

Mapping Local Factions in the Peace Accord Implementation Process: A Case Study of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article focuses on the challenges of the implementation of the Peace Accord signed in 1997 in the context of the conflict that occurred in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Based on primary and secondary data, this article mainly focuses on the factional strife between Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS, the United People's Party of the CHT), the receiving party of the Accord, and the post-Accord regional political party, United People's Democratic Front (UPDF). It is argued that the continuation of this factional rivalry is contributing to the weaknesses in the implementation of the Accord thus thwarting peace efforts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It is further claimed that the factions within the PCJSS strengthen the majoritarian dissent within the dominant Bengali ruling elites. In order to implement the Accord, calls for the primacy of unity among the indigenous groups and for the positive will of the majority Bengali elite, have been made.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary peace research field, implementation of the Peace Accord in a post-conflict scenario has turned out to be a formidable challenge for the majority of peacemakers. In the CHT of Bangladesh, to end the decades-old conflict between the mainstream Bengali elites and the Hill people¹ living in the area, an Accord was signed in 1997 between the representatives of the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) and the PCJSS, the political front that had waged an armed struggle for CHT autonomy. However, effective peace is yet to take a concrete and positive shape. For instance, in the recent past, on 10 February 2016, in reply to a starred question raised by Ushatun Talukder, independent lawmaker of Rangamati constituency, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that “her government had already implemented 48 clauses out of 72 clauses of [the] CHT Treaty and [was] working sincerely to implement [the] rest of the clauses[:] 48 clauses have already been implemented fully [while] 15 clauses have been implemented partially and the [remaining] nine are under implementation ...” (*New Age*, 11 February 2016).

In response to the Prime Minister's speech, the PCJSS published and circulated ‘An Open Letter’ on 16 February 2016, explaining many of the disagreements; for example, “[the] PCJSS including CHT residents and civil societies, on the other hand, believe that two-third of the Accord including its critical provisions are yet to be implemented”². The disunity among the local actors is now considered to be one of the impediments to a comprehensive peace. Since the time of the signing of the Accord, factionalism among the elite groups who represent the voice of ethnic minorities has placed its implementation at risk. Along with other breakaway factions of the PCJSS, the recently formed political party, UPDF, is one glaring example. Since the Accord was signed, these factions have become more visible, with some factions supporting the Accord, while others oppose it. However, the effective peace process would be very much closer if full implementation of all provisions in the Accord had been carried out. Against this backdrop, the central question of this paper is: how does disunity among the local factions affect the implementation of the CHT Peace Accord? In order to address this research question, a few other related questions also need to be addressed. These questions are as follows: at the signing of the 1997 Accord, was the PCJSS the sole representative of ethnic minorities in the CHT region? Are the differences within PCJSS a new phenomenon? How did the agreement reflect the diversity of the CHT people?

1.1 Methodological Framework

This study is exploratory in nature as I have sought to discover the underlying factors behind the non-implementation of the Accord through interviewing the leadership of the PCJSS and UPDF as well as local people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Moreover, I have conducted interviews with military personnel, bureaucrats, civil society members and political leaders living in other parts of Bangladesh. This is primarily a qualitative study but quantitative data are used from secondary sources in order to triangulate the primary data. For collecting primary data, I extensively relied upon Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with the people concerned. With the aim of arranging this work in a representative manner, during my field work in CHT as well as in other parts of Bangladesh in May-June 2016, I purposefully interviewed 29 people belonging to different professions and from ethnic backgrounds incorporating the CHT inhabitants as well as those from other parts of Bangladesh. A self-administered, semi-structured questionnaire was developed for data collection from the respondents. Relevant discussion was also incorporated after reviewing secondary sources in the literature, that is, books, research articles from journals or publications, newspapers, magazines, annual reports, etc. In reporting on this study developed within this methodological framework, this article has been divided into eight sections. After this introductory section, the second section delineates the concepts relating to the study. The third section describes ethnic diversity between and within communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The fourth section systematically provides the background of the CHT conflict. The fifth section addresses conflict resolution initiatives and attempts to concisely outline the 1997 Peace Accord. The sixth section portrays the group dynamics relating to the factional strife in the CHT issues, particularly after the signing of the Accord, and the ongoing debate about its implementation. In the seventh section, the main findings are analysed based on the field work undertaken. Finally, in the eighth section, on the basis of the analysis reported throughout the paper, the conclusion is presented and recommendations are drawn.

