**Submission to COVID -19 Recovery Report to the**

**Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples**

**Country: Bangladesh**

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The Bangladesh government implemented relief measure in response to the Covid-19 crisis but these have rarely reached the marginalised indigenous peoples of the country. Food (in)security, poverty, access to health facilities, credit, water and sanitation and other socio-economic indicators of the minority indigenous peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region and other parts of Bangladesh inhabited by indigenous peoples are far behind the national average. Poor coordination and consultation of the Covid-19 relief programme does nothing to ameliorate the fundamental existing structural challenges such as land dispossession, and geographical and ethnic discrimination that face indigenous peoples.

Continued inaction by the government to implement the CHT (peace) Accord signed in 1997, should have assured good governance by addressing land ownership, the protection of democratic rights and the demand for regional autonomy through elected regional and district administrations and the disbandment of military camps and personnel. These have NOT been implemented. Instead there have been ever increasing incidents of ‘land grabbing’, non-democratically appointed rather than elected regional and district ‘representatives’ and councils, and an increase in the number of military camps in the CHT. Peace, democracy and development have been effectively thwarted and in its place a punitive system of underdevelopment imposed on the indigenous peoples of the CHT.

The CHT is still a militarised area and the security forces are the key players for peace, conflict, governance and development.

At the central level, the government screens and discriminates against indigenous peoples NGOs via the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB ) of Bangladesh. Local NGOs of the CHT who submit any project proposal that has issues concerning Human Rights, indigenous minorities or lands rights are prohibited from receiving foreign funds. The NGO Affairs Bureau issued an official instruction to NGOs that have the word Adivasi/indigenous in the name of the organization to delete Adibasi/indigenous from it. The directive issued just prio r to the outbreak of the pandemic -18th December 2019 - stated that the word Adibashi/indigenous is a ‘threat’ to communal Bangladesh and added that ‘……with regard to CHT the word adivasi/indigenous is also a threat to the national security’. Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (HRFB) has expressed deep concerns over the directive and in a press release, they demanded an explanation how the use of indigenous /Adivasi pose threat to national security.

At the field level, the security branches such as NSI (National Security Intelligence) and DGFI (the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence) routinely monitor the work of indigenous peoples, NGOs works and increasingly and aggressively monitor legitimate development projects demanding excessively frequent reports of planned activities to be submitted directly to them. A directive issued by the Army authority in Khagrachari,District (CHT) instructs all NGOs working in the area have to declare the activities and inform the military before executing their programme. *‘……in order to provide (military) security’*. This exemplifies total military control in civilian affairs, development activities the CHT.

Indigenous activists who raise their voices against the current human rights abuses in the CHT, live in fear of arrest and torture. During the pandemic military personal are collecting information focusing on indigenous youth in different areas of CHT

There is a need for urgent action on two fronts: Firstly, to ensure that COVID-19 relief and rehabilitation measures and resources are inclusive of the most vulnerable and isolated indigenous peoples in the CHT.

Secondly, land rights and the sequestration of customary held land needs to be urgently investigated and land returned to communities to ensure food and livelihood security for the affected communities.

**A) Impact of states’ COVID-19 recovery laws and policies and economic recovery plans on indigenous peoples**

**The Bangladesh government does not recognise the identity of the indigenous peoples in the country** and discriminate against communities. The COVID pandemic has served to heighten negative discrimination**.**

**The recovery laws, policies and economic recovery plans government have been grossly inadequate in protecting indigenous people from the impact of the pandemic and have totally failed to consult with indigenous communities in any strategic planning.** Hence, indigenous peoples in Bangladesh faces a major challenge with regard to the COVID-19 crisis.

**Government failure to protect land against invasions and land grabbing during the COVID 19 in CHT, Bangladesh**

The situation of indigenous peoples particularly in the CHT is particularly acute. Customary land rights are not respected and the remote hilly communities are deprived of access to mains electricity, safe drinking water, government healthcare or comprehensive education as well as other state-run services.

No measures have been taken by government to protect the lands territories and resources of indigenous peoples against land grabbing during the COVID -19 economic recovery phase. There is not only of a failure to protect lands but increased human rights abuses in the pandemic including the illegal taking of customary held land on which to build a luxury 5 star hotel. The illegal take over by the military and commercial companies is current being protested at local, national and international level including by the United Nations as well as Amnesty International and more that 100 human rights organizations and individuals.

