

“Policy & Legal Rights of the Indigenous Life & Livelihood: Perspective of Khasi Community”

Report from a Roundtable held in Dhaka, Bangladesh on
December 7, 2012

Environment and indigenous rights activists demanded the formation of an Indigenous Peoples Commission led by an acceptable person on indigenous peoples' right of plain lands to identify and solve problems towards protecting their rights.

This demand was raised at a discussion titled **“Life and Livelihood Policy of Indigenous People and Legal Rights: Perspective of Khasi Community”** organised by Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA) and Adivasi Poribesh Rokkha Andolon (APRA) at Reporters' Unity in Dhaka.

The speakers said that indigenous people in plain lands are deprived of their basic rights; in particular, the Khasi community is facing the threat of extinction by the mainstream population while the government remained silent. So, all indigenous groups including the Khasi community should be well aware of their rights.

The eminent columnist Syed Abul Maksud said that the Khasi community is actively involved in environmental protection in their regular lives. They are protecting nature and the environment as well as the country. But they are now facing fear and eviction. If they are evicted, their human rights will be violated. He urged the government to form a separate commission for indigenous peoples.

Eminent Theatre activist Mamunur Rashid said there are significant people's representatives and leaders who are working against Indigenous Peoples' rights. Everyone should protest against them and move forward to protect the Indigenous Peoples' rights. He also suggested making social revolution beside policy of indigenous peoples and legal rights.

General Secretary of Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum Sanjeeb Drong urged to all to come forward for the protection and promotion of the human rights of all indigenous peoples including the Khasi community. He stated that indigenous communities are actively involved with nature and

they know how to live in nature in a sustainable manner.

A prominent Khasi women leader and a Human Right Activist, Miss Flora Bably Talang, on behalf of the Oblate JPIC desk in Bangladesh, said, “We, the Khasi community, are the children of the Forest. We take care of the forest and the forest takes care of us. We need security and constitutional recognition by the Government of Bangladesh. If we are not given permanent land settlement and are evicted from the forest, we will eventually disappear from the picture. We know how to protect and promote biodiversity in the hills and forest. We cultivate betel lives on the tree, therefore the tree is part and parcel of our livelihood.”

She added, “We contribute a lot to the economy of the country and at the same time we create lots of job for the non-Khasi community.” She mentioned that there are nearly one hundred Khasi villages in the region Sylhet. Directly or indirectly, each Khasi village (punji) provides job of various kind for five hundred people a day. She reiterated that the Khasis want to set an example to the Government of how a particular community of people can co-exist with nature in a sustainable way without cutting down trees. “If the Government gives us a permanent right to our ancestral homeland, we will maintain our traditional betel cultivation and preserve the natural way of biodiversity. Therefore, the Government does not need to deploy the forest department, does not need to spent so much money on reforestation and does not need to spend so much energy to file false forest cases against innocent Garo and Khasi Indigenous Peoples, ” she said. Flora Bably Talang also expressed her deep concern, along with other speakers in the meeting, about the violation of Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples during past years.

The meeting was organised by BAPA and was presided over by Syed Abul Maksud, while the keynote paper was presented by an eminent Lawyer of the Supreme Court, Khandakar Shahriar Shakib. Sharif Jamil, national coordinator of BAPA and immigrant doctor Rafiqul Hasan Khan joined others in speaking at the meeting.