



International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs



Navanethem Pillay

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
Palais Wilson, 52 rue des Pâquis
CH-1201 Geneva, Switzerland

Copenhagen/Chiang Mai, February 24, 2010

REG.: KILLINGS AND ARSON ATTACKS ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH

Honourable Madam Pillay,

Please accept our respectful greetings!

The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) Foundation is hereby contacting you concerning the killings and arson attacks on indigenous peoples in Baghaihat area of Sajek union in Rangamati district as well as in Khagrachari district in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. IWGIA and AIPP are extremely concerned about the situation and we will urge your good office to raise the matter with the government of Bangladesh.

No independent investigators, journalists and human rights activists have been allowed to visit the area since the incidents started. However, according to the information IWGIA and AIPP has received from our partners in Bangladesh, the recent killings and arson attacks started on February 19, 2010 when Bangladesh army personnel and Bengali settlers under the overall command of Lt Col. Wasim, Commander of the Baghaihat zone Army Camp, launched major communal attacks against indigenous peoples in 14 indigenous villages in Baghaihat area of Sajek Union under Rangamati district in the CHT. In these allegedly pre-planned attacks settlers backed by the Bangladesh army burnt down over 200 houses of the indigenous villagers. Several shops and one Buddhist temple have also been burnt to ashes.

On February 20, tension mounted once again and resulted in the army reportedly opening fire into a crowd of indigenous villagers. The police has confirmed the death of two indigenous persons but according to the Asian Centre for Human Rights, six indigenous persons were killed in the attacks, at least 25 persons were injured and at least 1,500 indigenous peoples have been displaced so far. The displaced indigenous villagers whose houses have been burnt have not been provided any relief and rehabilitation. The majority of them are still living in jungles and under the open sky.

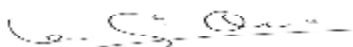
On February 23, the tension and arson attacks spread from Sajek, Rangamati to various places in Khagrachari district in the CHT where houses and shops belonging to indigenous peoples were burned down by Bangali settlers, reportedly in the presence of Police and Army personnel.

The recent incidents in Sajek have to be seen in the light of earlier incidents in 2008 when indigenous homes were also burnt to the ground, and following simmering tensions. Thousands of indigenous families have been living in this area for decades. In 2008 Bengali settlers illegally constructed some houses in Gangaram area on land cultivated by indigenous villagers. On April 20, 2008 a group of settlers attacked several indigenous villages, injuring people and burning down more than 70 houses, with no effective intervention by the authorities and despite the presence of nearby army camps. Subsequently, many indigenous peoples fled the area and lived in hiding. Since the incidents in 2008, tension in the area remained high and the indigenous residents continued to live in fear of army and settler attacks.

Along with indigenous peoples and organizations in the CHT, concerned civil society organizations in Bangladesh and abroad and the international Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission, IWGIA and AIPP is seriously concerned about the situation and the disastrous consequences that these incidents have for the indigenous peoples in the CHT. We would therefore like to encourage you to exercise your mandate and take up the matter with the Government of Bangladesh, particularly urging the Government of Bangladesh to:

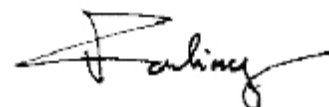
- Immediately undertake an independent, high-level investigation into the killings, arson attacks and allegations of human rights violations committed in the affected areas;
- Pull out the military troops in Baghahat to allow the access of independent investigators in these areas and the entry of relief and other forms of assistance to the victims of the arson attacks and violent encounters;
- Prosecute through fair and prompt and independent processes those who are responsible for such killings and violence, and to ensure immediate security and safety for the bereaved families and other victims;
- Take immediate steps to provide security of life and property, as well as food, water and shelter, for all women, men and children who have been left homeless, insecure and destitute from the arson attacks;
- Take immediate steps to activate the Land Commission and amend the CHT Land Dispute Settlement Commission Act 2001, so that all outstanding land disputes in the CHT can be readily and fairly settled, as per provisions of the CHT Accord, thereby helping to prevent the outbreak of further violence; and
- Implement the CHT Accord and to publicize a time-bound plan for the full and speedy implementation of the Accord.

On behalf of IWGIA



Lola Garcia-Alix
Director

On behalf of AIPP



Joan Carling
Secretary General

Attached to this letter:

- Urgent letter of concern from the international Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission
- Urgent alert from Parbattya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS, United People's Party)
- Report from the Asian Centre for Human Rights
- Photos of the incidents

IWGIA is an independent international membership organisation supporting indigenous peoples' struggle for human rights, self-determination, right to territory, control of land and resources, cultural integrity, and the right to development. IWGIA was founded in 1968 and its secretariat is located in Copenhagen, Denmark. IWGIA hosts the international secretariat of the re-established Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission.

AIPP is a regional organization established by indigenous peoples' organizations in 1992 to strengthen the struggles, cooperation and solidarity among indigenous peoples across Asia. AIPP is committed to the cause of defending and revitalizing indigenous systems; institutions and their control over their ancestral homelands; and their own development and future. At present, AIPP has members from 14 Countries and has broad network for cooperation and solidarity with other organizations, institutions and advocates at national, regional and global levels.