

THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS, BANGLADESH



On the Difficult Road to Peace

AMENA MOHSIN

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THE
CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS,
BANGLADESH



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*To the people of Chittagong Hill Tracts,
who taught me never to give up*

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Foreword

DAVID M. MALONE
PRESIDENT, INTERNATIONAL PEACE ACADEMY

This occasional paper was developed as part of the International Peace Academy (IPA) research project *Peacebuilding: Issues and Responses*, which examined regional and national approaches to peace implementation and conflict resolution. It offers not only important perspectives on prospects for stability in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh, but also important lessons for peace implementation more broadly.

The Chittagong Hill Tracts negotiations were unusual in that they were largely generated domestically. They were broadly successful, and the landmark agreement in 1997 ended two decades of armed insurgency.

The negotiations demonstrated that conflict prevention and resolution initiatives by governments and aggrieved communities can succeed. While donor governments did support the process, not least by promising to assist financially with implementation of an agreement, the CHT accord was not, as so many peace agreements have been, driven by international mediators, the UN, or regional or subregional organizations. However, implementation of the accord has been incomplete, as several thorny issues were left out of the accord or formulated in an ambiguous fashion. This was the case for the vexing issue of the presence of settlers in the tracts. Key aspects of the accord, such as military withdrawal, devolution of authority, and property rights, have not been implemented. The author makes several helpful recommendations for steps that could be taken by local, national, and international actors to ensure implementation of the accord and a lasting resolution to the conflict in the area.

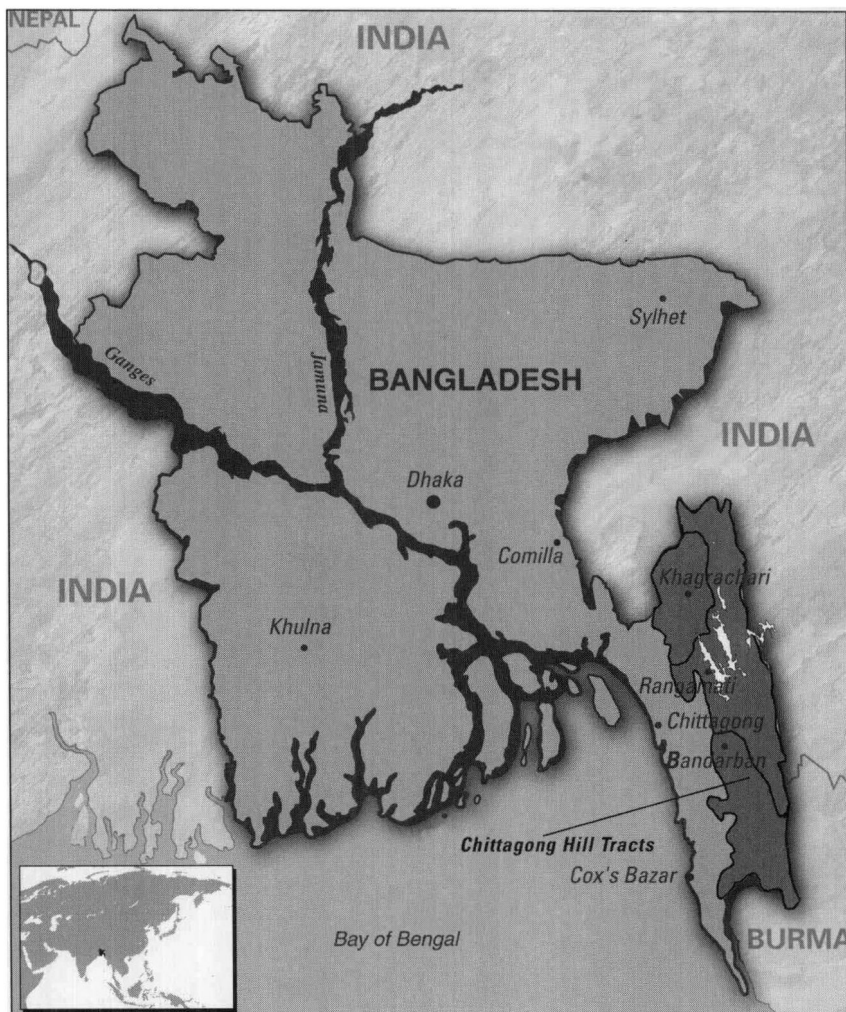
This study dovetails with other research undertaken by the IPA, including a significant comparative project carried out jointly with the Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford University. That project, the findings of which are collected in the book *Ending Civil Wars: The Implementation of Peace Agreements*, edited by Stephen John Stedman, Donald Rothchild, and Elizabeth M. Cousens, examines the chal-

lenges of peace implementation, with emphasis on the role of international actors in supporting it. The study of the difficulties in implementing the CHT agreement in the absence of strong external involvement reinforces one key finding of that broader comparative project: the need to address spoilers to peace processes.