2. Concepts Relating to the Study

It is quite challenging to conceptualise the term ‘peace’ as it is a relative phenomenon and the interpretation of peace can vary from philosopher to philosopher as well as between conflicting parties. Johan Galtung categorised the concept both in terms of positive peace and negative peace. In Galtung’s words, positive peace “is the integration of human society” while negative peace “is the absence of violence, absence of war” (Galtung, 1964, 2). McDougal identified the concept as “peace is the least application of violence and coercion to the individual and to the freedom of access of the individual to cherished values” (McDougal, 1991, 139). When critically analysed, both positive and negative (passive) terminologies of peace are found not to be unrelated. Thus, the realistic definition of the peace deal is not only the integration of human society but also of the very forces and conditions that cause the eruption of violence (or war) as these are also the prerequisites for economic development and social justice. Most philosophers are agreed that peace is a complex, long-term and multi-layered process.

The term ‘faction’ is considered to be opposition, disagreement, conflict, etc. that exists between or among groups of people within an organisation or political party or nation (e.g. an ethnic community). A faction is identified as “a small group of people within a larger one whose members have some different aims and beliefs to those of the larger group” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2002, 450). Moreover, when a group of individuals within a larger group is united in a common cause, it is generally considered to be a faction.

In the case of the CHT of Bangladesh, the government may define ‘peace’ as a triumph to end decades-old armed conflict between the PCJSS guerrillas and the military forces of the state. However, the Hill people may perceive ‘peace’ as the revival of their traditional rights to land, self-determination and constitutional recognition of their political and cultural identity under the framework of the CHT Peace Accord. Moreover, the post-Accord situation is very complicated, with this impacting on the Accord implementation process. In considering other factors, peace initiatives are highly affected this time by the local factions—between or within Hill communities (inter-group as well as intra-group rivalry)—and the Bengalis living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Major political parties as well as people living in other parts of Bangladesh are also found to have taken various positions in this debate. In this paper, I have sought to map these factions within the Accord implementation debate, with a particular emphasis on the local factions.

3. People of the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Diversity Between and Within Communities

Geographically, the CHT is located in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh. Once part of the Chittagong administrative district, the CHT now comprises three separate districts—Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban. These three districts occupy a physical area of 13,344.28 square kilometres, constituting approximately 10% of the total land area of Bangladesh. Of the total 1,598,231 (enumerated) CHT population, the indigenous ethnic population constitutes approximately 52.90%³. The CHT is

bordered by the Indian states of Tripura and Mizoram to the north and east; by Chittagong and the plains of Cox's Bazar stretching along the Bay of Bengal to the west; and by the Arakan region of Myanmar to the south and south-east. In particular, this area has geo-political significance for Bangladesh and beyond owing to its natural resources, its areas that are adjacent to the sea and its international boundaries or in regard to the insurgent activities that have occurred (or are occurring) in the Seven Sister States⁴ of India.

The 13 different ethnic communities living in the CHT comprise Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Riang, Murong, Lushai, Panku, Bon, Chak, Khumia, Mro and Kyang (Shelley ed., 1992, 45). Each group has its own customs, language and dress; therefore, one can assume that every group has its own culture. These Hill people are of Sino-Tibetan descent belonging to the Mongolian racial group. These people are closely resemble to the people of North-east India, Myanmar and Thailand rather than the Bengali ethnic population of Bangladesh who are a "mixed [race] comprising proto-Australoid, Mongoloid, Caucasoid and Dravidian strains" (Ahmed, A., cited in Mohsin, 2002, 11). A small minority of Bengalis has always lived in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In 1947, the Bengali population in the CHT was only 2.5% with this increasing to 10% in 1951 and to 35% in 1981 (Schendel, 1992, p. 95). However, the Bengali population is now nearly half of the CHT population (about 47.10%, according to the *Population and Housing Census 2011, Zila Reports ...* October 2015). Many indigenous people think that before long the Bengalis will be the majority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). In 1997, the CHT Accord was signed, an act protested against by one faction of the indigenous groups. In addition, the CHT Bengalis were not supportive of the Accord. The background and genesis of the CHT conflict and various initiatives for its resolution are discussed in the following sections.

