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PRESS STATEMENT
SAJEK'S BURNT VILLAGES:
CITIZEN'S TEAM CALLS FOR INQUIRY AND URGENT RELIEF

A group of citizens conducted an on-site inquiry on 28th and 29th April 2008 in Sajek Union, Rangamati District, following press reports of about 150 houses being burnt down across seven villages in the area. On arrival in the area, we saw that in eight villages within the reserved forest area in Sajek Union -- Nursery Para, Daney Bhaibachora, Bamey Bhaibachora, Purbopara, Balughatpara, Retkaba, MSF Para and Gongaram Mukh – the mostly Pahari houses which had been burnt down to the ground remained just as they were. The charred remains of burnt houses could be seen across a four kilometer long area. Many people are still in hiding. Others told us that several persons were injured during this incident. People do not have proper shelter, and some remain under open skies.

During the on-site inquiry, we spoke to victims and witnesses among both Paharis and Bangalis, other local persons, and to Army personnel, to clarify what had happened. Today we will attempt to outline for you the situation we witnessed, the main causes behind it, and the required action which we believe is necessary at this point. Those of us who visited the area at our own cost did so because we believed that the full facts of what had occurred in Baghaichori, a remote hilly area, had not been fully covered in the national media.

To date, no official record appears to have been made of exactly how many houses were burnt down, or how many people affected. According to news reports, about 150 to 200 families have been affected, of whom most are Chakmas. Speaking to victims and eyewitnesses of the incident, we came to learn that on 20th April from about 9pm till early morning houses in the area, mostly belonging to Paharis, and some to Bangali Settlers, with most of their contents including cooking utensils, books, clothes, were burnt to ashes.

Several Chakma inhabitants of the area described how they stood aside in fear, as their houses were burnt to the ground.

- A Chakma inhabitant of Balurghat Para village, aged 45/50, stated '*Our rice, clothes, pots-pans-plates have all been burnt. School books, birth registration certificates, SSC certificates, they're all totally burnt.*'
- Several eyewitnesses and victims mentioned that valuables were looted by those who burnt down the houses. A Chakma inhabitant of Daney Bhaibachora village, aged 35/40, ran out of his home on hearing screaming at about 9.45pm on 20th April, to see a house was burning and people shouting to be saved from the flames. His whole house had been burnt to ashes. Only the charred remains of the wooden pillars could be seen. He stated, '*The people who were setting things alight, they first took out from our homes, the TVs, beds, wardrobes, whatever they found, they looted, and at the end they torched the houses. Those who set the houses alight. They took everything.*' Another Chakma woman stated, '*I've heard that a TV was found in the Bangali Para. The Army has said that they will return the TV.*'
- An elderly Chakma, aged about 80 '*I've never faced such misery (oshanti) before.*' In this home, there are two school going students in this family, one studying for the SSC and another in class seven, whose books have all been burnt and who cannot attend classes.
- Another person said that the attackers had come in three vehicles.
- The families of three young men who had been arrested on the night of 27th April from Bamey Bhaibachora, claimed that they had been wrongfully taken into custody instead of apprehending those actually responsible. The three men detained at about 9pm were Ratan, aged about 18, a student of Class IX of Baghaichori High School, and about to sit for his SSC, son of Gunodhor Chakma and Sakuntala Chakma, of Bamebaispara Village, Sunil, 22, son of Subisona Chakma and Lokkhidhor Chakma, who is a signboard artist, and Nobel, about 22 years, son of Nishimoni Chakma, who is a teacher at the NGO Poddokhep, from Bamabaispara Bamebaishepara at about 9 to 10pm. Their parents asserted that they had all run to see what was happening, when they saw a house burning from a distance on Monday 28th night.

Bangalis are also alleged to have put up huts after having broken down the place of worship in Gongaram Mukh. Local residents said that even after making a complaint to the local Army Camp, there has been no action. After the fire, about 30/35 families came to take shelter at the Baghaihat Moitripur Jogi Bono Bihara [Buddhist Temple].

