



The 1997 Peace Accord and the Re-Emergence of Militancy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A Multidimensional Approach

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Article History:

Submitted 11 June 2025

Reviewed 05 July 2025

Revised 09 July 2025

Accepted 08 August 2025

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Article DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.3126/ajhss.v2i1.83195>

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ABSTRACT

The peace accord between the Government of Bangladesh, and the Parbatya Chattogram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS) was signed on 2 December 1997, after a decade-long insurgency in the Chittagong hill tracts areas. These conflicts go back to the inception of the independent Bangladesh; as the majority of the population is Bengali, and therefore the other ethnic communities and tribes have always felt threatened by Bengali majorities, the government, its forces, and their policies upon them. Despite signing of the peace accord, the conflict between different ethnic communities and the security forces hasn't made any progress of a total de-escalation of armed insurgency even after 27 years, as the peace treaty was signed by a few major ethnic communities, i.e. the Chakma, Marma, and Tripura and the Government of Bangladesh. It eventually made other small tribes marginalized in different aspects of life, and often resulted in direct armed conflicts. There are several questions and counter-questions to address this issue: How this hilly mountainous region became so prone to conflicts for fifty long years, why there are so many ethnic group fragmentations and what's their motive? Why does fighting break out so frequently with ethnic groups and security forces? How does reformation and implementing of peace

accord can actually improve the scenario? How the Government of Bangladesh can achieve national integration along with national security? This paper addresses these questions with the brief description of ethnic diversity of different cultures, historical backgrounds of Chittagong Hill Tracts, critically evaluates the problems and drawbacks of 1997 peace accord along with implementation, and the hostile ethnopolitics, ethnic group fragmentation for political representation, military presence and dominance in the

Chittagong Hill Tracts. It also proposes a multidimensional approach to resolve this fifty years long multifaceted crisis, encouraging a national integration.

KEYWORDS: Militancy, insurgency, peace-accord, conflict

INTRODUCTION

The decades-long insurgency and militancy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts is one of the major national security threats to Bangladesh. These insurgencies can be traced back to the inception of the state. However, no president, prime minister or government addressed this issue with humanitarian and cooperative lens. From Sheikh Mujib to Ziaur Rahman, and all the other statesmen wanted a solution through ignorance, militarization, and illegal settlement. Hence, the motive and the nature of these conflicts are ethno-political rather than socio-cultural. In terms of population, Bangladesh is almost a homogenous country with 95% of the population being Bengalis. All these Bengali majority people live in plain land for centuries. But, in the case of Chittagong Hill Tracts, this region is mountainous, and communication is very difficult. Various ethnic communities like Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mro, Bawm, and Lusai are usually the inhabitants of this region. According to IWGIA (2012), the Chittagong Hill Tracts is home to 11 different indigenous communities popularly known as the *Jummas*. Although, Larma (2008), suggested there are 13 diverse ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. For a long time, these communities felt marginalized due to repressive governmental policies, exclusivity in terms of rights, lack of political representation and forced eviction from their homes. It created an unconventional way of armed insurgency or guerrilla outbreak from the very beginning of the history of Bangladesh. After nearly 40 years, the appeal of armed insurgency, and militancy in that region, did not decrease much. Surely, 1997's peace accord was supposed to de-escalate militancy in the region, and create some sort of peaceful coexistence, but that did not last. The breaking of PCJSS, shortly after a year of the peace accord clearly shows, PCJSS is not only the key player of this region. Fractions of PCJSS, and other minor ethnic groups continuously created political and armed wing of the parties which also created hostilities among themselves too. These conflicts, and crises was never addressed politically, nor the Government took any initiative to integrate these indigenous groups to the mainstream population till now. It resulted in another insurgency outbreak in 2022; this time by the Kuki-Chin people. Showing the repeated policy failures by the government of Bangladesh in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Due to harsh treatment, lack of national integration, lack of political representation, and economic upgradation, the vicious cycle of conflict continues to reemerge.

This study examines the historical background of Chittagong Hill Tracts, the ethno-politics of the indigenous community, investigates the problems of implementing 1997 peace accord, discussed the reemergence of militancy, and suggests a multi-dimensional approach to resolve the issue. The study used secondary data such as academic journals, official documents, international and governmental reports to conduct this research. However, this may turn out one of the key limitations of the study as it exclusively relies on secondary data. And the absence of primary data may restrict the depth of firsthand insights and reduce real-time findings of the context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Chittagong Hill Tracts is a complex region of Bangladesh marked with violence, terrorism, militancy, and land dispute. The scholarly literatures show the multifaceted picture of historical and contemporary challenges faced by the region.

Lewin's (1869), ethnographic account is the foundational literature in the Chittagong Hill Tracts context, documenting the societal situation in the colonial time which gives a proper understanding of that time. However, the report has some critical colonial biases as it justified militarization, surveillance and British intervention; along with addressing indigenous community as uncivilized 'hill tribes.' Zaman (1982) provides, one of the most significant and critical analysis on ethnic conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, identifying the state-led military campaign and alienation of these indigenous people. Similarly, Larma (2008), an indigenous leader himself, provides an insider's perspective on the Chittagong Hill Tracts crisis, emphasizing political representation and autonomy, constitutional recognition, and implementation of 1997 peace accord as essential step towards solution.

