

27TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS ACCORD

# Implementing CHT Accord a pressing need for peace and stability



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Even though 27 years have passed since the historic Chittagong Hill Tract (CHT) Accord was signed between the Bangladesh government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), the much-cherished political and peaceful solution to the CHT crisis has not been achieved yet as it has not been fully implemented. Instead, the successive governments have opted for the policy of repression and extinction of the Jumma entity in an undemocratic and colonial manner. As a result, the enormous possibility that was created for putting an end to the long-standing bloody conflicts and discrimination and, above all, establishing peace and development in the hill tracts, is falling at risk of getting foiled day by day.

Following the signing of the accord in 1997, five political governments and two caretaker governments have been in power, but none of them showed the political will in fully implementing the CHT Accord. The student-led mass uprising in July-August 2024 caused the downfall of the Sheikh Hasina government, following which the interim government led by Prof Muhammad Yunus was formed. This administration has been in power for almost four months, yet it has not taken any initiative in this regard either. To this date, two thirds of the clauses of the accord, including the core issues, remain unimplemented.

The Jumma people were in hope that the long-standing conflicts and violence in the CHT region would come to an end, that the accord would establish an imitable example of resolving a conflict peacefully. That in place of armed movement,

mutual confidence, cooperation and tolerance would be achieved. That the Jumma people would not be subjected to enforced jailing, repression, harassment, arbitrary arrests and killings any more. That like the citizens living in other parts of the country, residents of the hill tracts would also enjoy the security of life. But it is a regrettable fact that due to non-implementation of the accord, the Jumma people have not yet achieved the secured life free from undemocratic and suppressive rule.

Rather, the CHT region continues to be ridden with conflicts, similar to how it was during the pre-accord period. In the post-accord period, the successive governments have applied aggression and forceful measures as means to handle the crisis. The security forces deployed in the CHT have been regulating the region, including general administration, law and order, judiciary, and the development programmes, through Operation Uttoron, which is serving as an obstruction to the introduction

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of a special governance system incorporating the three hill district councils with the CHT Regional Council atop.

A vested quarter within the government has been conducting various conspiracies and propaganda to criminalise the justified movement for full implementation of the CHT

Jumma people, divided them into different armed groups, and incited them against the current movement of the Jumma people demanding the full implementation of the accord as well as their right to self-determination.

Indeed, a special vested quarter has been creating a formidable

along the communal line has been intensified with a planned revival of communal hatred among the Indigenous Jumma people and the Bangalee people. Since the accord was signed, numerous communal attacks upon the Jumma people have taken place, including arson attacks on Indigenous homes and

lands and homesteads, breaking down their economic spine, and destroying biodiversity and the natural environment. Actions that pose a threat to the Indigenous culture and are counterproductive to the environment of CHT include the redesignation of reserve forest areas, leasing the traditional *Jhum* farming land and mouza land out to outsiders, establishing tourism centres via illegal occupation of traditional *Jhum* farming land, constructing border road, link roads and other infrastructures, establishing and expanding camps of the security forces, exploring for gas and oil resources, etc by destroying plantations and homes of the Jumma people.

The Jumma people cherished a hope that the time-immemorial feature of the Jumma-inhabited region would be restored through the implementation of the CHT Accord. The national identity of Jumma people, their culture, language, customs and practices, etc would thereby be developed and preserved. With this, the multiracial, multicultural and multilingual characteristics of Bangladesh would be strengthened and firmly founded. Instead, the Jumma people's fate stands at risk of getting abolished in the absence of a fully functional CHT Accord.

Democratic governance of the CHT region can never be developed while one-tenth of the area remains under undemocratic rule. A happy, prosperous and peaceful Bangladesh is possible only when the inhabitants of CHT are released from repression. Indeed, through full implementation of the CHT Accord, the historic opportunity to resolve the crisis through political and peaceful means will be revived and the long-standing conflict and discrimination will come to an end. Hence, the inhabitants of CHT continue to hope that the interim government, led by Prof Yunus, will take the step to create a roadmap in order to speed up the full implementation of the CHT Accord.



The Jumma people continue to hope for the full implementation of the CHT Accord so that peace can come to the region.

FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Accord. As a part of the mission, the fascist modus operandi includes identifying the right activists and people as "terrorists" and subjecting them to arbitrary arrest, extrajudicial killings, imprisonment under false charges, beatings, harassment, etc.

The government over the years has not only engaged in programmes that were counterproductive to the CHT Accord and against the interest of the Jumma people, but it also applied the colonial "divide and rule" policy to deal with the unruly and opportunist sections within the

environment in the region by nurturing these armed groups and providing support while continuing with repressive measures upon the people in the name of dealing with the terrorists. Not only that, the government has been operating against the interest of the Jumma people by making use of the opportunists, power-hungry and greedy Jumma individuals affiliated with various national political parties, including the deposed Awami League.

In recent months, propaganda

businesses by Bangalee people in Khagrachhari's Dighinala upazila in September, as well as clashes and mob beatings in Rangamati and Khagrachhari.