Government relief efforts have been woefully inadequate in protecting vulnerable people and communities from untold hardship. In spite of the government’s rhetoric for food support to be particularly targeted to low-income families this has not happened Government food aid relief packages consisting of subsidized rice in the ‘Honourable Prime Minister’s Special Package Grant’ of 2,500 Taka (around US $ 30) failed to reach most poor families due to corruption and people have gone hungry.

The military and Bengalis settlers have reportedly prevented food relief distribution efforts such as the UNDP food relief package from being distributed in the indigenous peoples’ areas[[1]](#footnote-1).

A significant number of indigenous families of the CHT are deprived of government relief because many indigenous peoples have not been provided a National Identity Card and/or lack a mobile phone account

The existing political and structural disadvantage of the majority of indigenous people in CHT has further exposed vulnerable communities to ethnic discrimination, displacement, sexual violence, starvation, , child malnutrition, and outbreak of infectious diseases such as recent measles outbreak in the CHT. .

According to UNPO 2020[[2]](#footnote-2) thousands of indigenous families living in the remote areas of CHT including approximately 7,000 families in 137 villages in Rangamati district are suffering from acute food shortages and potential starvation

Recent data, collected by the civil society groups suggests that more than 80 percent of these *Jumias* and day labourers do not have food stocks for less than one week. (The figure is much higher for the indigenous communities living in the hard to reach areas[[3]](#footnote-3).)

In the midst of the global coronavirus outbreak 10 indigenous children died from measles ( February 26 to April 1 2020) and approximately 400 were hospitalized. All the children were suffering from malnutrition and all of them were from remote areas where government health care providers and facilities are almost non-existent[[4]](#footnote-4).An indication of ethnic discrimination) and adequate institutional frameworks to supply a comprehensive health system.

150 NGO/community primary schools for indigenous children in areas with no government schools are shut down due to the pandemic.

**Land grabbing and displacement of indigenous peoples**

Land held for generations by indigenous communities have increasingly been sequestered for tourism, military establishments, industrial non-food plantation crops and means that communities face a growing food crises. In November 2020 the military took over land for commercial investment. A controversial 5 star hotel and leisure centre in Bandarban is the latest example of the abuse of power by the military authorities. This proposed project will directly displace thousands of poor indigenous Mro villagers from eight villages.[[5]](#footnote-5).

**Restriction on freedom of expression and movement**

Independent foreign and local researchers, journalists and human rights advocates have been prevented from reporting on the situation of indigenous peoples in the CHT and ravel within the CHT for indigenous peoples is increasingly monitored by the military.

 The security forces force indigenous peoples to speak Bengali, instead of their mother tongues, while collection of information for their reporting purposesconstituting a violation of freedom of expression and movement, assembly and associations and a racial discrimination of existing all national and international human rights standards or frameworks.

Sexual violence against indigenous women and girls has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. The military and Bengali settlers have used rape as a tool of suppression and obviously has far reaching consequences for the individuals and the indigenous society[[6]](#footnote-6).

The pandemic has increased the propensity for indigenous children from poor families for forced religious and cultural conversion by religious Islamic clique[[7]](#footnote-7) . Children are selected at a very young age and not allowed to speak in their mother tongue or visit their parents home.. They are socialised in an Islamic tradition the religious education demands they reject their language and culture and isolate from their own family and community.

Later these indigenous children are taken to different madrasas (religious school) in cities like Dhaka without their parents’ knowledge and forcefully converted to Islam[[8]](#footnote-8).

**B. Participation and inclusion of indigenous peoples in state COVID-19 recovery plans**

**Indigenous people have not been included in the state’s COVID-19 recovery plans or in development programmes such as the UN SDGs and no vaccines have been made available to indigenous communities to date.**

**C. Data collection and dissemination**

Since the government of Bangladesh does not acknowledge the existence of indigenous peoples it does not have any disaggregated data on the socio-economic indicators along ethnic lines. This means inevitably that the government fails to address the specific problems of indigenous peoples and their voices unheard and the needs of indigenous peoples are invisible and absent from national development strategies including the SDGs. Until the Bangladesh government’s definition of the ‘whole society’ includes indigenous peoples, the notion of ‘leave no one behind’ will not be achieved.

There is an urgent need for the collection and analysis of disaggregated data collection along ethnic lines. This is particularly needed in the CHT where the majority of indigenous peoples live and is an area effectively controlled by the military.

