

Fact Finding Team 1 (Moshrefa Mishu, et al)
Report on 20th April 2008 Incident at Sajek Union

We learnt from the daily newspapers that seven villages in Baghaichari had been burnt to the ground, including more than a hundred homes of Paharis and Bengalis, that Paharis and Bengalis were blaming each other for the incident. It was difficult to get a clear picture of what had happened on the basis of media reports. Beside that, most daily newspapers quoted ISPR, the Army news agency as its news source. In this situation, we felt it was urgent that we go there ourselves, and try to found out what had happened. A team of fourteen consisting of political activists, a university teacher, a journalist, cultural and student activists and leaders, left for Sajek on 26 April 2008. The team was led by Moshrefa Mishu, convenor, Biplobi Oikko Front. From the morning of 27 April to 30 April 2008, we went to the area where the incident took place, and also to other places in Marishya in Baghaichori, Dui Tila, Kobakhali in Dighinala, Sadhana Tila, Lichu Bagan, Moner Manush, Chongrachori as well as surrounding habitations, markets, forest area, garden and hillocks. We spoke to both Paharis and Bengalis, and also to some of the victims of the Sajek incident. We strongly feel that general members of the public should be informed about what we saw, heard and observed, and the conclusions that we reached on the basis of our fact-finding exercise. This is the reason for this press conference.

To ascertain what had truly happened on the night of 20th April in Sajek, our investigation team left for Sajek from Khagrachari. On the morning of 27th April, before we could reach the affected area, our investigation team was stopped at Baghaihat Zone. We were asked to get out of our cars, write our full names at the army camp gate, our bags were checked and list of items were prepared. After this we were taken inside the camp on orders of its second in command, Major Kabir. While we were waiting, Major Hafiz came and told us that in the current situation, it would be dangerous for us to visit the area, that we would not be permitted to go there because of concerns about our personal safety. Major Kabir came into the area where we were seated, and we were asked to introduce ourselves again, to re-enter our names and address in the identity record book. Both majors reminded us of the kidnapping of Danida employee Shumon a few months earlier. We were advised to return to Khagrachari. While we were talking, an army official came and began taking our photographs with a still camera. After a while, he began to use a video camera, and to take our photographs from different angles. We could not help but think: if we could not go to the area then why take our photographs? Was our personal safety the major concern?

For the next two days, we went on field visits outside Sajek. Each army camp that we came across, seemed to know about us. There are two zones in Khagrachari, and both combined have more than 18 army camps. While on the road, we were stopped several times and asked where we had come from, where we were going, etc. Our vehicles were stopped and inspected, we were asked to come out of our cars. The Committee's experience convinced its members that concerns over their personal safety was not the issue. What struck them was the army's ability to exercise power.

On 27th April, when we were stopped at the army camp in Baghahat Zone, Major Kabir narrated the incidents of 20th April. After his narration, the army officials changed their mind and decided to let us visit the affected area. But this was to be under their supervision, and in army vehicles. We were bundled into two army vehicles, and taken to only one of the four affected villages. Major Hafiz and Major Kabir accompanied us, along with twelve soldiers, in an army pickup. We were permitted to stay there for 20 minutes, then brought back. When we said we wanted to go to the three other villages (Purbopara, Retkaba, Baibacchora), we were told there was no need, that we would be met by similar scenes.

While passing Baghahat market area, we saw burnt houses on both sides of the road. The village we were taken to, Gangarammuk Dor, was deserted, and looked more like a burial ground. As we stood there, Buddhi Ranjan Chakma, a Pahari, suddenly appeared, rushed to Moshrefa Mishu, leader of the Fact Finding Committee, held her tight, and began recounting the events of 20th April. He wept and said that Bengali settlers were responsible for the arson attack of 20th April. This incident took place in front of the army members who had taken us there. Major Kabir quickly intervened, in a manner which prevented us from speaking further with Buddhi Ranjan Chakma. Another Pahari came up to us and whispered, we are not allowed to say anything. He was too afraid, he said, to tell us his name. We saw a Bengali settler, we learnt from him that the settlers were staying at the local market, under the supervision of the army. We learnt that the affected Paharis, who were feeling terrified, had taken refuge in the local Buddhist Bihar (five hundred feet from the Gangarammuk Dor army camp). Some Paharis had taken refuge in the forest and in the homes of relatives. We were not allowed to walk more than two hundred feet away from the place where we had gotten down from the army vehicle. We were asked to return to the army vehicles under armed guard, and were forced to leave the area. While in the affected area, we also learnt that forcible acquisition of land by Bengali settlers has increased since the state of emergency was declared on 11 January, 2007. Bengali settlers are building houses on the occupied pieces of land. This bit of information was substantiated by both Paharis and Bengalis, when we inspected adjoining areas.

Subsequently, we managed to meet Pahari victims of Sajek. One of them, who did not wish to reveal his name, told us:

“Last January, our houses were grabbed by the settlers, under the leadership of Shomo Andolon leader Golam Mowla. We don't get a chance to speak when council office meetings are held. When the Raja (Devasish Roy) came to visit, the army camp ordered us not to speak to him. On the night of 20th April, it was very hot, and I was sitting outside the house that I had raised after the January attacks. Suddenly I heard some Bengalis shouting “Narae Takbir Allahu Akbar”. I could see fire in the distance. I could hear Paharis shouting “Ujo, Ujo” (advance). At this time, I saw an army vehicle. By then, both my house and other surrounding houses had caught fire. On the one hand, our houses were burning, while on the other, the settlers were looting.”