4. Genesis of the Conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

Bangladesh became independent in 1971 but the Hill people were further alienated in the process of national integration within the new state. With the background of various past experiences that continued from the British period into the Pakistan period, on 15 February 1972, during the process of drafting Bangladesh's constitution, a Hill people's delegation led by Manobendra Narayan (M. N.) Larma (the lone elected member of the Bangladesh Parliament from the CHT) placed four demands for inclusion in the constitution to the then-Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. However, the Prime Minister rejected the demands. During that time, M. N. Larma became a champion leader of the CHT people's cause and, under his leadership, a regional political platform, the PCJSS, was formed on 7 March 1972. An armed wing, the Shanti Bahini (SB, Peace Force) was added to the PCJSS on 7 January 1973. The constitution adopted by the parliament of Bangladesh on 4 November 1972 declared Bangladesh to be a mono-national and mono-cultural nation-state and emphasised Bengali nationalism. In fact, Larma's pursuit of regional autonomy through constitutional means ended in 1975 when Mujibur Rahman was assassinated on 15 August in a military coup and the military rulers later suspended the constitution. After that, Larma crossed over to India and the PCJSS worked from its Tripura base in India. After 1975, the regimes, firstly, of Major-General Ziaur (Zia) Rahman and then of General Hussain Muhammad Ershad continued the previous government's policy of an assimilationist approach towards the nationalism of the Hill people through different measures. Amid the various measures taken by the state authority, the SB's attack on a Bangladeshi military convoy in the CHT in 1977 was considered the beginning of direct armed rebellion (Chowdhury, 2001, 94). The Ministry of Home Affairs then requested the Ministry of Defence to take up the matter: from 1977 until the signing of the 1997 Peace Accord, the military officially handled the issue. Along with military measures, successive governments undertook a Bengali settlement program as a counter-insurgency strategy and, according to one estimate, in total, around 400,000 Bengalis had been settled in the CHT by 1984 (*The Guardian*, 6 March 1984, cited in Mohsin, 2002, 113). Within this conflict from 1977 to 1997, in addition to those who were wounded, more than 8,500 rebels, soldiers and civilians were killed and over 50,000 indigenous people were forced to flee to the Indian state of Tripura (Chowdhury, 2012, 5). However, unofficial sources claimed that the actual number was more than was presented in the data.

5. Conflict Resolution Process through Dialogue

Within this turbulence between government agencies and the Hill people, since the late 1970s, initiatives for a negotiated settlement of the CHT conflict have been attempted. Although four rounds of talks were held from July 1977 to December 1978 during President Zia's tenure involving the government and PCJSS representatives, this discussion was finally halted due to the PCJSS's lack of confidence in the government's actual motive (Chakma, 2012, 127). During President Ershad's regime, between 1985 and 1988, five rounds of dialogues were held between the GOB delegates and PCJSS leaders, but with no outcome. However, after the restoration of parliamentary forms of government through the democratic election, the negotiation process was re-established when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led government formed a nine-member multi-party parliamentary

committee in July 1992. Although some significant developments were achieved on several issues, the two sides did not reach the final solution. However, Awami League (AL) formed government in 1996 as a result of the parliamentary elections. The government formed a 12-member parliamentary committee, the National Committee on CHT (NCCHT). After seven rounds of closed-door negotiations, the AL-led government reached an agreement with the PCJSS leaders. Without any visible third-party mediator during the peace negotiation process, Abul Hasnat, on behalf of the GOB, and Jyotirindra Bodhipriyo Larma (alias Santu Larma) (Chairman of the PCJSS), on behalf of the inhabitants of the CHT, finally signed the historic CHT Peace Accord on 2 December 1997 in Dhaka. Amid some divergent opinions, the agreement was highly praised nationally as well as internationally.

To be concise, the following factors seemed to have a contributing role in concluding the negotiations and reaching agreement on the Accord in 1997. The PCJSS had war fatigue and the GOB had realised that the problem needed a political solution and could not be resolved militarily. Historically, AL and the Indian government had a cordial and close relationship. After the end of the Cold War, consideration of India's geo-political strength in the South Asian region as well as its changing strategy towards the PCJSS (or SB) played a crucial role in ending the conflict. With the blessings of communications technology, the exiled people from the CHT as well as international networks played an important role by connecting with international human rights organisations to raise international awareness of the issue and bring it to wider attention. The GOB confronted pressure (or motivation) from international human rights forums, western donor governments and international organisations with this providing the impetus to solve the problem⁵. For example, even after signing the Accord, on 1 December 2016, the government—reaffirming its commitment to fully implement the CHT Peace Accord—signed a deal of over \$31 million for a new development project focusing on sustainable and inclusive development of the CHT. Almost all the grant will be given by UNDP, SAARC, governments of Bangladesh, Denmark, US and other development partners. (*The Daily Star*, 2 December 2016). Most of the interviewees assumed that the above points might have been the catalyst; however, the ultimate decision came from the AL-led government and the PCJSS leadership.

