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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2012 - Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the issues of ethnic identity and land rights were closely intertwined in 2011. This was underscored by the government's failure to resolve tensions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) area of south-eastern Bangladesh, home to at least 600,000 indigenous people. Not only did the authorities again fail to implement the long-delayed peace accords meant to bring stability to the region, but also Bangladeshi officials in effect denied the existence of indigenous people in the country, much to the surprise of the communities themselves and of a UN Special Rapporteur tasked with assessing the situation.

During the year, Bangladesh passed amendments to its Constitution that struck the term 'Adivasi', or indigenous, from the documents and replaced it with 'small ethnic groups'. Some communities in the CHT said the government refusal to recognize non-Bengalis in the area as indigenous will only come as a further threat to livelihoods, culture and language. Bangladeshi officials contended that allowing special treatment for any population would not be in the country's best interests and proceeded to press the case with foreign diplomats and UN agencies, according to local media.

In May, the UN Special Rapporteur urged Bangladesh to set a timeline to implement the CHT peace accord, which has largely languished since it was signed in 1997. For years, the CHT has been the site of conflict between indigenous people and Bangladeshi authorities. In addition to heavy militarization, the government has also exacerbated the conflict by encouraging Bengali settlers to move into CHT areas, a policy which has had consequences that play out in the form of present-day land disputes. The Special Rapporteur, Lars-Anders Baer, said land was the crucial issue in the CHT:

'Indigenous peoples have lost and are continuing to lose their ancestral lands at an alarming rate as a consequence of forceful eviction from and expropriation of their lands through development projects and occupation by the military.'

In the meantime, the violence continued in the CHT area throughout 2011, often pitting local indigenous populations against Bengali settlers. In April, indigenous villagers allegedly killed three Bengali settlers; in retaliation, settlers allegedly attacked nearby villages and set fire to at least 60 homes. Local rights groups say similar violent disputes over land were common throughout 2011. According to the NGO Kapaeeng Foundation, which campaigns for the rights of indigenous peoples, violence in the area saw more than 130 homes of indigenous people burned to the ground. Indigenous women also bore the brunt of the violence. The group recorded 16 rapes of indigenous women nationwide, including five who were also murdered.

The prolonged tensions mean that indigenous children in the area are among the country's least educated. Literacy rates among ethnic minority children from the CHT are far lower than the national average. Medical authorities said hospital facilities in the area are also dangerously under-staffed, a key problem which is contributing to high infant mortality rates in the district, namely 63 deaths for every 1,000 live births, compared with the national average of 49.

Elsewhere, worries over the proposed Phulbari Coal Mine project in north-west Bangladesh were a dominant issue for environmentalists. The project would involve an open pit coal mine, which critics say would devastate almost 6,000 hectares of farmland and uproot nearly 130,000 indigenous people who rely on farmland.

Peaceful protesters, who opposed the Phulbari project, were also subject to violence. In May, advocates accused 'thugs' linked to the government of assaulting protesters during a rally. In December, riot police used batons and tear gas to break up another demonstration against the Phulbari project.

Religious discrimination is prohibited under the Bangladeshi Constitution, yet NGO Odhikar nonetheless recorded multiple rights violations against religious minorities in the Muslim-majority country. These included more than 100 reported injuries to religious minorities as well as 25 attacks on places of worship. In one April incident recorded by Odhikar, supporters linked to a parliamentarian with the ruling Awami League party allegedly attacked a Hindu temple and several homes in central Bangladesh. The supporters then reportedly attacked local reporters who had arrived to cover the violence. In February, the Asian Human Rights Commission said officials in Gazipur District disrupted an annual convention of Ahmadiyya, even though prior permission had already been granted.

The NGO Bangladesh Minority Watch (BDMW) also recorded several alarming instances of violence against Hindus, in which girls and women were targeted. In October, a 15-year-old Hindu girl was gang raped and killed. In August, BDMW said another Hindu girl was abducted and then forcibly converted to Islam.

Bangladesh's Rohingya refugees continued to face problems throughout the year. The NGO Refugees International warned that the Rohingya, an ethnic minority from neighbouring Arakan (or Rakhine) State in Burma, enjoy few rights in Bangladesh and are subject to abuse. It is believed that more than 200,000 Rohingyas live in Bangladesh, though most of them are not officially recognized as refugees. The situation is particularly troubling for women. The NGO says reports of sexual violence against unregistered refugees have increased over the last year.

The government has long viewed the Rohingya as illegal migrants. Throughout 2011, Burma made international headlines as it incrementally allows greater freedoms for its citizens. Yet Rohingya in Bangladesh remain wary of the reforms and are unlikely to return there soon.

Women from minority communities were also the subjects of deep concern throughout the year in Bangladesh. During a February session, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) expressed concern about the prevalence of violence against women, including rape and acid attacks. The CEDAW Committee said minority women often suffer many forms of discrimination, yet Bangladesh has only limited information or statistics about disadvantaged women and girls.

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