

CAMBODIA

Khmer Rouge ruse?

Khieu Samphan proposes international body to curb his rebels

By Murray Hiebert in Bangkok

The Khmer Rouge has joined the latest diplomatic flurry surrounding the Cambodian conflict by proposing that an international control body be set up to ensure that its own guerilla organisation does not abuse the country's other political factions after Vietnamese forces leave Cambodia.

In a peace plan broadcast over Khmer Rouge Radio on 15 August, the resistance group also suggested that, following a political settlement, it would reduce the size of its army to the same level as those of the other factions.

Analysts interpreted the Khmer Rouge proposal as an attempt to counter growing fears that the group — which was responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Cambodians during its rule between April 1975 and January 1979 — may try to battle back to power once Vietnam's troops have withdrawn. Hanoi has promised to pull out 50,000 troops, about half of its remaining forces, this year and the balance by 1990.

"After the JIM talks, attention has turned from Vietnam's occupation to the Khmer Rouge atrocities," said a Western diplomat, referring to the

Jakarta Informal Meeting on Cambodia in July, which included representatives of the three resistance factions, the Vietnamese-backed Heng Samrin regime, Vietnam, Laos and the Asean countries. "The Khmer Rouge are now trying to re-establish themselves as players with a rational plan," the diplomat said.



Khieu Samphan: peace plan. AP

Observers speculate that China, which has come under increasing diplomatic pressure to block any Khmer Rouge effort to grab power, may have pressed the group to make concessions on the issue prior to Sino-Soviet talks on Cambodia, scheduled to be held in Peking on 27 August.

Vietnam and its Cambodian allies quickly rejected the Khmer Rouge peace plan. Phnom Penh's official news agency described the proposal as "a new farce staged by China to save its lackeys from isolation in the international arena."

The Khmer Rouge initiative, which brings the group's diplomatic position closer to that of Prince Norodom Sihanouk, calls for an international conference to adopt measures to "ensure that [the Khmer Rouge] does not abuse other parties and that other Cambodian

parties do not abuse one another and, at the same time, to ensure that [Vietnam] cannot return to commit aggression against Cambodia."

It is not clear from the proposal, signed by the Khmer Rouge's nominal leader, Khieu Samphan, whether the group was indirectly admitting past abuses. The Cambodian version of the plan, broadcast on the radio, used the Khmer verb *romlop*, which is usually translated as *abuse*. However, the Khmer Rouge's English-language translation, sent to foreign embassies in Bangkok, reads "dominate," which is usually *chih chwan* in Khmer.

The plan also said the armed forces of the four factions — the Khmer Rouge, the two non-communist resistance factions and the government in Phnom Penh — should be put in "garrisons" following a settlement. The proposal called for setting up a "four-party Cambodian army . . . with each party having equal strength under a four-party high command." In subsequent commentaries on the proposal, Khmer Rouge Radio set the size of each group's future army at 10,000 men.

In the last phase of the Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, and following a ceasefire agreement among the four warring factions, the Khmer Rouge peace plan called for:

- ▶ Dissolving both the Vietnamese-backed government in Phnom Penh and the resistance coalition, and setting up a four-party government headed by Sihanouk that would organise elections for a new government.
- ▶ Convening an international conference, attended by "countries involved in the Cambodia problem" and the five members of the UN Security Council, to guarantee the agreement. ■

SUBCONTINENT

Talking with the tribals

India reaches agreement with Tripura insurgents

By Salamat Ali in New Delhi

The Indian Government announced to a surprised parliament on 12 August that it had lifted a ban on the Tripura National Volunteers (TNV) and reached an agreement designed to end within a month the nine-year-old tribal insurgency in the northeastern state bordering Bangladesh. The secret talks India held with a TNV delegation in early July have resulted in a memorandum — signed by the TNV, the Congress party-led central government and the Congress government of Tripura — which could remove one of the levers used in larger bilateral disputes between New Delhi and Dhaka.

