

Arson attack on indigenous villages in Sajek under Baghaichari upazila by Bengali settlers in CHT

On 20 April 2008 Bengali settlers with the help of military forces made an arson attack on Jumma villages at Sajek area under Baghaichari upazila in Rangamati district. In this incident, seven indigenous villages namely Nursery Para, Baibachara, Purba Para, Nangal Mura, Retkaba, Simana para and Gangaram Mukh of Sajek union were affected and at least 76 houses of indigenous villagers and 43 houses of Bengali settlers were completely burnt to ashes. It is allegedly reported that Bengali settlers also looted valuables of the houses of indigenous villagers during the attack.

It is worth mentioning that the vast Sajek Union is located at one end of Rangamati district, and mainly comprises of Reserved Forests. Any settlement in this area is considered to be illegal. But many indigenous families have been living in this area for generations in accordance with their customary norms and without any official title deeds. Local residents noted as a cause of the incident that there had been rising tension in the area for about two months. The main reason for this tension was that the Bengali settlers had been erecting houses near or adjacent to the indigenous villagers' houses.

On 20 April the tension sparked when indigenous villagers opposed Bengali settlers to construct the houses. In retaliation to this, the Bengali settlers equipped with sharp weapons started attacking on the indigenous villages on 20 April and which lasted for 4 hours from 9.30 p.m. to 1.30 a.m.

According to the members of Sajek union, total 76 houses of indigenous villagers were completely burnt down. Actual number of burnt houses of Bengali settlers are yet to be determined. However, local sources reported that around 43 houses of Bengali settlers were burnt to ashes.

Follow-up: Arson attack by Bengali settlers on indigenous Jumma peoples in Sajek

Latest report confirmed that the arson attack on indigenous villages in Sajek area occurred on 20 April 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 Baghaihat branch of this organisation. Golam Molla also holds post of bazar chowdhuary of Baghaihat market that basically controlled by military forces. Victims of indigenous villagers also confirmed that military forces of Baghaihat army zone of 33 East Bengali Regiment (2) led by commanding officer Lt. Col. Sajid Imtiaz fully supported the Bengali settlers in setting fire on indigenous villages while a group of army of engineering core from Gangaram Mukh camp, at a stage, prevented Bengali settlers to conduct more attack on indigenous villages and brought the situation under control.

It is also learnt that 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. Witnesses also confirmed that a number of houses of Bengali settlers were also burnt down, but the actual numbers of these houses are yet to be estimated. The Bengali settlers alleged that some miscreants set fire on houses of Bengali settlers. On the contrary, indigenous villagers alleged that Bengali settlers themselves set fire on their houses to make excuse for their brutal attack. 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.

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. In addition, army always favour Bengali settlers in providing relief for the victims. Preparation of victim list and distribution of relief are dominated by the military authority of Baghaihat zone. Even, a grant of Taka 100,000 of Rangamati Hill District Council were also handed over to commanding officer Lt. Col. Sajid Imtiaz for distribution.

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

On 20 April 2008 at mid-night an arson attack was made by newly infiltrated Bengali settlers with the direct support of Bangladesh military forces at Baghaihat area of Sajek union under Baghichati upazila in Rangamati district in CHT. In this attack, around 76 houses of indigenous Jumma villagers of 7 villages were completely burnt down. It is report that Selim Bahari, President of Baghaichari branch and Golam Molla, President of Baghaihat branch of Equal Rights Movement, an extreme nationalist and fanatic organisation of Bengali settler led the Bengali settlers to conduct this attack with the direct sup[port of military forces of Baghaihat army zone of 33 East Bengali Regiment (2) led by commanding officer Lt. Col. Sajid Imtiaz, Captain Zabaedur Rahman and RP Habilder Harun. 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 Ckakma
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 Ckakra
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

Baghaihat 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

BISAC holds demonstration against arson attack on indigenous villages by Bengali settlers in CHT

On 23 April 2008 a demonstration against arson attack on 7 indigenous villages in remote Sajek area was organised by Bangladesh Adivasi Chhatra Sangram Parishad (Bangladesh Indigenous Students Action Council – BISAC) at Dhaka University (DU) campus where more than two hundred students attended. At 11.00 a procession was brought from '*Aparajeya Bangla*' of DU campus and ended circumambulating arts building of the campus. Then protest meeting was held with Mr. Karunamoy Chakma, President of BISAF in the chair at '*Aparajeya Bangla*'.

Representatives of different indigenous students' organizations, namely, Hill Students Council (PCP), Bangladesh Garo Chhatra Sangathan (Bagachas), Santal Students Union, Bangladesh Marma Students' Council (BMSC), Bangladesh Chatra Federation, Bangladesh Hajong Students Sangathan etc. participate in the demonstration. Associate Professor of Mass Communication and Journalism Department of DU Mr. Robayet Ferdaus and Associate Professor of Department of Linguistic of Dhaka University Dr. Saurov Shikdar were also present there and expressed their solidarity with students protest.