- The priest of the Bihara said '*I am ashamed to say this. I am also a religious leader. This kind of incident has happened in my area.*'

Some of the Bangalis affected also described the events of 20 April. These Bangalis are known as 'settlers' to the local Paharis.

- Md Rafiqul Islam came to Baghaichori about 10/11 years ago. He lives in the Musulman Para. About two months ago, he put up a hut near the Pahari houses in Gongaram Mukh. On the night of the incident, he said he had heard the sounds 'Ujao, Ujao', and fled from his home in fear. He said: '*Hearing the cries of Ujao Ujao coming closer, I fled and took shelter in the army camp.*' Another eyewitness, the General Secretary of Baghaichori Bazaar Shomiti stated that '*On the night of the incident, at about 9.45 I was in Major Hafiz's vehicle [as we came out of the Camp, where there was an event going on for the founding anniversary of the 2 B Regiment, on hearing a hullabaloo from outside]. We*
- *heard the sounds 'Ujao, Ujao' and saw about 100/150 masked people wearing black clothes setting houses alight. They were not local Paharis. They were outsiders.'*

Victims' Accounts of the Background to the Arson Attacks: The vast Sajek Union is located at one end of Rangamati District, and mainly comprises of Reserved Forests. Any settlement in this area is considered to be illegal. But many Paharis have lived in this area for generations in accordance with their customary norms and without any official title deeds.

Both Paharis and Bangalis noted as a cause of the incident that there had been rising tension in the area for about two months. The main reason for this tension was that the Bangalis had been erecting houses near or adjacent to the Pahari's houses. The same sight could be seen all along the four kilometers of the main road between Baghaihat and Gongaram. Next to the Pahari house or across it is a house of a Bangali settler, in which no-one appears to stay or to sleep at night. After talking to the Settler there, we learned that these huts have been put up over the last two months or so. From the beginning the Paharis could not accept that Bangalis would establish settlements on their traditional lands. There had already been conflict and confrontation over this issue. First the Paharis had objected to the Bangalis erecting these buildings. Although the hut construction did not end in the face of these protests, the tensions certainly increased.

From a visit to the area, it became evident that the fire could not have spread from house to house given the sparse density of their location, rather each house must have been separately set alight. For example, we saw in Bhaibachora village that between two burnt down Pahari houses a Bangali settler, Abul Malek and his mother in law Anwara Begum were in residence. Even though the two Chakma houses burnt down on 20th the hut in the middle did not.

Except for in Gongram Mukh, we could see that the Pahari homes had been burnt to the ground, but next door or close by Bangali homes or huts remained standing. This pattern indicated that whoever had been responsible for the burnings had most likely planned the exercise, identified the Pahari and Bangali houses and then set them alight. Almost everyone mentioned two names, Ali and Babul, as being the ones most involved with trying to displace the Paharis from the area through fear. A Chakma inhabitant of Gongaram Mukh said that Ali and some others had come to his shop on 19th April and threatened him that if he remained there till after dusk, then they would burn him and the shop down and kill his whole family. In fear, he sent his wife and children to another house that very evening. On the next night, 20th April, his house was burnt down. With tears in his eyes, this man said, pointing to his torn short sleeved shirt and lungi, '*I've been wearing these same clothes ever since the burnings*'.

A Karbari from one village said '*If they see 2/3 of us talking to each other, they inform the Army Camp.*' Another Pahari inhabitant of Gongaram Mukh, unwilling to state his name, said '*We were told to put up our houses about 2/3 km away from the road. The Settlers' houses would be next to the road. Ali and his cronies said that they would slaughter us like sacrificial cows if we said anything about it.*'

It is true that the fires began because of the ongoing tensions between Paharis and Bangalis, but in our view the reasons were deeper, that is the construction of Bangali settlements here and pushing the Paharis into an even more marginal and vulnerable existence. But it is also true that most of the Bangalis who live in that area are extremely poor, dependent on government rations. These marginal people, from different districts of the country, are surviving there on government patronization.