The tribal population of Tripura

state and that of the adjoining Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh face similar problems. Over the decades these tribal areas have been subjected to large-scale migrations by nearby plainsmen, resulting in the tribes becoming minorities in their own traditional habitat. In recent years, tribal discontent has given rise to insurgencies: When government troops pursue the guerillas, the rebels cross the border to take refuge, resulting in New Delhi and Dhaka trading charges that the other side is aiding and harbouring the rebels.

In 1986, at the height of violence in the CHT, some 50,000 Chakma tribals fled the onslaught of Bengali settlers

and Bangladeshi forces to seek refuge in Tripura. After a series of negotiations between the two governments, President H. M. Ershad told visiting Indian Minister of Human Resources, P. V. Narasimha Rao last year that he would create favourable conditions for the return of Chakma refugees. Last month Dhaka sent a 16-man delegation led by Bangladesh's High Commissioner to India, Faruq Choudhry, and comprising some Chakma tribal elders, on a visit of the main Chakma refugee camps.

The tribal elders told the refugees that the current conditions in CHT were quite suitable for their return. But some of the Chakma militants countered the delegation with the slogan "traitors go back." The refugees led by the militants presented the delegation with a 12-point charter, which was unacceptable to Dhaka. The Chakma charter included demands for full autonomy, investigation of atrocities, compensation for lives and property lost in disturbances, and compensation for property lost due

to the building of the Kaptai dam.

The refugees allege that the Bangladesh Government was continuing to settle Bengali plainsmen in the CHT and forcibly converting the Hindu and Buddhist tribals to Islam. They further allege that Dhaka was settling Bengalis along the border between Tripura and the CHT.

Despite these charges, the Indian press has described the delegation's visit as the first sincere and serious attempt by Dhaka to take back the refugees. Ershad has formed a committee to start a dialogue with the refugees and also create conditions for their return.

That tribal leaders, including the Chakma chief Debashis Roy, were part of the delegation is seen in India as a proof of Dhaka's sincerity. The tribal leaders knew a large number of the refugees personally. Tripura officials also impressed upon the visitors that the presence of large numbers of foreign nationals in the state had created several social, economic and political problems.

Refugee leaders refused the delegation's offer for safe conduct for travel in the CHT for two to three weeks to see things for themselves and report back to their followers in the Indian camps. The visitors complained that most of the refugees wanted to go back but were being prevented by the Shanti Bahini, the armed militants among the Chakmas. Dhaka wants New Delhi to make an official declaration that those Chakma refugees who are willing to go home should do so and nobody would be allowed to obstruct their return. Dhaka complained that India has not reacted to this suggestion.

On its part, India has complained in the past that TNV guerillas have sought shelter in the CHT between raids and are trained and armed by Bangladesh. Dhaka has made similar charges against New Delhi about the Shanti Bahini guerillas.

The agreement reached with the TNV this month — if it holds — could remove one of the levers Dhaka was using against New Delhi. The one month given for surrendering weapons and ending the insurgency was partly to enable TNV leader Bijay Hrangkhwal to overcome dissidence among his followers.

New Delhi on its part has undertaken to amend the country's constitution to allow a greater share to the tribals in governance, reserve 20 seats for the tribals in the Tripura legislature, restore alienated lands to them, set up a larger autonomous hill council in which tribals will have a majority, recruit them into the police and army, and take effective steps to counter infiltration from across the border. The Indian army, which had been deployed to stem the TNV insurgency, is said to have played a key role in bringing about the settlement. The troops are to be withdrawn after the agreement is implemented. ■

History of harassment

Bangladeshi tribals squeezed over land

Chakmas, the generic title given to all tribal refugees from Bangladesh sheltering in refugee camps in the Indian state of Tripura, call themselves Jumma. Constituting a little over half of the tribal population in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), the Chakmas are only one of the nine tribes in that area.

When the British partitioned the Subcontinent in 1947, the tribals comprised 95% of the CHT population, but today the 650,000 tribesmen form a bare majority, which is slowly on the decline. Given to shifting slash-and-burn cultivation, the nomadic tribes have over the past several centuries ranged all over the CHT and moved to the edges of the

ing on the remaining Chakma territory.