5.1 Main Features of the 1997 Accord

Under the framework of the Constitution of Bangladesh and keeping full and firm confidence in the sovereignty and integrity of Bangladesh, the Accord, consisting of 72 sections, dealt with a wide range of subjects ranging from administrative matters to military status, the land question, refugees and internally displaced people, etc. With the intention of subjecting the Accord to scrutiny, some could argue that the terms of the agreement provided for strong local government, consisting of a majority of indigenous ethnic representatives, including the chairperson; a decrease in the military presence in the CHT region; incorporation of indigenous leaders into the CHT land management system; and a substantial package for displaced indigenous ethnic families. The Accord is comprised of four parts, namely, (*Ka*) General; (*Kha*) Hill District Local Government Council/Hill District Council (HDC); (*Ga*) Chittagong Hill Tracts Regional Council; and (*Gha*) rehabilitation, general amnesty and other matters. The first part (*Ka*) of the agreement outlined the formation of an implementation committee whose convener is nominated by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. This committee has the role of monitoring the implementation process. The second part (*Kha*) dealt with amending, incorporating or writing the existing Hill District Local Government Council Act of 1989 (Rangamati Hill District Local Government Council Act 1989, Bandarban Hill District Local Government Council Act 1989 and Khagrachhari Hill District Local Government Council Act 1989) along with its different clauses. The third part (*Ga*) introduced the structure of a new Regional Council (RC), an apex body of the CHT although it is not always agreed that the RC can exercise power as a superior body. The fourth part (*Gha*) discussed issues such as rehabilitation of refugees; formation of a Land Commission to settle land disputes; continuation of the withdrawal of temporary military camps; and setting up a new ministry for CHT affairs, the minister of which will be appointed from the CHT's indigenous ethnic people. According to the Accord, the Land Commission would be constituted of five members headed by a retired justice. The most distinctive characteristic of the Accord is the self-government through the RC and the HDCs, with this being unique in nature and given power and authority to a greater extent than traditional local governments in other parts of Bangladesh (Chowdhury, 2012, 7).

6. Group Dynamics in the Post-Accord Chittagong Hill Tracts

The CHT Accord was successful to the extent that it could at least end decades-old armed insurgency in the region as well as the fact that it was welcomed at home and abroad. However, it was not beyond criticism as it lacked the build-up of national and local consensus about the issue. The post-Accord CHT situation is very much associated with the Accord implementation process. As long as the implementation process is not finalised, peace initiatives will be questioned. In the aftermath of the Accord, a prolonged phase of antagonism started in the CHT, this time between and within the communities—the indigenous ethnic people as well as the Bengalis. With this backdrop, it is urgent that these group dynamics are addressed as they relate to the implementation

of the Accord with this discussed in the following subsections.

6.1 Within Indigenous Ethnic Communities

Inter-ethnic interaction seems to have a rigid structure as the representation ratio for each indigenous ethnic group in the RC and the three HDCs in the CHT has been predetermined. The chairman of the RC must be a tribal person. Of the 12 male tribal members on the RC, the Chakmas (with 31% of the CHT population) were given five seats. The Marmas (at 17% of the population) assumed three seats while the Tripuras (with just over 7%) nonetheless received two representatives. The Murung and Tanchangyn tribes were given only one seat. The six ethnic groups—Lushai, Bom, Pankho, Khumi, Chak and Khiyang—share a single seat on the Regional Council (RC). The two tribal women members were elected roles: one from the Chakma tribe and the other from the other tribes. The non-tribal members (better known as Bengali settlers) who constitute about 50% of the CHT population were given six male representatives and one female representative on the Regional Council (RC)⁶. Historically as well as socio-economically, the Chakmas were at the top and expected to receive most of the opportunities from the embodiment of institutions and development activities that were expected to follow in future years. The smaller and relatively backward indigenous groups deserved more representation on the Regional Council (RC). In fact, some of the smaller ethnic communities intended to form a system of proportional representation. On the other hand, the Chakmas enjoyed the upper hand as they dominated the SB, and most prominent indigenous leaders were from the Chakma ethnic group. From immediately after the signing of the CHT Accord, some smaller indigenous groups began to complain that the Accord was unfavourable deal for them.

