



Indigenous Issues

[The occasional briefing papers of the Asian Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Network (AITPN)]
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VICTIMS OF BARBED-WIRES:

**Chakmas' existence in Mizoram threatened by
Indo-Bangladesh Border Fencing**

The tribals in India have been the disproportionate victims of the projects undertaken by the State or the private companies in the name of development or national interest. Millions of them have been displaced across India and then left to lurch. Thousands of impoverished indigenous peoples, mainly the Chakmas living along the international border in Western and South-Western side of Mizoram state are the new additions.

The government of India has been erecting fencing along its 4096.7 km-long border with Bangladesh running through five Indian states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in order to stop infiltration, smuggling and other alleged anti-India activities from across the border. As in March 2006, 2,187 km have been fenced. The border fencing project has received top priority and its completion has been advanced from 2007 to 2006.

The fencing has created numerous problems especially relating to survival of the displaced persons. In March 2006, the state government of Meghalaya temporarily suspended the border fencing works following protests by the indigenous peoples in Khasi and Jaintia Hills as their villages have fallen on the other side of the border due to demarcation of the boundary.

Yet, fencing of 318 km-long stretch in Mizoram sector is going on in full swing despite calls from the Indo-Bangladesh Border Fencing Affected Families Resettlement Demand Committee (IBBFARDCOM) of Mizoram to immediately halt construction of the border fencing until all the affected families are "fully and properly" rehabilitated. Such calls have fallen on deaf ears of the authorities in New Delhi.

I. Extent of displacement

A house to house survey conducted by IBBFARDCOM of Mizoram found that the fencing will displace a total of 5,790 Chakma tribal families consisting

of 35,438 persons from 49 villages. These villages are located on the banks of four rivers, viz. Thega, Karnaphuli, Harina and Sajek, which form the natural boundary between India and Bangladesh.

Most of the 49 villages affected by the border-fencing project will have to be entirely relocated due to their proximity to the international border. Apart from loss of their immovable houses and properties, the villagers will lose already developed wet rice cultivation lands, horticulture gardens, gardens for growing vegetables and other cash crops, tree plantations of high commercial values like teak etc, community/ government assets like schools, health sub-centres, community halls, market places, places of worship, play grounds, cemetery/ grave yards, water ponds, water supply, and other government/ council office buildings, etc.

II. Life without access to rivers

The Chakma inhabited areas along the Indo-Bangladesh border are extremely backward and most of the villages are inaccessible due to the absence of roads. The rivers have been the lifelines for survival of the Chakmas. Apart from drawing water for drinking, washing and other purposes, the Chakma villagers also use the rivers to conduct business and commerce, as there are no other means of transportation. They also perform the last rites of the deceased on the river banks. The river banks are fertile and used for cultivations of the paddy, vegetables and others cash crops. As the fencing will be erected up to 150 yards inside India, these rivers will fall outside the territory of India, and hence will be no longer accessible to the inhabitants. This will further break the backbone of the Chakmas who are already weak economically. They cannot think of their lives without the rivers; but now they will have to learn hard to try to live without access to the rivers.

III. Blatant violations of the laws

The Ministry of Home Affairs of the government of India issued guidelines for acquisition of the lands prior to construction of the fencing. In its various communications to the four implementing agencies, the Ministry of Home Affairs clearly stated that the four construction companies "shall be responsible for liaisoning with the State Government/ local authorities for acquisition of land and getting forest/ environment clearance for carrying out the fencing & related works", and that they "shall finalize the alignment of the

fencing in consultation with BSF (Border Security Forces) & DM (District Magistrate) of the area where the fencing is proposed".

However, the four construction companies which were accorded the contracts in Mizoram sector, namely Engineering Projects India Limited, National Projects Construction Corporation Ltd., Border Roads Organization and National Building Construction Corporation Ltd had started acquiring lands and erecting the fencing in their respective portions without any consultation with the tribal inhabitants or the local authorities, including the DM and the BSF.

Despite complaints by the IBBFARDCOM, the Government of India has maintained an astounding silence and has not taken any corrective measures.

Following submission of representation by the IBBFARDCOM to the Chief Minister of Mizoram, the state government constituted a "State Level Co-ordination Committee on Border Fencing" on 21 April 2006 to ensure that the victims received proper compensation and rehabilitation. But the Co-ordination Committee did not include any Chakma representative. This reflects the extent of apathy on the part of the authorities towards the plight of the border-fencing victims.

The implementation of the Indo-Bangladesh border fencing project is all set to break the backbone of the already impoverished Chakma tribals. As we go the print, government of India has failed to take any corrective measures while the fencing continues gather pace.