

Arson Attack made by Bengali Settlers in Sajek

7 Indigenous Jumma villages completely burnt down

Newly infiltrated Bengali settlers with the direct support of Bangladesh military forces attacked on the 7 villages of indigenous Jumma peoples throughout the 4 kilometre long area namely Nursery Para, Baibachara, Purba Para, Nangal Mura, Retkaba, Simana para and Gangaram Mukh of Sajek union under Baghaichari upazila (sub-district) in Rangamati district in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) on 20 April 2008 at night. 76 houses of indigenous villagers were burnt to ashes. Bengali settlers beat the Jumma villagers including women and children indiscriminately and looted valuables of the houses during the attack. The attack lasted for almost 4 hours from 9.30 p.m. to 1.30 a.m.

Description of Incident

Recently Bangladesh military forces started settlement programme of newly infiltrated Bengali families along the roadsides of Sajek road from Baghaichari to Gangaram Mukh by forcibly occupying the land owned by the indigenous Jumma people. It is also mentionable that thousands of indigenous Jumma families have been living in this area for decades long. Hence, Jumma villagers of these areas have been protesting against this illegal settlement programme. Despite the protesting, very recently Bengali settlers illegally constructed some houses at Gangaram area on the land owned by Jumma villagers. On 20 April indigenous Jumma villagers destroyed some houses of Bengali settlers that constructed couple days ago. In retaliation to this act, the Bengali settlers equipped with sharp weapons started attack on Jumma villages at 9.30 p.m. At that time, a group of military forces from Baghaihat zone of 33 East Bengal Regiment-2 led by commanding officer Lt. Col. Sajid Imtiaz along with Captain Zabaedur Rahman and RP Habilder Harun rushed there. However, they did not prevent Bengali settlers from setting fire on Jumma houses. Rather, it is learnt that the army led by one Captain Zabaedur Rahman supplied patrol to Bengali settlers to set fire on Jumma houses. 33 houses of Baibachara including Shanti Mamber Para and Kachu Adam, 27 houses of Baghaihat Purba Para, 11 houses of Gangaram Para and 5 houses of Retkabachara, in total 76 houses of indigenous villagers were completely burnt to ashes. On the contrary, some Bengali settlers were wounded due to prevent by Jumma villagers. Jumma villagers also alleged that Bengali settlers set fire on their newly constructed houses to make excuse their brutal attack.

Jumma people including teachers of local school Shakya Bodhi Chakma (40), Mono Ranjan Chakma (35), Nilamoy Chakma (36) alleged that they witnessed to looting furniture and valuables of the houses by Bengali people before setting fire to them. They also saw when they came to village to see the houses 22 April morning that Bengali people took away all the valuables including CIT sheet of the houses as much as possible.

On 21 April at around 10.30 a.m. a group of Bengali settlers encircled the shop of Anunay Chakma (52) of Baghaihat bazar. However, shopkeepers of the market rescued him from physical assault by the Bengali settlers.

It is learnt that the attack was led by two leaders of Sama Odhikar Anlodon (Equal Rights Movement), an extreme Bengali nationalist and fanatic organisation in CHT. The two leaders were Mr. Selim Bahari (35), president of Baghaichari branch and Mr. Golam Molla (50), president of

Baghahat branch of this organisation. Golam Molla also holds post of bazar chowdhuary of Baghahat market that basically controlled by military forces.

It is mentionable that the military forces have increased settlement programme of Bengali settlers in Khagrachari sadar, Mahalchari, Dighinala and Panchari upazilas (sub-district) under Khagrachari district, north district of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region by taking the advantage of State Emergency imposed on 11 January 2007 throughout the country. Two hundred families of Bengali settlers were already settled down on the indigenous people's land in March 2007 at Dantkupa mouza under Khagrachari sadar upazila. A new army camp was also set up there to provide security for Bengali settlers. Hundreds of houses were constructed by Bengali settlers at Gamaridhala, Maischari, Nunchari, Bijitala, Joysen Karbari Para etc. by forcibly occupying hundreds acre of land owned by indigenous Jumma people. Tension has been mounted in Dighinala while military forces tried to settle 812 families of Bengali settlers at Sadhana Tilla of Babuchari mouza in Dighinala upazila in last year. On the other, BNP-led last coalition government undertook programme to settle 10 thousands families of Bengali settlers in Sajek union close to Maini reserved forest. Since imposition of the State of Emergency on 11 January 2007, military forces resumed this settlement programme occupying indigenous people's land.

