a senior fellow at the International Institute for

Environment and Development (IIED), but was fully devoted to establishing ICCCAD. Subsequently, I became his deputy director and, thereafter, the fellow for international outreach. Over the course of eight years that I worked with Prof Huq in Dhaka and then six out of New York, we developed a productive and positive partnership.

The idea of ICCCAD came into

Cannon (visiting fellow, IIED), and critical support from all areas of IUB, I felt that under Prof Huq's inspiring leadership, I had a team to work with.

Prof Huq was truly a wonderful boss who was fully dedicated to his work. He believed that no challenge was too great to tackle as long as efforts were put forth with the best of intentions. He consistently encouraged innovative thinking, gave

courses and seminars to share critical knowledge with individuals and organisations, a master's programme on climate change and development, which I worked on with the School of Environmental Sciences Management (IUB), and hosted visiting researchers from universities both local and international. Additionally, ICCCAD offered internships and collaboratively organised national and international conferences such as Gobeshona, which enabled knowledge exchanges on climate change between national and international researchers, and the Urban Resilience conferences, which aimed to develop a better understanding of sustainable urban development.

Prof Huq received so many accolades, which he rightly deserved. He was conferred the Order of the British Empire (OBE) by the British government in 2022 and was named one of the top 10 scientists in the world in 2022 by the journal *Nature*. He attended every COP (Conference of Parties), an annual climate global summit, and became a force at each one, championing the cause of the vulnerable countries susceptible to the impacts of climate change. Prof Huq was also a lead author of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) chapters.

Prof Huq was truly an extraordinary man with amazing foresight, determination, and ability to drive climate change issues to positions of prominence in public discourse—locally, nationally, and internationally. He had envisioned creating a place that would become the epicentre for climate change adaptation, capacity-building, and research. This vision led him to want to set up an international centre in Bangladesh, a nation well-versed in facing climate change disasters.

At the COPs, he would set up an "office" by selecting a table or area where people could easily see and approach him. Even with his multitude of achievements, he was always keen on sharing the limelight because, to him, the end goal of

Prof Saleemul Huq fought for climate justice. He fought for us to have a future where we can enjoy Earth and all it has to offer. We must jointly continue his legacy to ensure a safe, liveable planet for future generations.