The PCJSS succeeded as an important political group in comparison to other groups that formed in post-Accord CHT developments. It was assumed that the leader of this group, Santu Larma, who signed the Accord, would take up the role of chairman of the Regional Council (RC). The thought was that the PCJSS could become a political party and, possibly, dominate Bangladesh politics with respect to the CHT region: subsequently, the PCJSS emerged as a regional political party on 2 December 1999 (Mohsin, 2003, 66). It was presumed that the PCJSS would articulate indigenous grievances as a way of promoting regional issues. Some smaller indigenous groups felt marginalised by larger indigenous ethnic groups, that is, by those who dominated the PCJSS, namely, the Chakmas. The extent to which the PCJSS could mobilise or integrate the smaller indigenous groups, as well as other groups in the CHT region, still remains unclear.

Although the Chakmas were the majority as well as the dominant indigenous group among the SB fighters who engaged in the armed conflict, the politico-military organisation of the insurgents was not monolithic (Shelley ed., 1992, 116). The ideological, factional and personal rivalries that divided the leadership of the Chakma insurgents eventually led to the formation of Jana Samhati Samiti under Priti Kumar Chakma (the so-called Priti Group) and the assassination of the founder leader of the PCJSS, M. N. Larma, the brother of Santu Larma, on 10 November 1983 (Mohsin, 2003, 67). One surprising outcome of this violent incident was the surrender of a large segment of the Priti faction on 29 June 1985 who stayed back in India (Shelley ed., 1992, 116). In the meantime, after the assassination of M. N. Larma, Santu Larma took over the leadership of the PCJSS. On the other hand, the surrender of the Priti faction and subsequent events gradually eroded the support of the Tripura and Marma ethnic groups for the Chakma insurgents. These two ethnic groups had refrained from the insurgency for several years and many of their leaders had resumed their normal lives. In the early 1990s, Bandarban, the domicile of the Marma and Murong indigenous people, was almost free from insurgent activities (Shelley ed., 1992, 117). In addition, the indigenous leadership was divided over the formulation and implementation processes of the 1997 Accord and faced problems over other contentious issues. The Accord, signed under the leadership of the PCJSS, was never accepted by some Hill organisations that had been struggling for their autonomy and for their distinctive identities. These factions assumed that the Accord (and its provisions) would be inconsistent with their movement for self-determination and that it would not really recognise their identities and particularly their rights over land. They also argued that the agreement had no basis for constitutional recognition and could be amended at any time simply by a majority vote in the parliament. In connection with this point, the Accord created a split in the three major indigenous organisations—Pahari Gono Parishad (PGP, Hill People's Council), Pahari Chattra Parishad (PCP, Hill Students' Council) and Hill Women's Federation (HWF). All three organisations split into two groups—pro-PCJSS and anti-PCJSS. The pro-PCJSS faction naturally supported the Accord and organised processions in the Hill districts that addressed the Accord (Chowdhury, 2001, 98-99).

Conversely, one faction of the Hill people rejected the Accord and termed it an 'agreement of compromise'. Members belonging to this group (comprising a faction of each of the PGP, PCP and HWF) formed the political party, UPDF, on 26 December 1998 (CHT Commission, 2000, 21). The UPDF members promised to carry on the movement for constitutional recognition of indigenous identity and 'full autonomy' of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). "According to Proshit Khisa, convener of the UPDF, full autonomy implies that except for the matters of taxation, currency, foreign policy including defence and heavy industries the rest of the issues in the CHT would remain with the CHT administration" (Mohsin, 2002, 215). The UPDF leadership believed that by formulating the Accord, the government sought only to strengthen its control over the Chittagong Hill Tracts

(CHT). They felt that, by signing the Accord, the PCJSS had betrayed the indigenous people and their rights which included the intention to establish their autonomy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). They claimed that the PCJSS signed the Accord without consultation or discussion with other indigenous groups and pretended to be the guardian of the CHT people. The UPDF members considered that the PCJSS leadership had emerged as a collaborator with the GOB in respect of the exploitation and repression of the common people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). They condemned the PCJSS and the government for the unrest in the CHT and discarded any involvement of the army and political leaders.