By 1971, the political rift in Pakistan had reached such proportions that the Bengalis of East Pakistan took up arms against the domination by West Pakistan. The Pakistani army cracked down on the Bengalis and even armed several minority resistance groups against the Bengalis. The Shanti Bahini, a militant group of Chakmas, was raised, armed and trained by the Pakistani army.

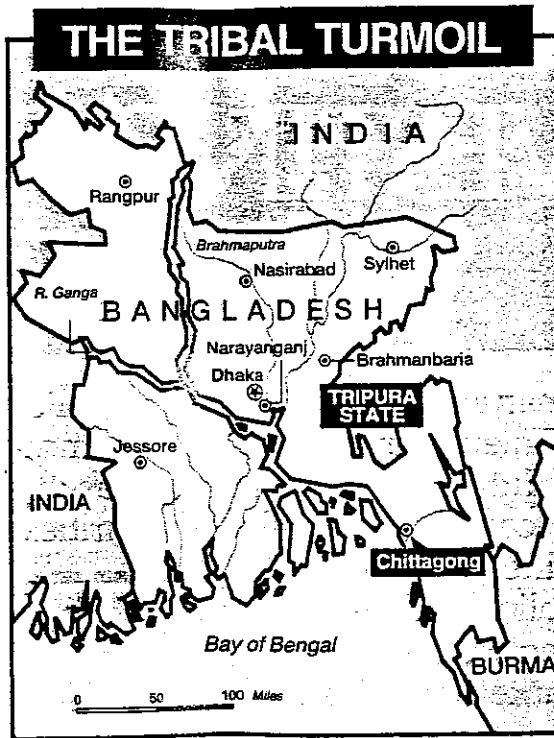
After the formation of Bangladesh, the country's founder, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, toured the CHT and told the tribal people that they were part of the new nation and should consider themselves Bengalis. The Chakmas were further alienated as the ruling Awami

League's corrupt cadres began exploiting the tribals by grabbing their land and monopolising all the trade in the CHT. Mujib's successor, Gen. Ziaur Rahman, wanted the Chakmas to feel free to move into the plains and the Bengalis to settle in the Chittagong hills. The predominantly Buddhist and Hindu Chakmas considered such national integration a ploy for cultural and ethnic assimilation and the Shanti Bahini stepped up its violence.

The Shanti Bahini guerilla operations centred on murdering plainsmen and vandalising their property. These nightly forays often resulted in organised retaliation by Bengalis against innocent Chakmas and their tribal settlements. The carnage peaked in 1986, when amid charges that the Bangladeshi army and paramilitary troops actively assisted the Bengali

settlers in their attacks, an estimated 50,000 Chakmas fled across the border to Tripura.

While conceding that the 1986 exodus was unfortunate, Dhaka said the total number of refugees was 29,000 and that some 7-8,000 of them had returned. Dhaka asserts that now, after every report of a Shanti Bahini attack on any Bengali settlement, its soldiers are rushed to seal off the affected area to prevent retaliation. Many of the settlers who provoked such retaliation are now in jail, Bangladeshi authorities say. But despite such steps, the long-term prospects for the Chakmas remain bleak, because it is nearly impossible for the authorities to stop the Bengali migration, which is born of the population pressure in the plains. — Salamat Ali



Ganga-Brahmaputra river delta. Prior to partition, the British had enforced special regulations to secure the hilly areas for the tribes from the encroachment of land-hungry Bengali plainsmen, most of whom are Muslims. After 1947, the CHT formed part of East Pakistan — later Bangladesh — while Tripura remained in India.

The special status bestowed upon CHT by the British in 1900 was abolished in 1956 by Pakistan's first constitution. Later the Kaptai hydroelectric dam in East Pakistan inundated large tracts of Chakma land. As compensation for the loss of their homes and land, the tribesmen received a paltry US\$1 per head. With special status of the CHT being lifted, Muslim Bengalis from the plains began encroach-