**D. Indigenous peoples’ COVID-19 responses and efforts at recovery**

**In spite of their disadvantaged position indigenous communities recognised the dangers posed by the pandemic and communities mustered their scarce resources – such as lack of access to water -and instituted protective measures against spread of the deadly virus. For example, villagers provided hand washing facilities at the boundary of their village for would be visitors.**

**The Bangladesh government has not only utterly failed to incorporate indigenous health care knowledge into national health care they have not provided their own basic services in many indigenous communities especially in the CHT.**

**Lessons learned.**

The situation faced by indigenous peoples in Bangladesh during the pandemic is critical - especially for the majority of indigenous people living under military control in the CHT - and demands urgent action if unprecedented disaster is to be avoided in this COVID-19 and any future pandemics.

It is clearly evident that the underlying poor situation of indigenous peoples in the CHT are exacerbated in times of disasters and pandemics and the impact of pandemics potentially a far greater catastrophe.

The long standing structural inequalities, disadvantagement, negative government discrimination and the lack of protection for human rights of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh need to be urgently addressed by government. This includes he implementation of the key aspects of CHT (Peace) Accord democratically elected civil governance and the decommissioning of more than 400 military camps.

Indigenous civil society organizations through the Chittagong Hill Tracts Citizens’ Committee issued a joint statement calling on the government to take urgent actions regarding the COVID -19 and the urgent necessity to put an end to the structural discrimination faced by indigenous peoples.

Documentation of HR violations, support to network and alliance building, research and documentation and providing protective mechanisms to indigenous communities. Encourage the government to uphold HRs in the HR Council.

There is an urgent need for the collection and collation of disaggregated data on ethnic lines to indicate disparities in order that corrective action can be taken.

Provide support to indigenous human rights (HR) defenders including full and safe doccumentation of HR violations, support to network and alliance building, research and documentation and providing protective mechanisms to indigenous communities. Encourage national governments to uphold HRs in the HR Council.

In the case of relief and rehabilitation the following principles are recommended :-

Emergency relief - food and financial support should be provided to all the poor indigenous families urgently without discrimination based on political, ethnic, religion, gender and other social affiliations.

Identify target groups for provision of relief by developing a clear of set of criteria for selection of the beneficiaries. - ultra-poor/low income families, women headed households, families with elders, persons with high risk illness and disabilities, families with children and pregnant women should be prioritised. For children, elders, persons with high risk illness and disabilities, and for pregnant women special additional high protein kits/packages should be supplied.

1. See Ahmed, HS 2020, Structural discrimination in Hill Tracts, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/118961/structural-discrimination-in-hill-tracts>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. UNPO 2020, *Coronavirus: Food crisis in Chittagong Hill Tracts*, <<https://unpo.org/article/21821>.>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See attached attachment 1: ‘Memorandum on Behalf of Internally Displaced Hill Persons & Civil Society of the Chittagong Hill Tracts To The Hon’ble Chairman of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Task Force’. Page 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chakma, N 2020, Measles Outbreak in the Hills: a crisis in desperate need of attention, <<https://www.newagebd.net/article/104206/measles-outbreak-in-the-hills-a-crisis-in-desperate-need-of-attention>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. #  OHCHR 2021, UN experts call for halt to contentious tourism resort in Bangladesh, <<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26733&LangID=E&fbclid=IwAR3yrZEUooTlPOGjLj3guzgDhbICiMzD3aPVLatpzqXuAR7HS9RoRO3CpXk>>.

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6. Hill Voice 2021, [Violence against indigenous women on the rise due to culture of impunity](file:///C%3A/Users/harip/OneDrive/Desktop/Job%20Related/Tebtebba/Study%20on%20the%20rights%20of%20indigenous%20children/Report/Violence%20against%20indigenous%20women%20on%20the%20rise%20due%20to%20culture%20of%20impunity),  < <https://hillvoice.net/violence-against-indigenous-women-on-the-rise-due-to-culture-of-impunity/>>.

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New Age 2018, Marma sisters raped in Rangamati, <<https://www.newagebd.net/article/33325/marma-sisters-raped-in-rangamati>>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. #  Hill Voice 2020, Conversion of Jumma people to Islam in CHT–1, <https://hillvoice.net/conversion-of-jumma-people-to-islam-in-cht-1/>.

Hill Voice 2020, Conversion of Jumma people to Islam in CHT–2, <https://hillvoice.net/conversion-of-jumma-people-to-islam-in-cht-2/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. #  Dhaka Tribune 2017, Indigenous children at risk of forced religious conversion, <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/nation/2017/01/04/indigenous-children-forced-conversion>>.

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