

URGENT ACTION

OVER 100 INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARBITRARILY ARRESTED

Since 7 April, over 100 Indigenous Bawm people have been arbitrarily arrested as part of an ongoing military operation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in southeastern Bangladesh. They are accused of being terrorists, suspected of being part of, or supporters of, the military group Kuki-Chin National Front, that allegedly robbed two public banks and held a bank manager hostage on 2 and 3 April 2024. Of those who haven't been arrested, most have now fled to jungle areas near the villages or are fleeing the country. Amnesty International calls for the immediate release of all civilians and an end to the crackdown against the Bawm community.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina
Prime Minister's Office
Old Sangsad Bhaban,
Tejgaon, Dhaka-1215
Bangladesh
Email: ps1topm@pmo.gov.bd;

Dear Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina,

Since 7 April 2024, more than 100 Indigenous Bawm people, including a pregnant woman and children, have been arbitrarily arrested as part of an ongoing military operation in villages in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. This followed the alleged robbery of two banks and hostage-taking of a bank manager by armed group Kuki-Chin National Front (KNF) on 2 and 3 April 2024. The authorities assumed that the entire community of Bawm people are part of, or supporters of, the KNF. The arrested are accused of alleged sedition under Section 15 of the draconian Special Powers Act, and for several other offences under the Penal Code, such as robbery and kidnapping.

All those arrested remain unnamed in the police documents referred to as "130-150 armed terrorist robbers". Some of them have been produced before court and further remanded. Others are yet to be taken to court. There is CCTV footage of the robbery that shows who robbed the banks. Instead of using it to identify the perpetrators, your government is persecuting an entire Indigenous community.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Indigenous Bawm people are at serious risk of suffering collective punishment from the state authorities. They were kept under the scorching sun for a whole day for questioning, deprived of food. The random, mass arrests, with toddlers being sent to jail with their mothers, having no one else to leave them behind with, show the scale of the military operation. There are around 11,000 Bawm people in Bangladesh and most of them are currently living in fear of arrests, starvation, lack of access to education, employment, etc. The military has set up camp in some of the villages, and are confiscating villagers' mobile phones, cutting them off from their family members.

I urge you to:

- **End the crackdown against the Bawm community;**
- **Urgently release all civilians, especially the pregnant woman and children, who have been arbitrarily arrested;**
- **Provide adequate legal representation for all arbitrarily arrested and allow their relatives to visit them freely, without any fear of them being arrested in the process;**
- **Ensure military activities should only be carried out on Indigenous Peoples' lands with their consent, in accordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples;**
- **Fully implement all human rights provisions of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord.**

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh have a long history of being persecuted, discriminated against in various socio-economic and political ways. More than 25 years ago, Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord was signed by the government of Bangladesh and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti - a political party established to defend the interests of the Indigenous Peoples of CHT - to end conflict and address systematic injustices in the region, yet, today, the situation has driven people out of their villages.

On 8 April at around 5.30am the military arrived to Bethel village, which was the closest to one of the banks that were robbed, under the assumption that the villagers should know about the robbery or the robbers, and the crackdown started. According to a family member of one of the arrested, the military demanded the villagers to gather at the school grounds, separated men and women, and randomly picked people to be arrested. Among them there were people in their late fifties and sixties. They were all taken to Bandarban police station around 8.30pm.

KNF is also alleged to have stolen 14 weapons. According to the villagers, the military has said that they would stop the mass arrests when the weapons have been retrieved. According to Bawm activists, the actual number of arrests could be much higher as they are aware of only the arrests they have found information of through contacts.

As part of the crackdown, the military ordered that each Bawm person was allowed to carry only 5kg of rice from the grocery. This has now reduced to 1kg, which is not enough to feed their families. The military has set up check points conducting random searches, and arrested Bawm people when they try to go through check points. There are around 200-300 Bawm students studying in Dhaka and other parts of the country, according to one Bawm community leader that Amnesty spoke with. These students were home on holiday just before Eid when the crackdown began. They have not yet been able to return to their schools, and some of them have been arbitrarily arrested during this crackdown.

The Bawm community, similar to other Indigenous communities in Bangladesh, survive on jhum cultivation, a shifting cultivation system in which plots of land are cultivated temporarily. This is the time period to prepare the land and cultivate it for the next harvesting year, which is completely disrupted with people having fled to jungles for survival and their movement is restricted due to arrests.

Currently there are five villages, Bethel, Pankhyang, Suanlu, Faruk, Eden, and Darjeeling under the military crackdown in the Ruma, Bandarban and Rowangchari sub districts of CHT.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: English or Bangla

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL 22 AUGUST 2024

Please check with the Amnesty office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PREFERRED PRONOUN: Bawm villagers (They/ them)