This book also bolsters the recent findings of the IPA project on conflict prevention. The comparative casework of the prevention project highlights the difficulties in securing implementation of agreements that are ambiguous toward key provisions or do not engage all potential spoilers. These cases are collected in a book, edited by Chandra Lekha Sriram and Karin Wermester, entitled *From Promise to Practice: Strengthening UN Capacities for the Prevention of Violent Conflict*.

This occasional paper was made possible through the generous contributions of the Ford and John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundations to the Peacebuilding: Issues and Responses research project. It is such funding that enables the IPA to support innovative field research, often on topics off the beaten track, by leading scholars from the regions involved.

I am deeply grateful to Amena Mohsin, one of the leading scholars from Bangladesh, for undertaking the research and for writing this occasional paper. We have learned much from her and hope that publication of this work may encourage the new government of Bangladesh to consider carefully her recommendations for a more complete implementation of this historic agreement. I am also grateful to my IPA colleagues Chandra Lekha Sriram and Karen Ballentine for coordinating within the IPA the planning and preparation of this exciting volume.



Source: Reprinted from Monique Mekenkamp, Paul van Tongeren, and Hans van de Veen, *Searching for Peace in Central and South Asia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 305.

Introduction

This book is an inquiry into the processes and politics of conflict and peacebuilding in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh. On December 2, 1997, a peace accord was signed between the government of Bangladesh (GOB) and the Parbattya Chattagram Janashonghoti Samity (PCJSS, or United People's Party of the CHT), the political front that has waged an armed struggle for the autonomy of the CHT since the mid-1970s. Although the accord has been hailed internationally as a successful case of conflict resolution, it involved no third-party mediations or direct interventions by international actors, nor was civil society incorporated within the peace process. While the CHT Peace Accord was meant to resolve the armed conflict between the insurgents of the CHT and the government of Bangladesh, it did not address the underlying complaints of the Hill people and is thus unlikely to establish peace until the GOB seriously addresses these grievances. The situation in the CHT is in flux and has acquired complex dimensions following the accord, with one faction of the Hill people committed to pursuing full autonomy. The state's slow pace of implementing the accord has only exacerbated the situation. Still, the accord provides a framework for establishing a viable and sustainable peace in the CHT, a peace that must necessarily envision the empowerment and autonomy of the people.

The CHT Peace Accord is the outcome of a long process primarily initiated by the GOB in the 1980s. In 1975, following a military coup and political upset, PCJSS leader Manobendra Narayan Larma fled to India. The Indian government gave its full support to the PCJSS and allowed it to establish headquarters in the Indian state of Tripura. The Shanti Bahini (SB, or Peace Force), the military wing of the PCJSS, was given training and assistance by the Indian military and was allowed to operate from bases within the country, giving India considerable leverage in its relations with Bangladesh. Further straining relations between the two countries and a

source of international embarrassment for the GOB, about 54,000 Hill people were registered as refugees in Tripura, having fled the CHT to escape military atrocities committed during the counterinsurgency.

By the 1980s, international donors began to exert pressure on the government to reach a political settlement. Amnesty International published regular news of human rights violations in the CHT, and the Denmark-based CHT Commission published annual reports on the situation in the CHT, providing information to Bangladesh's aid donors, such as Japan, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, France, Germany, Switzerland, the European Commission (EC), and the United States.¹ By the 1990s, the demise of the Cold War had brought about a qualitative change in international politics, and donors were emphasizing good governance, transparency, accountability, and democratization of administrative systems.

The GOB itself realized after a decade of military operations that the CHT problem required a political solution. In 1991, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), a civilian regime, had come to power after almost nine years of military and quasi-military rule.² Under Begum Khaleda Zia, the BNP established a parliamentary committee to conduct negotiations with the PCJSS. Because the Bangladeshi military had been given extensive powers to put down the CHT insurgency and control the region, it was in the political interest of the civilian regime to seek a political solution in order to firmly establish civilian control over the military. Apart from this domestic political compulsion, the government realized that its international credibility as a democracy, and therefore its external aid and assistance, were at stake. An end to the armed insurgency was imperative to ensure political and economic stability.

The PCJSS responded positively to the government's gestures. The stated objectives of the party were to secure political and economic autonomy within the state of Bangladesh. Secession was not considered an option (see Appendix 2), perhaps partly because the economic viability of the region as an independent entity was questionable, but more importantly because India would not have lent its support for an independent CHT given that the insurgency within its own borders, in northeastern India, was adjacent to the CHT. An independent CHT would have weakened India's leverage over the Bangladeshi government, which it alleged was aiding the insurgents of northeast India. Despite several rounds of negotiations, an agreement could not be reached, as differences existed between the GOB and the PCJSS on the questions of political autonomy for the CHT and Bengali settlers.

