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Bangladesh: Investigate vicious mob violence against Indigenous Peoples

Bangladeshi authorities must bring to justice those responsible for a vicious mob attack on Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), which left hundreds of homes torched and at least one person dead, Amnesty International said. The organization is also deeply concerned about reports that soldiers used excessive force against peaceful protesters who have called for justice for the attack, and that police and soldiers were present during the initial attacks and did not intervene to protect Indigenous villagers.

Mob violence

On the morning of 2 June 2017, a group of more than 1,000 Bengali settlers gathered in the Langadu sub-district in the eastern Chittagong division. The crowd, which was allegedly led by leaders of local political parties, attended the funeral procession of a Bengali man who had been found dead the day before. Settlers alleged that local indigenous Pahari people were responsible for his death.

After the procession, the mob begun a rampage through several villages in the region and torched at least 300 houses belonging to Indigenous people, forcing hundreds of people to flee into nearby forests to escape the violence. According to activists, at least one person – a 70-year-old woman – became trapped in her home and was burned to death. Sources told Amnesty International that people in the mob were armed with knives and sticks, and that some had brought petrol, indicating that it was a pre-planned attack.

Although the local authorities around 12pm invoked Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which bans gatherings of more than four people, the violence continued for several hours afterwards. Sources told Amnesty International that police and army personnel were present during the attacks, but did not intervene or do enough to protect the homes of indigenous families.

Police had as of 5 June arrested 12 people in connection with the violence, and the central government has promised compensation and aid to those who lost their homes. While these steps are welcome, Bangladeshi authorities have a poor track record of holding Bengali settlers to account for violent attacks on indigenous people, and perpetrators are often allowed to carry out such attacks with impunity. In February 2011, for example, a clash between Bengali settlers and Pahari in Langadu resulted in the burning of 23 Pahari homes. Pahari villagers said that despite pleas for help, security forces did nothing to stop the attack on their villages. As far as Amnesty International is aware, no one has been held to account for this attack.¹

Suppression of protests

Amnesty International has also received disturbing reports of soldiers using excessive force against peaceful protesters since the attacks. On 4 June at around 11.30am, a group of some 50-60 people, mainly students, had gathered in the Dighinala sub-district to protest against the mob violence and call for those responsible to be brought to justice. Although the protest was peaceful, it was violently dispersed by police and army personnel shortly after it started.

¹ Amnesty International, *Pushed to the edge: Indigenous rights denied in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts*, 13 June 2013 (ASA 13/005/2013), pp. 22-23, available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA13/005/2013/en/>

Soldiers punched and beat some of the protesters with sticks, leaving at least seven people with minor injuries, according to eye witnesses. These actions clearly amount to excessive use of force by the soldiers. Videos of the incident have circulated on social media since Sunday.

Two of the protest organisers, Nitimoy Chakma and Jibon Chakma, were arrested; they are still detained in the Dighinala police station where they are being investigated for crimes including extortion and attempted murder. These charges, however, relate to cases that was filed against them several month ago by Bengali settlers and are unrelated to the protests. Amnesty International believes that both men have been arrested purely for exercising their right to peaceful protest, and calls for their immediate release.

The human right to freedom of peaceful assembly is provided in human rights treaties to which Bangladesh is a party, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). As such, Bangladesh state officials must not impose excessive or arbitrary restrictions on the exercise of these rights.

Background

The CHT region in southeastern Bangladesh has long seen internal armed conflict following Pahari demands for greater autonomy and protection of traditional lands. Indigenous Peoples in the CHT have made numerous complaints that land traditionally owned by them has been occupied either by the army or Bengali settlers who arrived during the 1990s or previously, benefiting from government sponsorship in the process.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997 established a Land Commission to resolve such land disputes, but the Commission has since that time not resolved a single dispute.

In a 2013 report, Amnesty International documented how Pahari tend to suffer disproportionately in violent clashes with Bengali settlers resulting from land disputes.² Hundreds of Pahari families have been left homeless in recent years, while perpetrators of violent attacks against the community are rarely held to account. Bangladeshi authorities have furthermore since 2015 imposed unjustified restrictions on journalists and human rights defenders wishing to travel to the region to investigate allegations of human rights violations.

Recommendations

Amnesty International urges the Bangladeshi authorities to:

- Initiate a thorough, impartial and independent investigation into the attacks and make the result of this investigation public;
- Ensure that those suspected to be responsible are prosecuted in fair and transparent trials, without resort to the death penalty;
- Publicly condemn attacks against members of Indigenous Peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and take effective steps to prevent any recurrence of attacks and other measures to ensure protection of members of Indigenous Peoples; and
- Ensure that the right to freedom of peaceful assembly is respected, and that security forces do not use excessive force against protesters. Investigate allegations of use of excessive force by security personnel against those protesting the Langadu violence, and hold those responsible to account.

² Amnesty International, *Pushed to the edge: Indigenous rights denied in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts*, 13 June 2013 (ASA 13/005/2013), available at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA13/005/2013/en/>