



The violence that Indigenous women face is unique to them and needs better understanding on our part.

FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

The unfinished promise of July in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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In recent times, attacks and arson at the offices of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, as well as vandalism and attacks on Chhayanaut—one of the foremost institutions of Bengali culture—clearly demonstrate that the spirit of July has reached its lowest point.

Many of us are also aware, to varying degrees, of the repression faced by the Bawm community in Bandarban. Following the bank robbery organised by the Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) in Ruma and Thanchi in April 2024, widespread repressive state actions were launched against the Bawm people. Even after the July uprising, the Bawm community has not been spared from this repression. In the name of counter-terrorism and on allegations linked to the bank robbery, innocent villagers—including women and children—have been detained and kept in prison without trial for nearly twenty months. During this period, two detainees have died in custody due to a lack of proper medical treatment, while another died on the way home to Bandarban from Chattogram Medical College Hospital after being granted bail in critical condition.

Despite repeated appeals by human rights activists and organisations to senior figures in the current interim government regarding these inhumane actions against the Bawm community, no meaningful response or initiative has been taken—apparently for some inexplicable reason. The only progress so far has been the release on bail of two Bawm women, one of whom is a minor. We, too, want those genuinely involved in the bank robbery to be brought under the law and punished. However, collective punishment of an entire community in connection with



As part of the celebrations for International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples at the Central Shaheed Minar, youths of the Bawm community staged their own protest demanding an end to the persecution of their people.

The tourism industry can create immense opportunities for the Chittagong Hill Tracts. However, for tourism to develop and expand in the region, special attention must also be paid to protecting its environment and ecology. In the name of tourism and driven purely by the lure of profit, the indiscriminate cutting of hills, destruction of forests, and construction of resorts must be stopped immediately. The growth of tourism must take place in a manner that respects ecological balance as well as the customs, values, and culture of the local communities.

If the hills are to be truly enlightened, the educational environment in the region must be made more creative and vibrant. Policy formulation alone is not enough. Taking into account the socio-economic and geographical realities of the hills, the education system of the three hill districts must be comprehensively restructured. The quality of teaching must be improved, and incentives, allowances, and facilities aligned with the demands of the present time must be expanded for teachers.

The thirteenth national parliamentary election is drawing near. While there is no shortage of enthusiasm, excitement, and curiosity among the general public surrounding the election, there is also a deep sense of apprehension and anxiety. Across the three hill districts, there are many remote and inaccessible areas with no motorable roads, no civic amenities, and no access to proper healthcare or education—yet people have lived in these areas for generations. Many residents of these regions are registered voters but are deprived of their right to vote due to communication constraints. Others remain poorly informed about who the electoral contenders are, simply because of the region's remoteness. Therefore, priority must be given to the balanced development of these remote areas and to addressing the deprivation faced by disadvantaged communities.

Our demand is clear: the election manifestos of all parties participating in the thirteenth national election must include explicit commitments to these marginalised and deprived populations.

KEY POINTS

1. July's promise of reform has stalled amid rising violence and corruption.
2. Indigenous communities face repression, killings, and prolonged detention without justice.
3. Environmental destruction continues under political protection despite climate commitments.
4. Peace and development require inclusion, fair trials, education reform, and sustainable tourism.
5. Lasting peace demands political neutrality and genuine reconciliation.

this incident must end immediately, and the right to a fair trial for innocent Bawm villagers detained in prison must be ensured. If the right to justice continues to be denied as it has in the past, who can guarantee that the entrenched culture of impunity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts will not one day engulf the entire country? We firmly believe that no development can be sustainable without representation and participation of all ethnic communities in the country's overall progress. Mere cosmetic gloss can never produce lasting sustainability.

Bengalis, creating a shared space of trust and a smooth path forward for all.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts issue is a long-standing political problem and must not be treated lightly. Achieving lasting peace in the hills requires not only the efforts of the elected government, but also the collective engagement of all political parties, social institutions, and individuals, irrespective of party affiliation. The law enforcement and security forces—key actors in the hills—must also play a special role in restoring peace by maintaining strict neutrality. The armed forces and law enforcement agencies have earned global recognition for their exemplary service in peacekeeping missions around the world. If unrest prevails within our own country, that shame and failure will not belong to those forces alone—it will be a stain on the entire nation.

Through the July uprising, we sought to bring change to a long-decayed system. The people of the country responded to that call for transformation. Therefore, we must uphold the spirit of July 2024 and build a discrimination-free nation. Losing the spirit of July would mean pushing the country further backwards. Learning from history, we must become more flexible, patient, and generous in outlook.

In conclusion, we must change our perspective. Change must begin with ourselves. If I change, the country will change automatically.

The article has been translated by Samia Huda.

It is essential for voters to know what candidates and their parties envision for establishing lasting peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as voters' choices will ultimately depend on these pledges. In the past, political parties may have succeeded in keeping voters pacified with false assurances, but this time voters are far more aware. There is no scope left to treat them as naïve or ignorant. In the age of technology, voters can easily assess the past records of each candidate and possess the discernment to judge who is truly qualified. The days of ballot rigging or manipulating voters into casting their votes are over. Voters will exercise their precious franchise guided by reason and judgement, in the interest of regional development and lasting peace.

Finally, regardless of which party comes to power, as residents of the hills our expectation is that the elected government must come forward with an inclusive and generous outlook to restore lasting peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and rebuild harmony between hill communities and

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