On the other hand, the HDRC (2009), baseline survey report shows contemporary challenges, data-driven insights including socio-economic inequalities, land dispossession, bureaucratic negligence, and governmental policy failures. Ali, Emran, Tsuchiya (2002), and the Chittagong Hill Tracts land commission (1991), both identified the colonial and postcolonial legal framework which systematically undermines the land rights of indigenous community, their struggle for resettlement and justice. This later led to the guerrilla outbreak and frequent insurgencies in the hill tracts which the government responded violently. The IWGIA (2012) report shows the brutal treatments, torture, and repressive policies carried out by the Bangladeshi military officials. It also shows massacres done by both the settler Bengalis and ethnic communities which shaped and reshaped the political and social landscape of the hill tracts. Mong (2016), addressed the decline of cultural heritages of the indigenous people due to decades of conflicts, and counterinsurgencies; emphasizing the reintegration and linguistic diversity of the region. However, insurgency broke out again in 2022, this time by the Kuki-Chin, a small ethnic community who has been deprived from mainstream lifestyle, socio-economic upgradation, and political representation. This group evolved from an NGO to a mainstream separatist group which becomes a national security threat to Bangladesh and to the region (Jarin, 2023). The Kuki-Chin Army has grip over 9 upazila or subdistricts, and has caused major fatalities to the Bangladesh Armed Forces since its inception.

Taken together, all these literatures illustrate the vicious cycle of structural violence, failed political integration, alienation of the indigenous communities, and decline of their identity over time period. Despite the 1997 peace accord which was meant to ensure peace in the region, it failed to establish sustainable peace, and end to socio-political inequality; which resulted in 2022 Kuki-Chin insurgency, after 25 years of the peace accord.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative research design grounded in a descriptive and analytical approach. It relies exclusively on secondary data sources to explore historical background, socio-political, and security dimensions of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, mostly emphasizing the security dimension of the area. The use of secondary data sources is appropriate given the sensitive and violence-prone region, longitudinal scope of the conflict, security-restrictive situation, and availability of extensive secondary data across academic journals, governmental and non-governmental institutions and policy domains.

This study used academic journals, governmental documents and records, international and UN-based reports, and legal documents. These literatures provide

historical backgrounds and contemporary relevance, enabling a multidimensional examination of the conflict.

Method and Analysis

This research mainly adopted the content analysis, interpretation of historical background, identified the patterns of conflict, and policy gaps. It emphasizes on the limitations of peace accord, the role of state and non-state actors in shaping post-accord politics, exclusion and marginalization of ethnic communities in terms of political and administrative representation, dynamics of insurgencies, and the evolution of militant groups over time. Data were thematically categorized from historical background to post peace-accord militancy and a multidimensional solution.

Research Limitations

As the research is exclusively based on secondary data, it lacks firsthand, real-time experience, and security dynamics from the ground. The study does not include fieldwork, survey, interview or ethnographic observation due to security concerns, political and geographical constraints. However, the rich extensive evidence-based documented literatures from academic, institutional and policy domains reduce the limitation to an extent.

Ethical Considerations

As the study exclusively relies on publicly available documents, and secondary data, therefore, no direct ethical approval was required. Nevertheless, the study maintains strict academic integrity and refrains from any unethical speculation and claims.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ethnic diversity, and demography of the CHT

The Chittagong Hill Tracts or also known as CHT comprises three hill districts in the south-eastern border of Bangladesh. The size of this mountainous region is 13,294 square kilometers. This mountainous region is home to several small ethnic communities, some of them have been living for centuries.

They are also known as “*Khudro Nri Gosthi*” (SEC), and largest in terms of population and diversity in Bangladesh. Thirteen SECs have been mentioned by Larma (2008). These communities are *Chakma (Changma)*, *Marma (Magh)*, *Tripura (Tippera)*, *Bawm (Banjogi)*, *Chak (Asak)*, *Khyang*, *Khumi*, *Lusai (Kuki)*, *Mro (Murang)*, *Pangkhua (Pankho)*, *Tanchangya*, *Nepalese (Gorkha)*, and *Assamese*. They are identified as the highlanders or Jumma people (Larma, 2008). Although, the UNDP-CHTDF baseline survey identified eleven communities as indigenous to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, which excluded the *Nepalese* and the *Assamese* (HDRC, 2009). All these small ethnic communities (SECs) are primarily categorized into two portions based on their origin, and the connection to ‘modernity’. The Kuki group, also known as the ‘Children of the Hill’ is called ***Toungtha***. This group consists of the Kuki, Khumi, Mro, Lushai, Khyang, Bawm, and Pangkhua communities. On the other hand, the other group is called ***Khyoungthas*** which is known as “Children of the river or simply Tipra”. This group includes Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, and Rieng. The first group is also known as the ‘ancient tribe’ in this region, while the second group are ‘domiciled tribes’ (Lewin, 1869). According to BBS data, the small ethnic communities make up around 46% of the whole population of the Chittagong region. Among them, Chakma is the

largest group, making up around 5-6 lakhs people. The Marma, and Tripura are second and third in terms of population.