It is mentionable that 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 from Nursery Para to Gangaram Mukh areas of Sajek union under Baghaichari upazila (sub-district) in Rangamati district in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) on 20 April 2008 at mid-night. More than 100 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 that lasted for almost 4 hours from 9.30 p.m.

Student leaders condemned the arson attack in Sajek terming it as barbaric attack against humanity. They demanded exemplary punishment to the persons responsible, compensation for affected indigenous families and immediate withdrawal of Bengali settler families from Sajek area.

At the beginning of the program Sohel Hajong, General Secretary of BISAC demanded to stop rampant land grabbing by Bengali settlers and eviction of indigenous people from their homeland. He said that demonstration would be carried till the exploitation and repression against the indigenous people is stopped. He demanded to rehabilitate Bengali settlers outside CHT with dignity.

Mr. Pintu Haui of Bangladesh Garo Chatra Songothon (Bagachas) said that this arson attack is nothing but a blueprint to alienate the indigenous people from their own land outlined by the army. He expressed solidarity with the hill people's fight. He threatened to declare hard programme if the indigenous people have been given to live peacefully in their homeland.

Central General Secretary of Pahari Chhatra Parishad (PCP) (Hill Students Council) Mr. Hiran Mitra Chakma threatened that the situation of CHT is very vulnerable. In such situation no one in CHT can stay at home. He urged to the government to bring culprits to justice.

Santal Students Union's representative Mr. Bernard demanded to conduct impartial inquiry to the inhuman incident otherwise Caretaker Government would be controversial.

Mr. Aungyajai Marma of Bangladesh Marma Students' Council (BMSC) expressed his solidarity and urged the indigenous students to be prepared to launch movement against any kind of inhuman atrocities. He added that the land of the indigenous people is being grabbed in the name of establishment of cantonment. He asked to the students to choose "Either freedom or death."

Mr. Shamsujjoha of Bangladesh Chatra Federation expressed his solidarity with the indigenous students. He urged the government to resolve land disputes in CHT by reactivating Land Commission as per CHT Peace Accord.

In his closing speech Mr. Karunamoy Chakma, President of BISAC announced the ends of the programme saying that the students should take preparation for greater movement for achieving the just rights of indigenous peoples.

At the beginning of the demonstration, Mr. Lutherson Zetra, Organizing Secretary of BISAC read out a leaflet circulated by the BISAC on arson attack in Sajek in which they demanded proper compensation for the victims and withdrawal of Bengali settler families from Sajek area.

Follow-up programme

On 24 April demonstration against the arson attack on indigenous peoples in Sajek was also held in Jahangirnagar University campus (Savar, Dhaka) and Chittagong University campus by Hill Students Council (PCP).

Civil Society Team visited spot of the Sajek arson attack

On 28-29 April 2008 a group of citizens conducted an on-site inquiry in Sajek union under Baghaichari upazila in Rangamati district, following press reports of about 150 houses being burnt down across seven villages in the area.

The civil society team include Pankaj Bhattacharya, Member, Shomilito Shamajik Andolon; Sara Hossain, Advocate, Supreme Court; Syed Abul Maqsd, Writer, Journalist; Ziauddin Tareque Ali, Member, Shonmilito Shamajik Andolon; Robayet Ferdaus, Associate Professor, Dhaka University; Rajiv Mir, Assistant Professor, Chittagong University; Shameema Binte Rahman, Journalist; Anirban Saha, Investigator, Ain o Salish Kendra; Abu Ahmed Faizul Kabir, Investigator, Ain o Salish Kendra; Supriyo Chakma, Prothom Alo, Rangamati; Jewel Dewan, Advocate, BLAST, Rangamati and KCing Marma, Student, Chittagong University.

During the on-site inquiry, they spoke to victims and witnesses among both Jummas and Bengalis, other local persons, and to army personnel, to clarify what had happened. They reported that on arrival in the area, in eight villages within the reserved forest area in Sajek Union - Nursery Para, Daney Bhaibachora, Bamey Bhaibachora, Purbopara, Balughatpara, Retkaba, MSF Para and Gongaram Mukh – the mostly Pahari (indigenous Hillman) houses which had been burnt down to the ground remained just as they were. The charred remains of burnt houses could be seen across a four kilometer long area. Many people are still in hiding. Others told us that several persons were injured during this incident. People do not have proper shelter, and some remain under open skies.

Another civil society team also visited spot earlier

Earlier on 27-30 April 2008 another team of fourteen consisting of political activists, a university teacher, a journalist, cultural and student activists and leaders, visited Sajek area. The team was led by Moshrefa Mishu, convenor, Biplobi Oikko Front. From the morning of 27 April to 30 April 2008, they went to the area where the incident took place, and also to other places in Marishya in Baghaichori, Dui Tila, Kobakhali in Dighinala, Sadhana Tila, Lichu Bagan, Moner Manush, Chongranchori as well as surrounding habitations, markets, forest area, garden and hillocks. They spoke to both Jummas and Bengalis, and also to some of the victims of the Sajek incident.