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Indigenous land dispute turns deadly in Bangladesh

The Bangladeshi authorities must act to end the outbreak of violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area between Bengali settlers and Jumma indigenous peoples that has left three dead and at least 20 injured, Amnesty International said today.

The authorities must also provide proper accountability for deaths and destruction caused in this incident.

The latest round of tensions began on 14 April when a group of Bengali settlers occupied and tried to plant crops on areas within the Jumma's ancestral lands, in Khagrachari District in south-eastern Bangladesh. After three Bengali settlers were killed on 17 April, allegedly by Jumma people, settlers looted surrounding indigenous villages and injured people, burning at least 60 homes.

Indigenous sources say they informed the local authorities – including the army, which has a heavy presence in the area – of the settlers' movements, but they failed to act on the information.

Khagrachari authorities have said they would set up an inquiry into the latest incident and that victims would be compensated. Amnesty International is urging the government of Bangladesh to ensure that the inquiry is conducted in a thorough, independent and impartial manner to determine what happened. The authorities must bring those accused of killing or injuring others, or destroying their property to justice.

Any army, police or other security personnel who allowed this type of attack to take place must also be brought to justice.

This deadly violence could have been prevented if the authorities had taken appropriate action in time. The failure to prevent these clashes suggests Bangladeshi authorities aren't following through on their responsibility to uphold the peace accord and prevent the further escalation of violence on indigenous lands.

The government of Bangladesh must ensure that the local administration and the army take the recurring clashes between the two communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts seriously, work to prevent them and remove their underlying causes. In this context, Amnesty International is alarmed that the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachari District (the highest executive authority in the area) told the *Daily Star* newspaper on 18 April that the incidents were "not so serious".

Amnesty International calls on the Bangladeshi government to make public the details of any plan to compensate the victims and survivors of these attacks, which should include rehabilitation for people who lost their homes and belongings and medical treatment for those who were injured.

The violence underscores the need for Bangladeshi authorities to implement a 1997 peace accord, which was signed between the then Awami League government and representatives

of the indigenous peoples. The accord ended a 20-year insurgency in Chittagong Hill Tracts and provided for a peaceful settlement of the conflict between the two communities.

From 1976 to 1997, many Bengalis were officially settled onto land historically belonging to the Jumma in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Meanwhile, the Jumma indigenous inhabitants were engaged in a simmering armed conflict against the Bangladesh army. There were frequent attacks during this period led by Bengali settlers against Jumma villages, often with army involvement. Tens of thousands of Jumma people fled their homes and scattered throughout the hill districts or fled to neighbouring India to escape the fighting.

Despite the 1997 peace accord, clashes between the Bengali settlers and Jumma inhabitants have continued. These confrontations have included deaths on both sides. In the most recent clashes, the dead were all Bengali settlers while most of the injured were from the Jumma indigenous peoples.

Amnesty International is urging the Jumma leadership to impress upon Jumma peoples that they cannot resort to deadly violence, no matter what their grievances. Leaders of Jumma and settlers communities must do what they can to prevent further lethal outbreaks.

Amnesty International is urging the government of Bangladesh to implement key provisions of the peace accord, which include the establishment of an effective land commission to resolve disputes in the Jumma's ancestral lands, and the withdrawal of some 400 temporary army camps in the area, which Jumma inhabitants say frequently allow the advance of Bengali settlers onto indigenous land, rather than preventing it.