These comparatively large groups mainly live in the Bandarban and Rangamati District. However, the population density per km is much lower than the whole plainland Bangladesh. As the Chakma people are the largest tribe among all, and have a huge population, they were the first to raise voice against mainstream discrimination by the former Pakistani Government, and later on Bengali government since the liberation war in 1971. It includes socio-economic development, ethnic heritage, cultural identity, and political representation.

However, militancy, counter militancy, political instability, discriminatory political alliance, and policy failure created a hostile ground in this region. It not only created militancy or political instability but also a repeating cycle of dirty ethno-politics in this region. Therefore, the problem of Chittagong Hill Tracts is much more complex than any other situation, as this region has multiple key actors, various ethnic groups and subgroups, foreign backers, NGOs, national security forces, government, and lastly, mass people.

Historical Backgrounds of Chittagong Hill Tracts

While an overwhelming proportion of the surface of Bangladesh is a flat alluvial plain, the Chittagong Hill Tracts comprises parallel ridges of sedimentary rocks running from the south in a north-westerly direction (Zaman, 1982). These hills are tertiary age hills, and mountain ranges which are above 300 to 1000 meters from the sea level.

The name 'Chittagong Hill Tracts' was given by the British in 1860, when this region was a part of the British Empire. They divided the Chittagong region into two parts, Chittagong, and eastern Chittagong, also known as Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Chittagong Hill Tracts was later divided into three sub districts called Bandarban, Rangamati, and Ramgargh (modern-day Khagrachhari) which are now known as separate districts.

Geographically, this region is the south-eastern part of the country, with hilly terrain, mainly a part of the Himalayan ranges of southern Tripura, and northern Myanmar. The decolonization of the Indian subcontinent, the separation of India and Pakistan, and their independence happened with a peeve and nonchalant intention of the British, especially when it came to drawing new borders for decolonized states. As, the separation of two states mainly occurred based on religion, the Chittagong Hill Tracts tribal ethnic communities felt confused whether to join Pakistan, a Muslim majority country, or to join India. Former Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru insisted on British authority to annex Indian territory to the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as they are a diverse community with various religions and ethnicities. But the border commission considered Chittagong Hill Tracts as a part of Pakistan. It created dissatisfaction among some tribal leaders right after the independence of these two countries. Among them, *Sneha Kumar Chakma*, a leader of the Chakma tribe, walked for 50 days to meet the new Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, for arms aid to liberate Chittagong Hill Tracts from Pakistan. This was way before the liberation war of Bangladesh.

However, due to political and diplomatic pressure, Nehru didn't take the risk. Later on, dissatisfaction grew larger and larger when Pakistani authority ordered the building of a hydroelectric water dam near ethnic residence in Rangamati. It displaced 40% of the Chakma community in Rangamati, and submerged 56,000 acres of crop lands. All these factors later affected the 1970's general election, in which, Awami League only lost in this Chittagong Hill Tracts region among all the regions of

Bangladesh. Soon after the Liberation war in 1971, the ethnic communities tried to raise their voice to the top officials of the state and government but denied several times.

One of the harsh stories was, Abdur Razzak Bhuiyan suggested the constitution's bill number 6 must be reformed, on 31 October 1972. As he said, "According to the constitution and laws of Bangladesh, all citizens of Bangladesh will be considered as Bengalis." Manabendra Narayan Larma, a Chakma political leader, and the only non-Bengali MP at that time, raised his voice against that, and the speaker of the Ganaparishad countered Larma by saying, why they don't want to be Bengalis, instead of being Chakma.

All these issues created massive dissatisfaction among the Chakma and the *Khyoungthas* tribes; they were heavily politically active at that time. Later, on 7th march 1973 Manabendra Narayan Larma was again elected as the MP of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region which was ethnically Chakma, despite the landslide popularity of the Awami League. However, Manabendra could not manage to get any political space for the ethnic minority people. On 28 June 1974, four cantonments were decided to be built in Alikadam, Ruma, and Soalak in Bandarban district, and in Dighinala in Khagrachhari district. The militarization of this hilly region backfired, created mass dissatisfaction among ethnic people, and caused the very first terrorist activities in the region.

Mainly based on *Khyoungthas* ethnic communities which had a large population comparatively, created a military wing of the political party called *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti*, known as *People Liberation Army (PLA)*. This was the very first militant group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region who chose military insurgency as a means to gain political, economic, and social rights. Although, they were mostly known as the *Shanti Bahini*. But *Shanti Bahini* wasn't popular at first, they were a small portion of PCJSS. But, due to several encounters, extra-judicial killings, and massacres by the security forces of Bangladesh, this militant group step up as a resistant force in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. There are several mass murders, extra-judicial killings, and massacres done by both parties. But, militarization of this region, attacking ancient tribes, counting them as a threat, and mass killings was only escalating the situation and clearly it was a policy failure of the Bangladesh Government. The main trigger for the indigenous community was a transmigration program of Bengali settlers into the Chittagong Hill Tracts region in the 1975-1980s. At Least 1 lakh Bengali people were settled by government support, as local residents, businessmen, farmers and used as a tool to counter the indigenous community. This sparks the indigenous communities, specially PCJSS and their military wing PLA. At the end of 1979, approximately 35 people were murdered by the *Shanti Bahini* or PLA.