When we visited Baghaichori Marishya, Dui Tila, Kobakhali in Dighinala, Sadhana Tila, Chongrachori and other areas over the next couple of days, we saw more evidence of state-supported land-grabbing, Bengali occupation of Pahari land by force, and the setting up of new settlements. The picture was the same in all areas: since 11 January 2007, the process of Bengali settlers grabbing Pahari land has accelerated, this is happening under the supervision of the armed forces. We saw the following:

- 1.** Bengalis have houses which are temporary shelters, with only four khuti (pillar). There are hundreds of such homes in the Dui Tila area. We spoke to Bengali inhabitants, who told us that they live there for short periods only (see attached picture 1).
- 2.** Members of the Fact Finding Committee found that most Bengalis have two houses, the more elaborate ones are lived-in permanently. Dighinala and Lichu Bagan are 12 kilometers apart, while travelling from one place to the other, we saw only Bengali houses, clustered on either side of the road. We counted three madrasas, more than one mosque, and Bengali shops standing by the roadside. We interviewed settlers who told us that they had received 4 acres and 1/70th land in Lichubagan (for cultivation), and the remaining 1/30th land on BetChari (for living).
- 3.** We encountered similar processes in Dui Tila and Chongrachori. When we went inside Bengali homes, we saw only a few utensils, and no bedding or other household items. When asked, they admitted that they were given 4 acres and 1/70th land here, and the rest, 1/30th portion in the more populated areas, for living. The settlers informed us that the local administration had told them that these lands belong to the government, not the Paharis. Therefore, Bengalis have just as much right to this land. This area is guarded by soldiers who patrol at night.

Major Kabir, second-in-command of Baghaihat zone told us: "Some external terrorists from outside Sajek have set these fires. There is no conflict between Bengalis and Paharis in this area. Those who set the fire don't want the current communal harmony between Bengalis and Paharis to stay intact. Since they want to create a terrorist center in this area, they try to keep both sides agitated."

Even though army officials claimed that there was "communal harmony," the fact remains that tension and conflict prevails in the area over land grabbing of Bengali settlers. So how can there be "communal harmony"? On the contrary, we think that words like "terrorist attack" are often used to hide the administration's role in assisting Bengali settlers to forcefully occupy Pahari land. Many incidents of violent attacks of Pahari villages by Bengali settlers exist. For instance, the Mahalcchari incident of 26 August 2003 when ten Pahari villages were attacked by settler Bengalis, with Army support, leading to the death of a former Union Parishad chairman, and a child. Or, the Maishcchari incident of 4 April 2006, when Bengali settlers occupied the land of a Buddhist temple. In the subsequent conflict, 4 Pahari villages were burnt to the ground, a Buddhist monk was attacked, and four teenage girls were raped. These are only two among many such incidents.

During the Fact Finding Committee's visit, another incident of arson took place. On 28 April 2008, a Bengali settler's house was set on fire around 10 pm, in an area where the army was on patrol. The army

immediately arrested Rabindra Chakma (22, father's name, Shashimohon Chakma), Shushil Chakma (26, father's name, Lakhmichandra Chakma), Ratna Bikash Chakma (22, father's name, Gunobir Chakma), and Shangram Chakma (22, father's name, Ashok Kumar Chakma). The next day, the national dailies reported the arrest of three Paharis. We are concerned about the fourth arrestee, and generally speaking, about the fate of all those arrested.

Based on the investigation carried out by the Fact Finding Committee, we demand:

1. The immediate formation of an independent judicial committee to investigate the Sajek incident, and that the judicial report be completed and made publicly available within 6 days of this press conference.
2. The Chittagong Hill Tracts area should be opened up to the national media in the interests of the right to know, and the free dissemination of information.
3. Work should immediately begin on the preparation and publication of a White Paper on past incidents of killing, rape and oppression in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.
4. Land grabbing and oppression of the Paharis should cease immediately.

Members of the Fact Finding Committee:

1. Moshrefa Mishu, convenor, Biplabi Oikko Front.
2. Dr. Manosh Chowdhury, professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University.
3. Udisa Islam, journalist
4. Rico Chakma, chairman, Greater Pahari Student Parishad
5. Manjurul Ahsan, convenor, Shangskritir Naya Shetu
6. Md Arifuzzaman, member, Shangskritir Naya Shetu
7. Nurur Rahman, convenor, Biplabi Chatra Jubo Andolan
8. Saifuddin Sohel, organizer, Biplabi Chatra Jubo Andolan, Chittagong branch
9. Sohan, Garments Workers Unity Forum
10. Nepali Chakma, member, Hill Womens Federation
11. Rina Chakma, organizational editor, Hill Womens Federation
12. Shahadat Hussain, Jatiyo Biplabi Front
13. Asif Akbar, poet and little magazine worker
14. Nisha Chakma, student, Khagrachari