It became apparent that the PCJSS disapproved of the UPDF's political existence as the latter gathered support. On the other hand, the PCJSS leadership claimed that the GOB motivated the formation of the UPDF and continued to support them in their efforts to debase and destroy the PCJSS. The PCJSS leadership assumed that the UPDF was like team 'B' of the government as it continued to provoke instability in the region and hindered the implementation process of the Accord. On many occasions, indigenous leaders complained that political leaders, as well as senior people in the army and civil bureaucracy, from certain quarters, were backing the UPDF. They blamed the UPDF for the decline of the law and order situation in the region and demanded resolute legal action against UPDF members. Occasionally, in recent times, news has emerged of military action against UPDF members, which could be in response to urging by the PCJSS's assertions or due to the urgency of maintaining law and order in this region. In addition, factionalism is observed within the PCJSS although its existence is not intense. On 2 December 2015, in different places in the Baghaichhari Upazila in Rangamati, the PCJSS (Santu faction), the PCJSS (Manobendra faction) and the Border Guard Bangladesh celebrated the 18th anniversary of the signing of the CHT Accord (*Prothom Alo*, 6 December 2015).

6.2 Reaction of Bengali Settlers

Both socially and politically, most non-indigenous Hill dwellers seek to be identified as Bengalis. During the negotiation process of the Accord, the Bengali settlers' community formed the Parbattya All Party United Organisation on 14 March 1997 as an endeavour to protect their rights and privileges in the region (*Inqilab*, 15 March 1997). The Bengali settlers' organisation, Parbattya Gano Parishad (PGP, Council of Hill Peoples), condemned the CHT Accord, and almost all of the settlers hoisted a black flag at their homes in contravention of the Accord, especially after its endorsement. Accusations have been made that military-backed organisations, that is, the Bengali Krishak Sramik Kalyan Parishad (Bengali Farmers' and Workers' Association), Parbattya Gano Parishad (PGP) and the CHT Peace and Coordination Council have been set up to strengthen the interests of Bengalis living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The indigenous people complain that these Bengali organisations carry out attacks on the indigenous ethnic community (Mohsin, 2002, 175). Moreover, indigenous people highlight that these organisations aim to ensure the rights and privileges of Bengali settlers: this, in effect, is the government's mechanism to legitimise Bengali settlers in the region as well as an excuse for non-implementation of the CHT Accord.

The predominantly Muslim Bengali settlers have not been wanting to support the PCJSS with its largely Buddhist membership: possibly, most of the settlers lean towards the then-opposition BNP and right-wing Islamic groups that were campaigning (although their motive was not without question) for the Bengali settlers. On the other hand, some indigenous leaders have claimed that the government has sponsored socio-economic development initiatives that have been executed against the interests of the indigenous ethnic groups and in favour of the Bengali settlers. Some Bengali demonstrators in the three Hill districts, particularly in Khagrachhari, have reportedly been arrested for protesting against the implementation of the CHT Accord (Rashiduzzaman, 1998, 662). Although initially the Bengali settlers were making the situation more complex, with the passage of time, it seems that the situation has calmed down compared to what it was in the past. However, recently, it has come to our knowledge that the Bengali settlers have set up a program of planned protests against the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission (Amendment) Act 2016 which was passed in parliament on 6 October 2016. For instance, five CHT Bengali organisations called general strikes in the three Hill districts for 13 October 2016 and 16 October 2016 protesting against this act and demanding the release of a Bengali leader arrested in Bandarban (*New Age*, 12 October 2016). While the PCJSS leaders welcomed the amendment, the leaders of Bengali organisations have demanded its repeal, alleging that they would be deprived of land rights in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

6.3 Response of National Political Parties

Factionalism has not only prevailed between and within the Hill communities but national political parties' perceptions have not been identical with regard to the Accord. The rightist and Islamic fundamentalist national political parties have responded sharply against the Accord. The then-main opposition party, the BNP, had begun its opposition against the Accord even before it had been signed. After signing the Accord, the BNP termed it as "contrary to the constitution, existing laws, sovereignty of the national parliament and national interest". Moreover, the party branded the Accord as an exception to unitary government and a sell out to the "terrorists" (*The Daily Star*, 3 December 1997, cited in Chowdhury, 2001, 98), and orchestrated a series of disruptive

programs against the Accord. The Islamic religious-based party, Jamaat-e-Islam (JI) rejected the Accord altogether by terming it as a “black agreement” with the indigenous leaders. Another party, Jatiya Party (JP) adopted a policy of checking the Accord through parliamentary processes.