Relief and Rehabilitation: Relief has now been distributed in the area on three occasions, most recently on the occasion of the visit by the Army Chief on 29 April, when each affected person was given Taka 500 and some food (5 kg rice, 1 kg dal and 2 kg potatoes). On two earlier occasions, Taka 500 had been given from the army and civilian administration respectively. During the Army Chief's visit it was announced that each family would be given Taka 10,000 for reconstruction of their homes. Several of those we interviewed said that this amount would not be adequate.

Some Paharis alleged that Bangali Settlers had been given more relief. We also saw a number of Chakmas come back empty handed from the event.

Who is Responsible? When traveling from Khagrachari to Baghahat in Baghaichori located at the end of Rangamati upto Gongaram Mukh, any ordinary citizen would wonder 'Is this my country'? Because of the intensity of army checking. There is very tight screening there. The names of whoever enters or exits the area is written down. Each such person has to give their identity. The car numbers are noted. And on leaving the area, that number is again checked. We thought it was important to ask how such an arson attack could take place in the midst of such close monitoring.

We asked some of the Pahari victims, who do you think is responsible? They said without any hesitation that they saw Bangali settlers burning down the houses, and the Army were with them. On the other hand, the Bangali victims said that local Paharis were not involved with the incident, but rather outsiders.

Army's Statement: We met with personnel at the Baghahat Army Camp. When asked about whether the Army Camp had any involvement with the incidents, Commanding Officer Lt Col Imtiaz stated '*There is no question of any connection. We heard the sounds 'Ujao! Ujao!' and shouting and quickly went there. I sent forces. I also went there myself. I would definitely say that outsider Paharis carried out this terror, those who don't want to see Paharis and Bangalis living together in peace and harmony.*' He further informed us that it appeared to him that prima facie the JSS or UPDF were responsible for this incident. In response to a query about whether any action had been taken re the activities of Ali and Babul, Lt Col Imtiaz further stated that '*The Karbari of Gongaram Mukh, Bilash Chakma had raised a complaint about threatening Mongol Kumar Chakma, and after that we held Ali for four days but then let him go. No-one else has brought any complaints to us.*' He also said that he would take action if he found that our claim that Ali was using the CO's name to terrorize or exploit the local inhabitants is made out.

Our Recommendations: We want to place a few recommendations on the basis of our on-site inquiry, interviews with related persons and an analysis of the situation is as follows:

1. Establish an independent and impartial Judicial Inquiry Commission, required to publish its report within a fixed time period; prosecute and provide exemplary punishment to those found responsible for the attacks;
2. Provide adequate compensation and undertake prompt rehabilitation of persons affected during the arson attacks in Sajek Union, including reconstruction of houses;
3. To release the three persons held in the Baghaichori Army Camp;
4. To cease all Bangali settlements in Sajek Union and the three Hill Districts;
5. In accordance with the CHT Accord 1997
 - a) To activate the Land Commission, to review and settle all land disputes;
 - b) To withdraw army camps from the CHT; and
 - c) To enable full functioning of the civil administration, including through effective functioning of the CHT Regional Council.

The group of citizens which conducted an on-site inquiry at Sajek Union in Baghaichori Upazila in Rangamati District comprised of:

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| 1. Syed Abul Maqsd, Writer, Journalist | 8. Sara Hossain, Advocate, Supreme Court |
| 2. Ziauddin Tareque Ali, Member, Shonmilito Shamajik Andolon | 9. Abu Ahmed Faizul Kabir, Investigator, Ain o Salish Kendra |
| 3. Pankaj Bhattacharya, Member, Shomilito Shamajik Andolon | 10. KCing Marma, Student, Chittagong University |
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