But, the security forces of Bangladesh responded more brutally. One of the notorious massacres was done on 25 March 1980 which is known as "Kawkhali Massacre". On that day at dawn, in Kawkhali, Rangamati, security forces called all the Pahari or indigenous people of the union for a reformation of the temple of the union. Then the security force encircled the indigenous group with the help of Bengali settlers and then killed almost 300 people (Mong, 2016). The Bengali settlers also helped in slaughtering those people, and thousands of them fled to India. But these events have been going on for years from both parties.

Most notable massacres done by the *Shanti Bahini* was "The Bhushancchara Massacre" in Bhushancchara union, Barkal upazila, Rangamati. On 31 May 1984, Major Rajesh of *Shanti Bahini* along with 125 militant soldiers, encircled the Bengali living Bhushancchara union at late night. They slaughtered almost 400 Bengalis, including women, and children when they were asleep.

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To end this decade long insurgency, terrorist attacks, massacres, and the power struggle, a peace accord was much needed. The government party Awami League held the peace accord on 2 December 1997 with the only tribal political party PCJSS and signed 72 different rules and regulations for both stakeholders, and the PCJSS handed over all their arms and ammunition. But, the credibility of the peace accord is still questionable, as the militancy is still reemerging.

The Problems of Implementing 1997 Peace Accord

The 1997 peace accord was signed on 2nd December, 1997 with *Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samiti (PCJSS)* which is a political party in the CHT representing Chakma, Marma, and Tripura people. That made other SECs people' marginalized from several rights and political representation.

The peace accord has 72 different segments which includes the land rights of indigenous people, creating a ministry for the indigenous people, a region council (CHTRC), Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Dispute Resolution Commission, (CHTLDRC), and removals of temporary Military camps in the region. In 1997, there were a total 232 military camps in the region. In the past 27 years, 117 temporary military camps have been removed. But, the other stakeholders of the peace accord couldn't manage to reduce terrorism, extortion, and separatist movements in the region. According to the Government, 48 out of 72 segments of disputes have been solved. But the leaders from PCJSS says, it only delivered small scale issues but declined basic human rights and needs such as land disputes and self-governance.

The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs was established on 15 July 1998. Yet, the number of indigenous people in the ministry is pretty low which raises questions on implementation of the accord. On the other hand, Chittagong Hill tracts Region Council was founded in 1999, yet they have little power to exercise and function. This clearly created massive dissatisfaction among ethnic communities. But the major dissatisfaction raised for the Chittagong Hill Tracts Land Dispute Resolution Commission (CHTLDRC), which now have 16,000 cases in hand. Most of them came from Khagrachhari district, it has 7314 cases, and Rangamati has 7104 cases. But, the CHTLDRC failed to resolve any cases due to inconsistencies between two different governments, and now closed to take any new cases.

The land disputes started at early 1980s, a government sponsored transmigration project to the Chittagong Hill Tracts of an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 landless Bengali farmers from several district outside the Chittagong Hill Tracts was migrated and the plan was executed without the involvement of indigenous leaders, (HDRC, 2010). These migrated Bengalis from 1978 to 1982 are known as settlers. One of the major acquisitions from the indigenous community is to remove the settlers and give back the lands that belong to them. On the other hand, the conflict between military and shanti bahini created massive tensions among both Bengalis, and the indigenous communities. Estimated 20 thousand people fled to India due to the conflict. Meanwhile, Bengalis were settled in those areas. After the establishment of the peace accord in 1997, officially 12,200 families were repatriated, but those repatriated families became landless. And from then, these land disputes become the major issue not only for the indigenous political parties, but for the mass people too. An estimated 90,000 internally displaced people (IDP) are also the victims from this dispute. According to the 2001 reformation of the 1997 peace accord, land ownership law, the lands belong to the indigenous communities and Bengalis cannot purchase these lands if it isn't hereditary. Which also

created backlash from both sides including Bengalis from the Chittagong Hill Tracts region.

Another problem of implementing the peace accord is demilitarization. The military removed 117 temporary camps from the region but expanded permanent cantonments as a strategy to counter insurgency groups. The application of this counter insurgency strategy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts has been a major factor in the problems of land dispossession of the indigenous people, and land grabbing, forced eviction became normalized, (Ali, 2002). The involvement and the influence of the armed forces is confined to security matters, but extends to socio-economic issues, thus this is hampering the livelihood of indigenous people, (CHT Commission, 1991). Thus, peace remains elusive in the hills and the frequent outbreak of insurgent tendencies are still growing till this date. As of now, these are the major issues of the peace accord that needed to be addressed for a national integration.