On the other hand, the AL and other leftist political parties including the Workers’ Party of Bangladesh, the Communist Party of Bangladesh and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and the centre-left parties, that is, Gono Forum, National Awami League and Gonotantary Party welcomed the new CHT Accord. The Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament of Bangladesh) passed the Rangamati Hill District Local Government Council (Amendment) Bill on 3 May 1998 amongst the BNP and JI lawmakers’ protest and walkout. The Khagrachhari and Bandarban Hill District Bills were passed on 4 May 1998 and 5 May 1998, respectively. The JP voted against all the bills through the parliamentary processes. Again, the Regional Council Bill was passed on 6 May 1998 in the absence of the BNP and JI parliamentary legislators while the JP lawmakers played the same role as with the previous legislation. These political divisions among the political parties have been based on their non-identical perceptions about the CHT Accord and this, in turn, affects the country’s people. Generally, the people of a country are also supporters of a political party. In this sense, most of the people as well as the civil society members of Bangladesh are assuming different views about the CHT issue and, in particular, about the Peace Accord.

7. Discussion on the Key Findings

During my field work, firstly, I asked the interviewees from among the CHT indigenous people to explain: what is now the main demand of the Hill communities? They responded that their main demand was the full implementation of the 1997 Accord. When I met Ricoh Chakma (District Organizer of UPDF, Khagrachhari) and Mithun Chakma (Member of UPDF) on 22 May 2016 at their Khagrachhari office, they assured me that they were being interviewed as representatives of the UPDF leadership. Therefore, I asked them these questions: what is the main demand of the UPDF? Is it a movement for autonomy? They tactically bypassed the direct answer and expressed their three demands which were: land rights for the indigenous ethnic people; military withdrawal from the region; and rehabilitation of the Bengali settlers to other parts of Bangladesh. Furthermore, the UPDF members thought that the Accord could not be implemented as it has no fundamental basis. Another question that I asked almost all interviewees was: what are the impediments to the implementation? The answers to this question came from different angles influenced by interviewees’ professional and ethnic backgrounds. Most of the interviewees from CHT people, including the PCJSS members, emphasised the government’s reluctance as being the main cause. Some Hill people assumed the lack of democratic mindset of the ruling elite to be one of the significant causes for the non-implementation of the Accord. They added that the government including bureaucratic (both civil and military) and political elites were highly sensitive about the sovereignty concerns of the unitary state. As a result, they were not willing to implement the Accord as they wanted to exercise their power in the CHT region. The government was occasionally motivated by their decision, and a number of ruling party members were not willing to implement the Accord as they wanted to win the parliamentary elections through seeking support from the Bengali settlers, and the general voters of the region. Interviewees viewed intra-group conflict (PCJSS vs. UPDF and within PCJSS) as another impediment to implementing the Accord. However, most PCJSS members, along with other interviewees, assumed that the UPDF was no longer considered a challenging power to protect the Accord. In addition, some interviewees added that the UPDF was formed under the backing of the government agencies (civil and military bureaucracies) although the UPDF members asserted that the party was formed in accordance with the CHT people’s aspirations. Some respondents mentioned that the rivalry within the PCJSS (the Manobendra and Santu factions) and the restive Bengali settlers were also considered as running counter to the Accord implementation process. Most interviewees agreed that land ownership in the CHT area was a crucial issue. Among the interviewees, two left-wing Members of Parliament of the present government (Rashed Khan Menon and Fazle Hossain Badsha) who were interviewed on 6 June 2016 and 9 June 2016, respectively, at Parliament House in Dhaka and some civil society members, including long time expert researchers on the CHT issue, also mostly agreed with this discussion. Moreover, the law and order situation of the region is far from peaceful as it is associated with the debate of the formulation of the CHT Peace Accord as well as its implementation politics. Within these discrete debates, for example, some groups (or factions) of indigenous communities including the Bengali settlers are collecting levies from the general CHT people—a few interviewees claimed that.

On the other hand, when I interviewed R. A. M. Obaidul Muktaadir Chowdhuri (AL backed Member of Parliament) on 9 June 2016, he emphasised that the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina-led government is sincere about implementing the Accord. “We [government] are optimistic about the Land Commission which will resolve land related problems”, he added. Furthermore, amongst the respondents, almost all the government officials answered in a similar vein. During my interview with two retired army officials (Major General Md. Abdur Rashid and Brigadier General M. Sakhawat Hussain on 2 June 2016 and 5 June 2016, respectively, in Dhaka), they told me that non-implementation of the Accord was not caused by government reluctance. Major