Reactions:

Different organisations condemned the attack and demanded punishment to the people responsible who ransacked houses at the village. Bangladesh Adivasi Chhatra Sangram Parishad formed a human chain and held a solidarity rally on Dhaka University campus on 22 April 2008 while the Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) brought out a protest procession on 21 April 2008. Both organisations expressed deep concern over the incident and demanded proper investigation. Jatiya Mukti Council also condemned the attack on the hilly village. In a statement Council President Badruddin Umar and General Secretary Fayjul Hakim demanded punishment to the persons responsible.

Bangladesh Adivasi Chhatra Sangram Parishad (BACSP) organised protest meeting at Dhaka University Campus on 23 April 2008 at 10.30 a.m. The meeting was presided over by Mr. Karuna Moy Chakma, President of BACSP. Among others, teacher of Dhaka University Dr. Sourav Sikder and Mr. Robaet Ferdous, general secretary of Bangladesh Garo Chatra Sangathan Mr. Uther Samajatra, press secretary of Bangladesh Marma Students Council Mr. Aungyajai Marma, leader of Student Federation Mr. Saju, Hajong student leader Mr. Sahel Hajong and acting general secretary of Hill Students Council Mr. Hiron Mitra Chakma spoke in the meeting. The protest meeting was followed by a procession. Speakers demanded proper compensation for the victims and withdrawal of Bengali settler families from Sajek area.

Government's measures:

Chairman of the Khagrachhari Hill District Council Monindra Lal Tripura, Two members of the Rangamati Hill District Council namely Mr. Bihari Ranjan Chakma and Mr. Moniruzzaman Mohsin, Deputy Commissioner of Rangamati Mohammad Nurul Amin, Police Superintendent of the district Abdul Baten rushed to the spots to take stock of the situation on 21 April 2008. Rangamati Hill District Council granted Taka 100,000 for victims. It is very astonishing that lion share of this money were handed over to commanding officer of Baghahat zone Lt. Col. Sajid Imtiaz to distribute to the victims. It is reported that most of relief have been distributed to Bengali settlers. Victims of indigenous villagers are not interested to come army camp to receive relief due to security reason.

Most of the indigenous villagers took shelter into the deep forest fearing further attack. Victims of the indigenous families became totally ruined. Most of them were passing days without food. They were staying on open sky. Like Nirupa, most of the people, whose houses have been burnt down, took shelter in the deep forest.

Only 10 victims including two women members of the Sajek union came to Baghaihat bazar to receive relief while others denied to come Baghaihat bazar fearing retaliation. Two women members of Sajek union submitted a list of victims to administration. On the other, separate cases were filed by both indigenous villagers and Bengali settlers with Baghaichari police station. But the officer-in-charge (OC) of the police station did not disclose the name of the complainants and defendants. But no arrest has been made so far.

It is also learnt that most of the Bengali settlers whose house were burnt down are now staying nearby areas of Baghaihat bazar with the assistance of military forces. However, some Bengali settlers sent their women and children to settler localities of Merung of Dighinala upazila and Longadu upazila.

List of indigenous Jumma villagers whose houses were burnt down at Sajek area in CHT:

The following list of indigenous Jumma villagers whose houses were burnt down prepared by three members of Sajek union, namely, Kalachoga Chakma, Swapanika Chakma and Jotsna Chakma are as follows:

Daine Baibachara village including Shanti Mamber Para and Kachu Adam:

1. Bimal Kanti Chakma
2. Shanti Bikash Chakma(1)
3. Nayan Ranjan Member
4. Brisha Muni Chakma
5. Chiringo Chakma
6. Subhanga Chakma
7. Dayal Kista Chakma
8. Kina Chan Chakma
9. Shyamal Kanti Chakma
10. Pratilata Chakma
11. Shanti Jiban Chakma
12. Gobinda Chakma
13. Subolya Chakma
14. Kala Kachu Chakma
15. Jyosna Rani Chakma (Member)
16. Rabi Shankar Chakma
17. Rupayan Master
18. Shakya Bodhi Master
19. Neuton Chakma (Dr.)
20. Rakhi Chakma
21. Nihar Kanti Chakma
22. Nirmal Kanti Chakma
23. Chigon Chiji Chakma
24. Dhabana Chakma
25. Shanti Ranjan Chakma
26. Kala Chan Chakma

