

BANGLADESH: REPATRIATION OF TRIBAL REFUGEES FROM THE HILL TRACTS

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The context

The much-awaited peace agreement between the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and the tribal leaders of Parbatya Chattagram Janna Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) was signed on 2 December 1997, aimed at establishing lasting peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts after more than twenty years of conflict.

Highlights of the Peace Treaty:

Changes in rules, laws and by-laws to implement the treaty; a special committee for monitoring and implementation of the treaty; a Commission for settlement of land disputes; Circle Chiefs to replace the Deputy Commissioners; a 22-member Regional Council to be setup; the army to be withdrawn gradually from its camps; surrender by the insurgents along with arms within 45 days; Tk. 50,000 for each family of the members of the PCJSS for their rehabilitation; a separate Ministry for the Chittagong Hill Tracts; the Regional Council may seek changes in laws enacted by JS and revenue collected will be deposited into the Pashad's fund.

The repatriation of the remaining 9196 families since 15 years in the five camps in India, which started in 1994, resumed from 21 November 1997, before signing the Peace Treaty. All parties, GoB, the Government of India and the tribal leaders, have expressed their sincere wish that the refugees should be repatriated to their home-land. Furthermore, the GoB has committed to make efforts to facilitate reintegration of the refugees. In total, 7296 families had reached Bangladesh from 21 November 1997 until the end of January. All were provided with supplementary food rations for three months by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), funded and monitored by the Federation. BDRCS is committed to supply rations to the remaining 1900 families, who are planned to return during February.

Latest events

Till 14 January, the situation in the Hill Tracts was peaceful except for the hoisting of black (protest) flags (which started at the beginning of this repatriation phase) and demonstration rallies by the followers of the opposition party. On 14 January, 98 the opposition BNP backed Sarbadaliya Oikya Parishad declared a 48 hours road blockade programme at Khagrachari from 15 to 16 January demanding the repeal of Chittagong Peace Treaty. On 15.1.98 the BDRCS team deployed to Khagrachari district to distribute the supplementary food for the tribal refugees returning from Tripura was stopped in a road block and their Red Crescent marked pick-up was burnt and destroyed. Nobody was hurt. The details related to the incident are under investigation. The situation is fully under control by the local administration. Repatriation is going smoothly, as well as the Red Crescent assistance.

Red Cross/Red Crescent action

Previously, BDRCS, on request from the GoB, has supported repatriation by providing supplementary food to all repatriated families for a period of nine months. Later, the GoB officially requested BDRCS to provide twelve months supplementary food, which was committed by the Prime Minister to the tribal leaders. A copy of this letter was shared with the Federation by the BDRCS. This was not possible to accept for the Federation due to funding constraints. On the basis of the present funding situation, the Federation is continuing to support the BDRCS to provide 3 months assistance, consisting of:

12 kg of lentil
6 kg of salt &
6 litres of cooking oil

The distribution is carried out by staff from the NHQ and by the Khagrachari Branch Red Crescent youth volunteers. This food ration is important for the returnees until they have built their houses and received the first harvest from their land. There have been good arrangements at the border for family registration, family list verification, issuing ration card, providing assistance, consisting of 50 kg rice, Tk. 3,000 (Tk 30 = 1 CHF) for the purchase of a cow, Tk. 3,000 for the purchase of wood to build their houses, Tk. 15,000 as a grant to establish themselves, Tk.15 instead of a meal per person in each family and also two bundles of CI sheet. Male and female members of the village police voluntarily provided their physical labour to the repatriated families for carrying in the distribution centres as well as loading in the trucks and buses.

The outdoor health service at the reception centre consisting of one male medical officer and two female medical assistants with adequate medicaments including antibiotics is quite satisfactory. Banking arrangements are also available at the reception area so that the refugees can change Indian currency and deposit their grant. Following receipt their assistance, the refugees are carried by government hired transport to temporary camps which are also equipped with necessary facilities.

The repatriation programme has been closely monitored by the Federation Delegation from the very beginning. As per the monitoring schedule, the Head of Delegation as well as other delegates and local officers have visited the area a number of times to get an overview of the situation. During monitoring, the Delegation has met with the District Commissioner of Khagrachari, Administrative officers on Indian side, the Secretary of the Special Affairs Division, Army personnel, the Superintendent of police in Khagrachari, Security In-charge, TNOs, the Chairman of Parbatya Zila Sthanio Sarker Parishad (Hill Tracts local council, who is also the Chairman of the BDRCS branch), and all of them expressed their satisfaction with the level of co-operation which exists between all involved parties. They were satisfied with the security situation, the atmosphere was friendly and congenial.

In order to gain some insight into the state of the refugees, the Delegation also spoke to returnees who had left the temporary camp earlier and were re-building their homes, and who were living in temporary shelter close to the reception site. The returnees seemed genuinely pleased to have returned home, to be free and no longer to be confined to a restricted area. Of these families, all had been able to receive their original land. It was felt that the refugees faced no particular problems in reintegration and no conflict or tension exists between the repatriates and the population of the area on the individual level. No incidents involving violence between the repatriated tribal families and the local Bengali Muslim population was reported or found, and the general opinion is that the return of the refugees is generally accepted or welcomed.

Outstanding needs

The CHF 300,000 allocated by the Federation from the Disaster Relief Emergency Fund (DREF) will be sufficient for the purchase of 9,196 family rations for 3 months. After discussions today with the Secretary of Special Affairs it has been confirmed that there will be no additional unregistered families as these are included within the 9,196. In the last week of February, the Federation will conduct an evaluation of the first 3 months food distribution and a possible expansion of the operation into health/community services programmes which would support both returnees and local people. Unless the evaluation indicates otherwise, a plan with budgets for another 9 months operation will be drawn up and an appeal launched in early March.

External relations - Government/UN/NGOs/Media

The BDRCS and the Federation have good relations with the local administration of Khagrachari District, where most (90%) of the returnees will be settled, since 1994 when the first repatriation took place. The repatriation is carried out solely by the Governments of Bangladesh and India, in the presence of and monitored by representatives of the refugees and the Tribal councils and political party. No UN bodies or NGOs are presently involved, but the Delegation maintains contact with the UNDP, WFP and UNHCR.

The activities of BDRCS at the reception centre are highly covered by local and National Dailies as well as in TV news.

Contributions

CAD 5,000 from the Canadian Red Cross and CHF 300,000 from DREF.

Conclusion

The repatriation of the Tribal people from India is extremely important for the stability in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as well as from a humanitarian point of view since the refugees have been in camps for many years under difficult conditions. The GoB is clearly trying to solve this issue, especially the return of the land used by Bengali settlers to the Tribal people. On the other hand, undoubtedly the supplementary food ration is considered vital for the returnees to settle properly. The BDRCS and the Federation will take the necessary security precautions to ensure that the supplies can be supplied to the repatriates during the final phase of the repatriation.

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