The Re-Emergence of Militancy and Multidimensional Crisis

Right after the peace accord was signed, not every party was happy with all those rules and regulations. Some of them doubted that the government won't recognize the rights of the tribal people by peaceful means. Especially the young community and the hardliners from the PCJSS rejected the peace accord and broke ties with the main group. They created another group called the United People Democratic Front (UPDF) in 1998, and became the main opposition party of the PCJSS who was the main stakeholder of the peace accord. But that's not the end of it. These groups created a decade-long hostility among themselves which created more and more ethnic group fragmentation, subgroup and counter subgroups. All these groups have committed countless murders, plunder, theft, and had a dark past of terrorizing the region by dominating the minority ethnic communities. This also increased the risk of rising other terrorist groups from minority ethnic communities.

In 2007, after a decade of the peace accord and post peace accord ethnic hostilities, the fragmentation took place within the PCJSS. Some of the leaders of PCJSS created a counter group due to leadership struggle and interest issues within the party. The group is known as JSS - *Jana Shanghati Samiti* (Reformist) and created longstanding clashes between PCJSS and JSS. Much of it is an armed rivalry for the dominance of the region.

On the other hand, the UPDF lasted for twenty years, until in 2017, another fraction took place in 2017. Some leaders broke away from the main UPDF, and established UPDF (Democratic). This group is comparatively less armed, and less hardliner than the previous group. Which makes them more politically active in the region. But the main UPDF claims that security forces, intelligence and the government is responsible for all these fractions. UPDF and UPDF (democratic) have a strong base in the Khagrachhari district, while JSS (Reformist) and PCJSS have a strong grip in the Bandarban district. But all of them are in a power struggle in the Rangamati district.

The district which suffered many deadly massacres and countless murders. But Rangamati is not alone, as the UPDF was stronger for nearly two decades, numerous murders, mass killing, rape, plunder, robbery, and armed uprising took place in Khagrachhari, as that area was the strongest point of the party.

Over the time period, these ethnic parties have shifted their alliance several times with different ethnic groups. In 1998 to 2007, PCJSS and UPDF had a long rivalry. But, when UPDF grew stronger, another group emerged by the fraction from PCJSS, known as JSS (Reformist) and became the major opponent for both PCJSS, and UPDF. It also

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created an alliance between PCJSS and UPDF. After that in 2017, the whole scenario changed when UPDF fragmented into two parts, one is democratic and the other one was simply UPDF.

As of now, the rivalry between PCJSS and UPDF has shifted into inner fractionated groups, while these two are maintaining a strong alliance to control the dominance in this region. On the other hand, JSS (reformist) and UPDF (democratic) are maintaining an alliance as they have similar interests.

From January 2018 to November 2020, more than 70 political activists have been killed in this power struggle between these four groups. According to UPDF, 40 of them are their members, and 27 of them are from JSS (reformist).

Here is a chart of violence, kidnap, rape and murders committed by these four groups in the last 10 years in the Chittagong Hill Tracts:

Table 1
Violence, Kidnap, Rape, and Murders by Four Groups

Ethnicity/ Party	Kidnapped	Killed	Raped	Evicted (by other tribals)
Bengali	63	187	19	225
UPDF	211	345	-	107
JSS	240	329	-	135
Others	538	416	51	493

But these are the crimes committed by mainstream parties of Chittagong Hill Tracts. There are more parties, which are armed, and have no intention of political legitimacy. These armed groups are mostly Based in Bandarban, in the deep forest, hills and mountains. The Arakan Liberation Party (ALP) is one of them. This group is mostly active in the border area of Bandarban, which is pretty much impassable for the security forces or traditional army due to difficult terrain. ALP has a strong presence in Thanchi upazila, especially in the deepest corner of the Sangu river, Boro Modok area, where there are usually less security forces due to difficult terrain. Even, Boro Modok is a totally restricted zone for all Bangladeshi citizens due to ALP presence and other security risks.

This party operates by smuggling narcotics such as opium, terrorism in the region and plundering. ALP is categorized as a separatist group, which wants to carve out a mini state for the Arakani people. Their projected mini state is combined with some portions of Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and some border areas of the Rakhaine state of Myanmar.

Recently, after decades of being dominated by the comparatively large and stronger tribes, a group from *Toungtha* tribe, mainly based on the Bawm community called "*Kuki Chin National Front*" emerged as an insurgent group in the region in 2022, and started attacking not only other ethnic groups but also the security forces. This threatens the whole national security of Bangladesh.

As of now, this group has killed more than 5 soldiers of Bangladesh Armed forces during confrontation, launched nine major operations in various areas, robbed 17 lakhs taka by Bank robbery and kidnapped the bank manager, terrorized the whole region, and created massive violence.

This is where the crisis gets multidimensional. There are tribes like the Kuki-Chin who want to carve out a mini state combining Bangladesh, India, and Myanmar. Just like the Arakan Liberation Party, they are also considered as a separatist group. This creates not only a national security threat but also increases the security threat of the region. The mainstream parties aren't separatist groups anymore, yet they use violence, extortion and terrorism to maintain dominance in the region. And their popularity is questionable when it comes to voting for them from the other tribes.