27. Neuton Chakma (Kalabo)
28. Kamini Ranjan Chakma
29. Sushi Ranjan Chakma
30. Rabi Ranjan Chakma
31. Baratya Chakma
32. Shanti Bikash Chakma (2)
33. Suma Chakma (Para Kendra School)

Gangaram Mukh village:

1. Gyana Chakma
2. Sunesh Chakma
3. Kaladhan Chakma
4. Jagadish Chakma
5. Lorbo Chakma
6. Maratshaw Chakma
7. Ajit Chakma
8. Mangal Sadhan Chakma
9. Chiranta Master
10. Suman Chakma
11. Chandra Mohan Chakma

Baghahat Purba Para village:

1. Jyoti Moy Chakma
2. Kala Maratya Chakma
3. Arun Bikash Chakma
4. Jagadish Chakma
5. Rupan Chakma
6. Bhubati Chakma
7. Sumati Ranjan Chakma
8. Dhana Gula Chakma
9. Nilamoy Chakma
10. Mangal Sen Chakma
11. Dhana Bikash Chakma
12. Gyana Ranjan Chakma
13. Sunil Kanti Chakma
14. Trishankar Chakma
15. Paran Sona Chakma
16. Monu Ranjan Chakma
17. Dulal Chakma
18. Amar Bikash Chakma
19. Rumel Chakma
20. Bangalya Chakma
21. Laxmi Kumar Chakma
22. Samar Kanti Chakma
23. Amar Kanti Chakma
24. Minal Chakma
25. Laxmindra Chakma
26. Indra Raj Chakma
27. Aiub Kanti Chakma

Retaabachara village:

1. Mon Mohan Chakma
2. Ranesh Chakma
3. Kinadhan Chakma

4. Ladu Muni Chakma
5. Goyeshur Chakma

Follow-up: Sajek arson attack

(a) Bengali settlers continue to occupy land in Sajek

Despite prevailing tension following Sajek arson attack on 7 Jumma villages, Bengali settlers continue to occupy land in Sajek area in Baghaichari sub-district. It is learnt that since 10 May 2008, Bengali settlers have even been cleaning the ashes and charred beams of the burned houses of the Jummas allegedly to occupy homestead of Jumma villagers. Besides, Bengali settlers started to construct houses on occupied land since mid-May. On the other, a few Jumma villagers also started to build houses on their land. However, most of Jumma villagers are still passing days fearing further attack.

(b) Relief distribution

Various organisations and authorities provided relief to the victims. There is no coordination in providing relief. It is learnt that government relief is being distributed by Baghiahat army zone authority led by Lt. Colonel Md. Sajid Imtiaz who are mastermind of this heinous attack. Tk 10,000 for each affected family was granted from Chief Advisor's fund. Though Bengali settler families have been provided this grant, however, most of affected Jumma families have not yet received. It is learnt that Jumma families are not interested to receive this grant from army zone authority.

On the other, Gono Swastha, a national NGO, distributed relief to 78 Jumma families and 115 settlers. It is mentionable that according to local public representatives, only 43 shacks of Bengali settlers were burnt down. However, Gono Swastha distributed almost triple more than actually burned.

Among others, Relief Management Committee for Victims of Sajek-Gangaram Arson Incident, Medicine Shun Frontier (MSF), Students of Chittagong University, etc. distributed relief to the victims. The relief includes rice, cloths, dry fish and paste, cash, book for students etc. On 21 May 2008, Relief Management Committee for Victims of Sajek-Gangaram Arson Incident distributed relief led by former advisor to caretaker government and eminent human rights defender Ms. Sultana Kamal.

(d) Arrested 4 Jumma villagers released on bail

On 29 May 2008 arrested 4 innocent Jumma villagers namely Sushil Chakma (26) s/o Asomi Chandra Chakma, Sangram Chakma (22) s/o Ashok Kumar Chakma, Ratna Bikash Chakma (22) s/o Gunodhar Chakma and Rabindra Chakma (23) s/o Shashi Mohan Chakma were released on bail. They were arrested by military from Simanachara village in Sajek union falsely accusing of setting fire to settler house.