

Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission

Co-Chairpersons:

Sultana Kamal, Elsa Stamatopoulou
Myrna Cunningham Kain

Members:

Shapan Adnan, Lars-Anders Baer, Tone Bleie
Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Bina D'Costa, Hurst Hannum
Yasmeen Haque, Sara Hossain,
Muhammad Zafar Iqbal, Khushi Kabir
Michael C. van Walt van Praag, Iftekharuzzaman

Press Statement

June 26, 2020, Dhaka: The International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission is alarmed at the reports of allegations of human rights violations, especially against the indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past few months, as the pandemic spread into the three hill districts, widespread human rights violations have been reported by the security forces and the police, as well as vigilante groups, which includes cases of harassment, intimidation, arbitrary house searches, attack on religious places of worship, abduction and threats against indigenous leaders, activists and prisoners. While the pandemic has affected the indigenous people in various ways in terms of food shortage and access to medical services, the harassment and intimidation by the security forces and the activities of these vigilante groups have continued to aggravate the situation.

We are deeply concerned about allegations of the formation and operation of vigilante groups to intimidate, threaten and attack Jumma activists in the CHT, as reported by the two leading political parties, the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) and the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF). Both political groups have reported such activities from 2017 and have alleged that these actors with support from security forces carry out extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, harassment and intimidation. According to these reports, vigilante groups have abducted at least 29 people from January to May of this year.

The two political parties in the CHT, the PCJSS and UPDF, have also reported a number of incidents of intimidation and harassment by the military. According to these reports, from January to May 2020, at least 21 UPDF and JSS activists were arrested without a warrant. Those arrested include business persons, public representatives and students, while 24 individuals have been tortured or harassed by security forces. This also includes at least five men and women who were physically persecuted by police and the military while returning home at the initial stages of the pandemic in front of a military check post. At least 5 women have reportedly been the victims of

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sexual assault. At least two separate incidents of attacks on indigenous villagers have reportedly been carried out – one in Guimara, Khagrachari and the other in Longodu, Rangamti. During April and May arson attacks allegedly occurred on at least three Buddhist temples with complaints to the local authorities not producing any results. There are also allegations of re-arrest of at least 19 Jumma persons after they had been released from jail on bail. The death of UPDF leader Pulak Chakma at the Khagrachari district jail on June 3 does not appear to have been investigated to date.

The PCJSS have also reported on allegations of widespread land-grabbing by corporate entities from local people in the CHT during the pandemic. In one reported incident a company, Meridian, allegedly illegally occupied 3000 acres of land in Lama, Bandarban and forcefully evicted Mro families from the area, with support from local government officers. In another incident, reported by the UPDF, a group of 20 military officers in Matiranga, Khagrachari allegedly demolished *jhum ghors* belonging to jhum cultivators claiming the area of be an abandoned camp site.

A recent independent report by a group of Dhaka-based academics and activists also identified human rights violations affecting readymade garment workers from the indigenous community during the pandemic (<https://independentresearcherbd.wordpress.com/2020/06/13/>). The confusion created by the owners and the BGMEA about whether workers would have to return to work or not, along with minimal guidelines about their health and safety during a pandemic, demonstrated deep disregard for the rights of these workers who help to bring so much foreign currency for the owners and the country at a pay level that leaves them little if any money to cover cost of health expenses if they were to be affected by the COVID-19 virus. This situation once again exposed the vulnerability of garment workers. The alleged physical assault on these garment workers by the police as they returned to the CHT from their workplaces also demonstrated how indigenous women garment workers faced a heightened risk to their lives.

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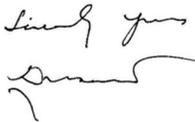
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Under these circumstances we urge the Government of Bangladesh to take immediate steps to ensure justice in the CHT, to investigate allegations of human rights violations and to bring to account those responsible. We recommend that the Government take the following immediate measures:

1. To direct local authorities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts to allow all people in the area access to medical facilities without any obstruction from the security forces.
2. To ensure protection for indigenous people of Bangladesh from any form of harassment, intimidation, or arbitrary house searches.
3. To ensure that civil society groups working on CHT issues can access all parts of the area without any hindrances in order to help distribute food and other necessary help.
4. Ensure the speedy release of incarcerated individuals and allow them to return home to prevent the further spread of the pandemic.
5. To carry out impartial and prompt investigations into the specific allegations of harassment, intimidation, assault and enforced disappearance mentioned above, and ensure justice to the victims and accountability for those responsible.
6. To amend the Land Commission Act according to the recommendations of the PCJSS and operationalize the Land Commission to resolve all land disputes in the CHT and fully implement the 1997 CHT Accord.

On behalf of the CHT Commission,



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Co-chair of the
CHT Commission



Elsa Stamatopoulou
Co-chair of the
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