The government of Bangladesh is trying to solve this issue by negotiating, or peace-talk which didn't solve in 1997, and is not working now either. Instead, the group Kuki-Chin took advantage of the peace talks offer, and created more violence by attacking two police stations on 4 April 2024. This group is waging full scale guerrilla grade operations in mountains and in suburban areas as they have an advantage of favorable grounds. Apart from the Kuki-Chin issue, the indigenous people also have some representatives in the United Nations (UN), United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) and in many INGOs which created backlash and diplomatic pressures on Bangladesh from the outside. Most notable conferences and diplomatic pressures come from the UN and UNPFII.

In 2022 and 2023, *Augustina Chakma* represented PCJSS in the UNPFII and urged the council for ensuring self-determination in the hill tracts for sustainable development in the region including land management, law and order, and general administration which Bangladeshi government has been prolonged for decades.

There were other accusations too, such as not listing permanent residents, voter lists which created unelected interim district councils for the past 27 years. These types of accusations, self-determination and self-governing statements in the UNPFII creates another complex situation for the government of Bangladesh. Although, according to the peace accord, the government of Bangladesh recognizes the land rights, and aims to deliver a unique governing system. But, bureaucratic failures, political reluctance, and military pressure didn't create much progress.

Therefore, this hill tracts problem is not a unidimensional problem anymore, it becomes a multidimensional and multilateral issue with multiple key parties, from political to military, with foreign backers and NGOs. Amidst all of these, the rural & ethnic mass people become the most sufferer.

Case Study: Kuki - Chin National Front (KNF)

Kuki-Chin National Front or KNF started as a nonprofit organization called Kuki-Chin Development Organization (KNDO) in 2008 by Nathan Bawm, a student and political activist of the Bawm community. However, it was established as a separatist insurgent group in 2022, when 15-20 members of the organization got full armed training from the Chin state of Myanmar in the previous year. The number of trained soldiers grew larger and larger and in April 2022, the number reached 35 and started attacking security forces. One year after that, it terrorized the whole region, and the government had to restrict the full Chittagong Hill Tracts region due to national security threat. In May and June of 2023, it launched full scale guerrilla grade operations in Thanchi, and Ruma upazila of Bandarban district which killed 4 soldiers (officially) of Bangladesh Army. Later, on 3-4 April 2024, the group robbed two banks and looted 17 lakhs BDT, the same day they attacked Thanchi police station with 70 soldiers. According to their own source, they have approximately 400 trained and armed soldiers now, and the numbers are still increasing due to foreign backups from neighboring countries.

The group mainly uses AK-47, semi-automatic assault rifles, Chinese rifles, IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device) for armed operations. But for better understanding on why this group rises out of nowhere, it needs to address its background and their regional demography. Kuki-Chin are the ancient inhabitants in this region and part of the *Toungtha* group. It means, they are called “The children of the hills”. They live in the deep mountainous areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts for centuries. This group consists of the Kuki, Khumi, Mro, Lushai, Khyang, Bawm, and Pangkhua communities. All these small tribes use *Tibeto-Burman* language and are known by different names in different regions (Jarin, 2023). Mainly known as kuki in North-eastern India, but also known as Mizo in the Mizoram state of India, the Kuki-Chin community is mostly Christian. And they're also known as the *Chin* community in Myanmar. Therefore, the whole “Kuki-Chin National Front” or simply Kuki-Chin project is to carve out a mini state consisting of some part of Bangladesh, India and Myanmar and building a “Greater Kuki Land” for their own ethnic people. In Bangladesh they want to carve out nine Upazilas from two hill tracts districts, these are Roangcchari, Lama, Alikadam, Ruma, Thanchi from Bandarban, and Barkal, Juracchari, Baghaicchari and Bilaicchari from Rangamati district; although they don't have that much population in these areas. Approximately, six to seven thousand total population are estimated of the whole Bawm community, and they claim to be the leader of other five ancient tribes.

One of the biggest reasons for rising as an insurgent group is the exclusion in the 1997 peace accord, which paved the way for the Chakma, Marma and Tripura community into mainstream politics and discriminated against other minor groups from participating in local or national politics. This peace accord not only just created a massive political shift in the region but also created ethnic violence, extortion of the mainstream groups which were the stakeholders of the peace accord. Misusing power, extortion, robbery, power struggle between Chakma, Marma & Tripura communities also created tension to the minority ethnic communities such as Bawm, Mro & Pangkhua tribes. But the main trigger for the Bawm community was from security forces and their indiscriminately land grabbing policies due to security purposes. As they're a very tiny community in terms of population, these land grabbing and forced eviction triggered them the most. Here are some incidents which are extremely relevant for understanding the rise of Kuki-Chin.

Table 2

Forced Eviction and Land Acquisition for Army Artillery Firing Range in Sualok, Bandarban

Date	September - November 2006
Place	Renikkhong, Sualok and Tonkaboti mauzas (administrative units), Bandarban sub-district, Bandarban district
Casualties	275 Mro, other Jumma and Bengali families were forcefully evicted to make way for a military artillery firing range on 11,445 acres of land that had been acquired in 1991-93. At least two elders and seven children allegedly died of exposure. Community leader Ranglai Mro was arrested with fabricated evidence of “illegal arms”.
Military Involvement	Sudden forced eviction at gunpoint; profiteering by

	extracting rents for acquired lands; destruction of livelihood assets provided by UNDP and NGOs to the community.
Military officers and units involved	Unknown

Table 3

Land Acquisition and Expansion of Ruma Cantonment in Bandarban.