Instead of resolving the CHT crisis through peaceful, political means by fully implementing the CHT Accord, the authorities are employing a blueprint for the displacement of the Jumma people by utilising all possible means. As part of the whole, the development programmes include the conspiring acts of evicting the Jumma people from their ancestral

## 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM AGAINST GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

# Piercing the invisibility of violence against Adibashi women



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Only two months ago, Abul Hasnat Muhammad Sohail Rana, a teacher of Khagrachhari Government Technical School and College allegedly raped a seventh-grade female Tripura student. According to news reports, doctors found evidence of sexual assault. Protesters, mostly from the Indigenous communities, attacked him, and after he was taken to the hospital, he was declared dead. Immediately after his death, tension broke out between groups of Bangalees and Indigenous people. A hospital was vandalised, temples looted and houses and shops belonging to Indigenous communities in multiple areas were torched.

Human Rights Support Society reports that in September, at least 28 people were killed in mob beatings in Bangladesh. However, in no other part of the country has such violence escalated into community-targeted aggression, underlining systemic issues unique to Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Rana previously went to jail on charges of attempt to rape of a student in Kushtia, following which, he was transferred to Khagrachhari. The decision to transfer him to CHT instead of taking firm disciplinary action raises serious questions about whether CHT is being treated as a "dumping ground" for individuals with tarnished records, further neglecting the safety of Indigenous or Adibashi women.

Violence against Indigenous women is not new in the playbook of colonial oppression and systematic marginalisation. The recent violence towards Adibashis in Khagrachhari and Rangamati in September and October,



VISUAL: MONG SHONIE RAKHAINE

resulting in the deaths of four Indigenous people and widespread attacks on Indigenous properties, reveals a different dimension to gender-based violence against Adibashi women.

Amid indiscriminate violent attacks on us, we were called "Bicchinotabadi" or separatists. Instead of solidarity, we received the demands to answer why we were anti-state. We somehow managed to get through the days, but the nights were filled with fear.

Social media was filled with provocative statements inciting hatred against us, and there was no hesitation in publicly demanding that Adibashis had to be controlled, lest

cultural traditions are exoticised to create a stark difference against modern "Bangalee" culture. As life-givers, we are the backbone of our communities. Under the "separatist" label, we are painted as the "enemy" women. Our wombs are targeted to disrupt the transmission of Indigenous ways of life. The violence is not just physical, it is deeply political and cultural.

On January 22, 2018, two Marma sisters were allegedly sexually assaulted by security forces in Orachhara village of Rangamati. IWGIA reports that in 2020, 25 violent incidents against Adibashi girls aged between 11 and 30 years took place in the

CHT. Physical assault, rape and attempted rape posed the biggest threat to their safety. From January to June 2021, 16 incidents of rape were confirmed by a report published by Bangladesh Indigenous Women Network. In 2022, Kapaeng Foundation documented at least 19 rape cases of Indigenous women and girls, including seven gang rapes.

The figures do not consider the many cases that go unreported. The 2016 Amnesty International report on sexual and gender-based violence in the CHT observed that 95 percent of victims feared stigmatisation and 60 percent chose not to pursue legal actions. By comfortably throwing Adibashi women under the "secessionist" label, perpetrators enjoy impunity and law enforcement agencies get an excuse to look away from the violation of our dignity. Dominant groups dismiss our suffering based on the conviction that it is self-inflicted and inevitable.

Such narratives depoliticise our activism. Our experiences are deeply entrenched in oppression, erasure and dehumanisation, yet our screams remain inaudible to dominant groups. Is it because recognising our struggles requires recognising their own privilege and complicity in systemic oppression?

In retrospect, a joint statement by IWGIA and Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission mentioned that Bangalee settlers had been attempting to incite unrest in the CHT ever since the Chief Adviser of the interim government referred to Indigenous Peoples of CHT as "Indigenous" in a speech on August 25, 2018. Certain groups protested this acknowledgment, claiming Bangalees were the country's true Indigenous population.

The Indigenous peoples have inhabited the region for centuries, long before the formation of modern Bangladesh. Historical accounts from Mughal and British administrators reference our distinct existence. During British rule, the region was classified as an "Excluded Area," recognising the unique governance and cultural practices of its Indigenous communities. This status was reinforced by the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Regulation of 1900, which acknowledged the Indigenous population's autonomy.

Bangladesh has not ratified the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No 169 that aims to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Without the recognition of our Indigenous status, our customary land rights are not protected. To suppress land claims, perpetrators use terror and rape against women. On the other hand, Article 22 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples mentions, "States shall take measures, in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples, to ensure that Indigenous women and children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination." How do we seek justice when our vulnerability is not recognised?

How does asking for Indigenous recognition translate to becoming a secessionist? If anything, we are seeking respectful coexistence and equitable relations with the state. Scandinavian countries, Bolivia, Mexico, North America and many other nations recognise their Indigenous Peoples. Were those countries divided?

Today the Chittagong Hill Tracts has the highest rate of poverty and illiteracy in Bangladesh, reported by Asian Development Bank. Despite having immense biological, cultural, and environmental resources, why is CHT lagging behind in almost all development indicators? Is it the Indigenous communities who want separation or the exclusionary policies pushing us to the margins?

Every year on May 5, Canada and the United States observe the National Awareness Day for Missing or Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Red dresses are put up in public spaces, symbolising the lives of Indigenous women lost to violence. There is no red pinon or tamhi hanging for us.

Experiencing gender-based violence as an Adibashi woman is like being hit by a car. You are only allowed to get medical attention if you can prove that you are not anti-state. How long can you wait till you bleed out?