General Rashid emphasised the weakness of the formulation of Accord when it was signed, adding that bureaucracy did not help in the implementation of the Accord. Brigadier General Hussain emphasised the bureaucracy's non-cooperation, but he was unwilling to comment on the military's involvement in this regard. Both agreed that not fixing the issue of the ownership of land remained the main impediment. Moreover, intra-group conflicts, Bengali settlers' issues and lack of political consensus were also causes for the non-implementation of the Accord. Major General Rashid added that the formation of the UPDF was an example of a challenging force against Santu Larma's leadership of the PCJSS.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

From the preceding analysis, it is evident that, since it was signed, the CHT Peace Accord has experienced rivalry from indigenous organisations, Bengali settlers and political parties, which has blunted the prospects for the Accord's successful implementation thus holding back peace efforts in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). It is important to proceed carefully and to build up trust and confidence between and within groups in the earliest stages for quick implementation of the Peace Accord which is now being deliberated as one of the prerequisites for achieving peace in the region. As the Hill people signed the Accord with an aim to reviving peace through ensuring some rights in accordance with the clauses of the CHT Accord-1997, the ruling elites should implement all the clauses as early as possible. In this case, any prevalence of factional strives between or within communities will threaten the CHT Accord resulting in widespread destabilisation of the region.

Thus, enduring peace in relation to the CHT issue requires the consensus of local factions as they are the receiving party of the outcomes of the Accord. If they are united, it would be easier to make the government agreeable to implementing the Accord as early as possible. For example, if the PCJSS and the UPDF moved together, then peace would evolve more easily or, at least, their unity would lessen the chance of government agencies making excuses for the non-implementation of the Accord. At the same time, the CHT leadership has to convince the government, including the military, the civil bureaucracy, dissenting political leaders and other stakeholders, that they are not rivals for unitary state power or sovereignty. If there is common ground and proper engagement among all groups (or, factions) to solve the problem and most importantly, if the national governmental authorities have goodwill, then the implementation process will be easily achieved. The government, including its different agencies, is claiming that it is sincere about implementing all the clauses of the Accord. With the indigenous leadership recently demanding a roadmap of the Accord implementation process, the government should arrange to provide this roadmap to build trust and confidence within the CHT indigenous ethnic people. I stated earlier, the government has sufficient strength to implement the Accord but it has to consider other political phenomena, that is, opposition political parties' feedback, settlers' issues relating to their voting practise in the national parliamentary elections, public opinion to all over the country, etc. Though AL-led government was the signatory party of the Accord in 1997 and the present ruling party of Bangladesh; like other political parties, it has to consider the aforementioned political phenomena with an aim to winning the national elections. On the other hand, the CHT people's cooperation including that of the Bengalis living in the area is also needed for the Accord's implementation. Again, the national leadership as well as local leadership can discuss the unsettled issues and should reach a consensus to resolve the problem as early as possible. In this case, local and national level consensus is necessary for evolving peace through the Accord implementation process. Along with other factors, peace efforts will evolve if reciprocal respect or a positive approach to one another is developed. In connection with this, the GOB has to address the CHT indigenous people's grievances; the PCJSS leadership should recognise the UPDF's existence along with mobilising other local factions; and the UPDF leadership should acknowledge the PCJSS's achievements with regard to the autonomy movement in CHT and, thus, a fruitful solution will come to light.

Endnotes

- ¹ The people (with the exception, particularly, of the Bengali settlers) living in the CHT are generally addressed with different terminology: 'Pahari' (Hill people); 'ethnic people'; 'ethnic minority'; 'tribal people'; 'Adibasi' (indigenous or aboriginal people); 'ethnic groups'; 'Hill communities'; etc. The debates over terminology evolved owing to scholars' different justifications for using the word or the English translation of the Bengali word or due to conceptual differences between people from Bangladesh and from Western countries. For example, the Bengali version of the word 'tribal' is '*upajati*' which means 'sub-nation'. Personally, I do not agree with this as a nation cannot be termed as a sub-nation.
- ² *An Open Letter from the PCJSS to the Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina*, published and circulated on 16 February 2016 by the information and publicity department of the PCJSS, Rangamati, Bangladesh.
- ³ I have calculated this figure based on a report of the *Population and Housing Census 2011, Zila Reports [Bandarban, Khagrachhari & Rangamati]*, ... October 2015.
- ⁴ The Seven Sister States are the adjacent states (provinces) of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura in north-eastern India.

- ⁵ This analysis is mainly based on various scholarly research works, interviewees' perceptions, my understanding through this study and the writings of Chakma (2012, 129).
- ⁶ This discussion is mainly based on the CHT Peace Accord and the writings of Rashiduzzaman (1998, 659-660).

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