Date	1973 to present
Place	9,560 acres of land in Shengum Mouza, Pantola Mouza and Galengya Mouza under Ruma sub-district, Bandarban district
Casualties	Approximately 5,000 people of about 700 families from the Mro, Marma and Tripura communities are due to lose more than 1,500 acres of land used for jhum cultivation. Approximately 2,000-3,000 acres of land belonging to the Forest Department is also included in the proposed area.
Military Involvement	The Ruma Zone has recently been trying to expedite the land acquisition process, which had been stalled due to bureaucratic hurdles and local opposition.
Military Officers and units involved	Lt. Col. Wasim, Ruma Zone Commander (Commanding Officer of Baghaihat Zone at the time of the February 2010

Table 3

Arrest, torture, and lengthy detention of leader opposing land acquisition by the military

Date	February 2007 to January 2009
Place	Tortured at Bandarban Cantonment, detained without any medical treatment at Chittagong District Jail.
Casualties	Ranglai Mro, community leader of the Mro people.
Military Involvement	Bandarban Cantonment, Bandarban General Hospital.

All these incidents done by the military have terrorized these small tribes for generations, forced eviction, illegal land grabbing, detention, and indiscriminately arresting has also provoked various groups to rise up against militarization. However, rising up and creating insurgency will not be a solution for this. Sooner or later, peaceful coexistence must be ensured by the both parties along with securing the national security and interest of the state. Here are some key points which can be considered as the major reasons behind the insurgency of the group. These are:

- Exclusion of minority groups in the 1997 peace accord, which gave the upperhand to some ethnic groups to dominate others. This created counter groups like Kuki-Chin, Arakan Liberation Party etc.

- Myanmar's civil war is fueling this crisis, as the military junta is losing control in the country, many insurgent groups like Kuki-Chin get arms and ammunition for creating violence not only in Myanmar but also in the Bangladesh, Myanmar and Indian region. This cross border security threat may raise KNF into a transnational entity in the future, if it doesn't get nipped in the bud. On the other hand, foreign backups are one of the worst problems as the neighbours are continuing to support these rebel groups.
- Lack of political representation of each and every ethnic community is another major issue for rising these types of terrorist organizations. This increases the risk of rising armed organizations, insurgencies, and terrorist activities. And the lack of political representation created a gap of democratic, peaceful groups to reduce violence and ensure stability in the region.
- Lack of socio-economic development and restricting all these communities from mainstream and dominant national identity created an unavoidable void in their psychology and also in the standard of living. Many small ethnic communities (SECs) live in either deep forest, or high mountainous regions, or in the river banks of hills. These communities have no connection with modernity at all, and living a lower standard of life and facing dire situations. Even, there are many places in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region where there are no educational institutions, not even primary schools, and no hospitals. But the government keeps building cantonments and tourist resorts instead of basic human needs creating dissatisfaction among these communities. This is a major reason behind these types of terrorist activities.
- The repeated failure of civil administration, Political leadership and representation. The political leaders have failed to ensure peaceful coexistence in the region, and extortion, violence, bribery, kidnapping, murder didn't stop even after 27 years of the peace accord. Which clearly suggests the political parties and government stakeholders have failed miserably. On the other hand, the civil administration, the land commission have a dark past of discrimination and complete failure. The land commission stopped working in 2016, as they aren't functioning anymore due to political instability.
- Blunders, policy failures, and repeated intelligence failure from the state. The intelligence failure is a major factor for making this type of radical insurgent groups. KNF has been operating since 2008, but intelligence didn't know anything about them. It only got hyped after they launched a guerrilla graded operation against military forces back in 2022.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

It has been twenty-seven years since the peace accord has been signed, still there is no sign of peace in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Already Bangladesh is suffering from cross border narcotics business by Arakan Liberation Party and other similar groups, and has been dealing with violence, murder, extortion, and gang culture from various ethnic groups, the Kuki-Chin Army created another dimension to this crisis. From the People's Liberation Army - PLA, or Shanti Bahini to Kuki-Chin Army - KNA, Bangladesh Government has failed to deliver peace, stability, and national integration, with other diverse minority ethnic communities. All these repeated insurgencies show that the policies taken from the government level aren't working much. On the other hand, the misuse of power by the security forces (Bangladesh Military) and from the political, and extremist groups of Chittagong Hill Tracts breached the trust between military-civilian relationship in the region. To solve this long-standing bloodshed, discrimination and

ethnic conflict, a multidimensional approach should be needed. Here are some keypoint of multidimensional approach to solve this issue:

- **Securing the Border:** Bangladesh shares 330 k.m. borders with both India and Myanmar in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, most of the area are unsecure due to mountains, and river in the southern part. These areas are major routes for opium and other narcotics trade. But recently Myanmar's civil war also made this route a safe way for trading arms and ammunitions. On the other hand, Kuki-Chin people are also inhabitants in the Mizoram state, a border sharing state of India with CHT, which makes this region more prone to arms trading and ethnic conflict. Therefore, securing the border should be the one of the major priorities of the Government of Bangladesh.
- **Foreign Backups from Neighboring States Must Be Stopped:** India has been accused of supporting these insurgent groups from the 1980's, and has some serious accusations of providing shelter, arms, and ammunition to the Shanti Bahini in the pre-peace-accord times. On the other hand, Myanmar is in a volatile situation due to civil war, which paves the way for various ethnic groups like *Arakan Liberation Party - ALP*, or Kuki-Chin National Front to gain political, and military support in this region and launch more terrorist attacks. Bangladesh should negotiate and create a peaceful dialogue with legitimate stakeholders of the both countries to stop aiding these terrorist, and insurgent groups through diplomatic means.
- **Military Operations Is a Temporary Solution but It Needs to Ensure Full-Scale Disarmament:** Military operations to regain the control of the region and securing peace and stability in the region is an essential factor for both the government and for the local people. But this is a temporary solution to cleaning up the mess, but it won't secure a long-term peace and stability. Nevertheless, there's no point to belittle military operations as the situation is going out of control and national security is at risk. Disarmament is another major issue, all civilians, mainly rebels must be disarmed either through diplomatic means or in military operations. Otherwise, there's always a risk of rising terrorist in the region. On the other hand, misuse of power, land grabbing, and forced eviction done by the military must be stopped to create a peaceful military-civilian relationship.
- **Political Representation from Every Ethnic Community:** Political representation from each and every ethnic community from local level to national level is another major factor which may decrease violence, armed uprising, and insurgencies from the root. According to the historical background, it is shown that in most of the cases, these insurgent groups rise up due to lack of political representation and political discrimination among themselves. Therefore, political representation will be a good option to increase the democratic, peaceful way to resolve this issue.
- **Representation in Civil Administration:** Representation in civil administration is another major factor, as there's already a separate ministry for these ethnic communities, called 'Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs.' But the representation of diverse ethnic communities in this ministry is very low. On the other hand, 'The Land Commission' to resolve the land disputes between Bengali Settlers and the indigenous people has been inactive since 2016. These people should be in these civil administrations, and that's how armed uprising will be decreased for a long time.
- **Stopping Unorganized Urbanization, Land Grabbing, and Eviction in The Chittagong Hill Tracts:** In the past twenty years, the Chittagong Hill Tracts people have seen massive infrastructures, tall buildings in the hills, resorts and what not.

But most of them are unorganized. These unorganized urbanizations have created markets, and tourist spots here and there, which damages the livelihood of the indigenous people. On the other hand, environmental pollution is another concern. Forced eviction, and land grabbing for either building cantonments or resorts is an old issue of the hill tracts people. There are countless numbers of people who were, and are forcefully evicted from their own houses. All these must be stopped for peace, stability, and national integration.

- **Cultural Integration through Acculturation:** According to acculturation studies, cultural integration can be done even with keeping the diversity and cultural differences. Cultural integration is one of the crucial parts in terms of psychological aspects to determine the behavior of other ethnic communities. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs (MOCA) can help to reduce the distance between Bengalis and other ethnic communities through integrating in cultural festivals and holidays.
- **Socio-Economic Development and Increasing the Standards of Living:** Socio-economic development and increasing standard of living in rural and ethnic communities is a mandatory issue for every ethnic community. Although, there are some ethnic communities who are living deep in the forest and mountains, have no electricity or modernity at all, and they're living in dire situations. Many parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts region don't have any school, hospital or markets, some areas are restricted therefore nothing is allowed to go in or out from the areas which violate basic human rights. All these issues must be addressed, and developed.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh has been suffering from numerous terrorist activities, violence, political instability, and armed insurgencies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region since its independence. To overcome all these from the root, all the stakeholders from the Government, military, armed rebels to rural ethnic people have to come forward to make a peaceful solution to secure everyone's interest. There's no way to solve this issue by military means, which will only increase the collateral damages and create distance from all sides. Diplomatic measures, peaceful negotiations and dialogues should be prioritized by the government. Creating opportunities from local level to national level in terms of political representation, civil administration, and job sectors should be secured by the government so that these rural ethnic communities don't get left out. On the other hand, cultural integration and exchange of cultural differences by acculturation process with mainstream Bengali community should be prioritized to achieve the national integration of Bangladesh.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I have no conflict of interest to disclose. Moreover, I also declare that this manuscript has not been published before, and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

I declare that this manuscript is originally produced by me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my outmost respect and gratitude towards all the marginalized indigenous people of Bangladesh, especially those who are facing structural violence. They deserve dignity, respect and acknowledgement.

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To cite this article [APA 7th edition style]:

Sadik, M.I. (2025). The 1997 Peace accord and the re-emergence of militancy in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: A multidimensional approach. *Academia Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*, 2, 279-294. <https://doi.org/10.3126/ajhss.v2i1.83195>