

## Bangladesh: A Glimpse of Missionary Experience in the Hills

By: Fr. Valentine Talang, OMI

Chittagong Hill Tracts has a long political history in Bangladesh. It covers 3 districts (Rangamati, Khakrachory and Bandarban) and most of these areas are mountainous. There are 13 indigenous tribes and Bengali people who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Oblates are working in two parishes namely Lama and Alikodom, under Bandarban district. I am working at Alikodom parish as an assistant priest and a member of the JPIC team in the Bangladesh Delegation.

Being a Khasi, an indigenous Oblate priest myself, it is always a privilege for me to share my experiences of working in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. We have 12 villages under Alikodom parish, which falls under the government reserved forest area and these are controlled by the army. These villages are in very remote areas without good communications, schools for the children, pure drinking water and basic health care. The only way to reach the people is to go on foot and in certain areas, by boat.

This year during Holy Week in Easter I had the privilege of visiting 11 Tripura villages over 12 days. Since the area is restricted due to government regulations, I needed permission from the army, and after waiting three years I thank God I finally got permission to have a pastoral visit and



Fr. Valentine celebrates Easter Mass with Indigenous host community

give the people a chance to celebrate the Holy Mass. The village where I had my Easter Mass was the first one they ever had. It was touching to see people's thirst for the Eucharist and their anticipation of participating in an Easter service. They were waiting to meet and talk with me, and it was so interesting to see the genuine faith of these humble people. Many of them did not know the traditional prayers and rituals of the church. But their enthusiasm in expressing their faith really challenged



Fr. Valentine Talang, OMI receives a warm welcome

my faith as a priest. I admired their faith and trust in the Lord.

After becoming a priest, it was my first time being away from the parish and visiting villages for 12 days. There were no toilets, bathrooms, personal rooms and purified drinking water. I just followed the way people did things. Having a toilet in the jungle, taking a bath in the Jhiry ( a small river), sleeping in a common room with them and drinking the water of the river gave me great missionary experiences. I walked for 35 hours over 12 days and one of those days, for the first time in my life, 9 hours at a stretch. At night I was tired but went to bed late as I listened to people's stories of their life struggles in the hills. In my mind, the only strength I received was from the people. After all, if they could stay and thrive in this place, why couldn't I? It was really a missionary journey, an adventurous one shared with simple indigenous people. Their cordiality and concern for me made my visit a pleasant and enriching experience. The cute faces of children still imprinted on my heart, I was sad to see so many children unable to attend school because most villages had none. We were helpless and even

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## Experience in the Hills *(Continued from p. 8)*

though my heart was willing 'the purse was weak'. We could not address their basic educational needs because of the lack of funds.

I listened attentively to their financial struggles; not getting just prices for their products in the market, the cry over ownership of their land and whether in the near future they would be able to keep and use the lands they now possess; as their movements are restricted by the army, their stories of injustice, done to them by the mainstream majority ethnic group (Bengalis), and sometimes by their own people; the political games in the hills. All this made my heart cry. I know I cannot address all of these harsh realities, but I am sure that as an Oblate, my presence, listening to them and visiting with them, gave them some moral support. It made me feel proud to be one of them. This Easter was special for me, as I saw the risen Lord in the faces of these people, and a new hope dawning in their hearts as they felt perhaps at least one person showed them empathy, and through me the whole Oblate world and the people of God, through this article. Truly Christ has come to redeem all human beings. My presence with them gave me and them that assurance. I thank the Lord for giving me this most enriching Easter experience.



Fr. Valentine with some of the Indigenous children.



Fr. Valentine crossing a river on his visit to Chittagong Hill Tracts.

## Gun Violence *(Continued from p. 9)*

I would like to share a couple of lines from a local high school student who suffered sleepless nights following the Parkland, FL shooting. He recited his poem (Poem to Assault Rifles) at a recent school walkout:

*"While the defenseless minors of America are put to pressure, the only number going up is our body counts...."* And he concludes:

*"And the number after that: bullets counted. And the number after that: caskets made."*

**Alex Torres, 18**, Pittsburg, CA, High School

Finally, there is a theory in science called the "Butterfly Effect." If I understand it correctly, the theory suggests that when a small, locally organized energy is applied, the impact of that energy may be felt far and wide.