The situation changed in 1996 when the Awami League came to power in Bangladesh, reversing India's attitude toward Bangladesh as well as the CHT. Historically, India has had good relations with the Awami League. Bangladesh won its independence under the political leadership of the

Awami League, to which India had lent its full support. The Awami League was also viewed by India as a secular force, as opposed to the pro-Islamic posture of the BNP. The Awami League continued the CHT negotiations, this time backed by the Indian government, which withdrew its support from the PCJSS. Pressed to reach a settlement and fatigued by two decades of armed insurgency, the PCJSS signed the peace accord with the GOB, compromising many of its key demands (see Chapter 3).

Although the pressure of donors and international human rights organizations and the support or lack of support of India were critical external variables, at no stage during negotiations of the CHT Peace Accord was there any direct involvement of a third party. At the national level as well, the process remained confined between the GOB and the PCJSS, never incorporating Bengali civil society. A government-imposed news blackout and localization of the conflict within the CHT kept the Bengali population outside the region unaffected and largely unaware of the issue.

The PCJSS also made no attempt to incorporate civil society members from among the Hill people. The Pahari Chatra Parishad (PCP, or Hill Student's Forum), the Pahari Gono Parishad (PGP, or Hill People's Council), and the Hill Women's Federation (HWF) had carried on the movement for the CHT cause in a democratic manner both within the CHT and in other parts of Bangladesh. By networking with Bengali women's organizations and student forums, they had attempted to sensitize Bengali civil society on the CHT issue. Yet at no point during the peace negotiations were these forums involved, nor were women represented on either side. Many of the weaknesses of the accord, such as the issues of compensation, justice, and repatriation, perhaps could have been avoided had the process been participatory.

Peacebuilding, like peace negotiations, is a protracted process. It must holistically address the structural and conceptual causes that initially led to the rupture, with interventions at the local, national, and international levels (see Chapter 5). At the national as well as local levels, trust- and confidence-building measures need to be adopted between and among the people, by opening up academic and ethnic channels of dialogue and giving recognition to the plurality of cultures in civil society. Economic development strategies must be culturally sensitive and participatory. To ensure sustainable peace and justice, participation of the people in the political structures as well as decentralization of power are imperative. International organizations like the United Nations, through its various agencies such as the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) can play a vital role in peacebuilding, as can donors, by exerting pressure for reforms and good governance. Most importantly, the UN and donors need to emphasize the full implementation of a peace accord. Peace

is not difficult to achieve if the political will to bring about change and transformation is created. And social mobilization from within and sustained international pressure for reforms in consonance with the aspirations of the people can indeed create this political will.

BACKGROUND

The CHT problem is a majority/minority conflict revolving around the politics of nation and state building, wherein hegemony and centralization inherently alienate the minority populations. The minorities themselves inevitably adopt the politics of identity formation as a strategy of counter-hegemony. Their objectives may vary from autonomy to secession. South Asia is replete with such conflicts, including those in Sri Lanka and north-eastern India. A brief background of the CHT and its people is provided here to distinguish the Hill people from the Bengali population of Bangladesh, who constitute the dominant and majority community.

Situated in southeastern Bangladesh, the CHT occupies a physical area of 5,093 square miles, constituting 10 percent of the total land area of Bangladesh. The region comprises three districts: Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Banderban. The area is important to the policy planners of Bangladesh for strategic and economic reasons. It is surrounded by the Indian states of Tripura on the north and Mizoram on the east, by Myanmar (formerly Burma) on the south and east, and by Chittagong district on the west. The ongoing insurgency in the Indian northeast and Myanmar increases the CHT's importance for the military planners of Bangladesh. The region is also rich in natural resources. Gas, coal, and copper deposits have been found in the Miani Reserve Forest. The Jogigofa Union (local administrative unit) located in the Khagrachari district and the Rangamati district are presumed to hold oil deposits. The state, however, had not been able to exploit the resources due to insurgency. In 1991, according to the last census held, the CHT had a population of 0.97 million, of which the Hill people constituted 0.50 million and the Bengalis 0.47 million.³ Eleven ethnic groups populate the CHT: Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Khami, Kheyang, Lushai, Marma, Mrung, Pankho, Tanchangya, and Tripura (see Table 1.1). They closely resemble the people of northeastern India, Myanmar, and Thailand, rather than the predominantly Bengali population of Bangladesh.

Brought under the direct administration of British colonial power in the nineteenth century, the CHT has a political history unique to Bengal. First acquired by the British East India Company in 1760, the region that would come to be known as the CHT maintained an autonomous status under the Moghals and their semi-independent governor, Nawab Mir Qasim Ali Khan. It continued to function autonomously under the company, which did not establish any administrative structure in the region. In 1860, by Act