



Inauguration of the
“Cultural Diversity Festival”

4 December 2011

Remarks by Mr. Neal Walker
UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative

Honorable Prime Minister Sheik Hasina;

Mr. Abul Kalam Azad, Minister, Ministry of Cultural Affairs;

Mr. Promode Mankin, State Minister, Ministry of Cultural Affairs;

Mr. William Hanna, Ambassador and Head of Delegation, Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh; and

Mr. Dipankar Talukdar, State Minister, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs and Chair of today's event;

It is a real privilege for me to be here at the opening of the Cultural Diversity Festival, on the podium, with the Honorable Prime Minister Sheik Hasina. I know, not only from the history of Bangladesh that I have read, but from our conversations in the months since my assignment to Dhaka, of your deep personal commitment to peace and development in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Please allow me, from the outset of this important event that celebrates cultural diversity in Bangladesh, to commit the United Nations Team in Bangladesh to the achievement of our shared objective, the effective, full and rapid implementation of the Peace Accord.

The Cultural Diversity Festival is held during the first week of December every year specifically to coincide with the anniversary of the CHT Peace Accord which was signed on December 2nd, 1997. The Ministry of Hill Tracts Affairs has taken the lead this year in organizing the Cultural Diversity Festival and the presence today of the Honorable Prime Minister and a very large section of government and non-government leaders and people from all the ethnic groups of Bangladesh shows the Country's commitment to the implementation of the Peace Accord.

I would like to take two tracks in my presentation, if you will allow me. One track will be about the Peace Accord, what makes it a quality document worth implementing, what has been done towards that end, and what remains to be done. But, first, I feel compelled to briefly elaborate the position of the United Nations around the intense debate that has been ongoing in the country over terminology.

Even BEFORE I begin let me give you my conclusion: In the national context, only the citizens of Bangladesh can address and answer the question of who is what. Dialogue among all parties is crucial. But regardless of the words used to describe who we are, dialogue must never distract us from two fundamentals: first the requirement to recognize, respect and protect the human rights of all citizens of Bangladesh; and second, the URGENT need to effectively implement the Peace Accord.

Having started with the conclusion let me take two steps back.....

Many ethnic groups in the CHT identify themselves as “indigenous peoples”. The UN understands there are different viewpoints about this. The tensions in the national debate are also reflected at the global level: there is no single definition of Indigenous Peoples and in most international instruments, the terms “indigenous” and “tribal” are used almost interchangeably. Nevertheless, there is a consensus on the characteristics of Indigenous Peoples which is relevant for the ongoing national debate. A major element is the voluntary perpetuation of cultural distinctiveness, including, for example, aspects of language, religion, modes of production and institutions. Another crucial criterion is self-identification. Fundamentally, and taking into account a reasonable relationship to the concepts, if a group identifies themselves as indigenous, or as tribal, for that matter, it should carry weight in the dialogue.

Clearly, this is a complicated issue, difficult to address in a short speech. But I hope the audience will agree that it is useful to spell out the areas of agreement. In Bangladesh, and around the world, UNDP’s role is -- (and I quote from the policy) “to facilitate and broker dialogues and initiatives that bring together Government, indigenous peoples and non-state actors”. This is, in fact, one of the principal purposes of today’s Cultural Diversity Festival.

So let me state our position: We encourage a constructive dialogue between Government and all distinct groups. We believe that such dialogue is central to the UN’s understanding of “indigenous peoples” and to the concept of democracy. At the same time, let me reiterate the two conclusions that I began with:

- **First, only the citizens of Bangladesh can address and answer the question of who is what;**
- **Second, while dialogue is crucial, it must not distract us from two fundamentals: (1) the recognition, respect & protection of human rights of all citizens; and (2) the URGENT need to implement the Peace Accord.**

Honorable Prime Minister, Members of Parliament, Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the world of Nations, the Bangladesh Peace Accord signed in 1997 is seen as a major achievement, as a high quality instrument. What do I mean by a “High Quality Instrument”?

The Accord transfers significant decision-making responsibility to local authorities. It establishes democratic governance institutions for the Chittagong Hill Tracts which are different from the institutions in the rest of the country, to reflect the diversity of the peoples’ that live in the Hill Tracts. The objective is to ensure that the groups of the CHT are represented at the table when decisions are made. The Accord also establishes bodies that are dedicated to dealing with the issues at the core of the peace process, such as the Land Commission and the IDP Task Force. In other words, the Peace Accord explicitly recognizes

the uniqueness of the CHT in the national context, and the diversity of its people, and defines concrete, mutually agreed ways to govern accordingly. **These differences exist! But, while some see only the difficult challenges of that diversity, I see, in fact, national strength and opportunity.**

Honorable Prime Minister, dear Ministers, participants and colleagues reflecting on my own long experience in other parts of the world, the bottom line is really quite simple: 14 years after its signature, the Peace Accord, in the ways I have outlined earlier, still constitutes an excellent model of what's necessary, of best practices, towards sustainable peace and development of the Chittagong Hills Tract.

So, then, where are we with regards to the implementation of the Peace Accord? Let us acknowledge work has been done to implement the Peace Accord. I do not wish to enter into unnecessary detail, but we CAN talk about accomplishments. Institutions have been created as defined in the Peace Accord, and more than 20 specific functions have been transferred to those institutions. Importantly, and with substantial help from key donors such as the EU, health and education services have been expanded, and the quality of those services has been improved. As a simple example, several hundred pre-primary and primary schools are effectively operational and multi-lingual, exactly in accordance with the principles of the Peace Accord. Economic empowerment activities are initiating, but I would emphasize, only initiating, sustainable poverty reduction. So, even while we recognize that much more remains to be done, **let us not forget the progress that has been made.**

Honorable Prime Minister, I am aware that the objective of today's event is to celebrate cultural diversity in Bangladesh and, if you will, to ENJOY ourselves as we deepen our mutual understanding of the rich history of the country. And, I know that you yourself are keen to get to that. But before we do, I hope you would allow me a few words on some of the priorities that I believe remain for all of us here today to do, if we are to effectively implement the Peace Accord in the immediate future.

First and foremost we must promote dialogue, build confidence in and implement, the Peace Accord, and to show LEADERSHIP towards those ends. **Your presence here today is EXACTLY the kind of leadership that I am talking about.** Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to be here with us today and for your very real commitment to the Peace Accords.

Some other important suggestions, for all of us to consider, would include:

- Elections for the Hill District Councils;
- More urgent efforts to transfer remaining functions to the Hill District Councils, AND to build their capacities to do their work;
- Adequate funding for the Hill District Council's;
- Amendment of the Land Commission Act and activation of a Commission that is accepted by all parties;
- Mixed police force in the Hill Districts;
- Continued efforts to reduce any violations of human rights, and to hold accountable those who are guilty.

The United Nations' itself stands for Unity in Diversity -- many nations, many different mandates, but one coherent, results-oriented platform. The focus of the UN Team in Bangladesh is to do whatever is possible, in support of the Government, to protect and promote human rights, and to implement the Peace Accord. We work FOR the Government; we work WITH the Government; AND we work with other stakeholders, towards those objectives. We pull in global expertise, we link it to national expertise, we adjust our programming as necessary, all to ensure that we are maximizing impact and achieving results.

Honorable Prime Minister that is all I am going to say on the work issues that are facing us. I thank you for your patience in listening to me. I look forward now to learning more about the cultural diversity of Bangladesh. It is my personal view that cross-cultural understanding and respect is the foundation on which we can build solutions to address the longstanding problems of CHT, and of Bangladesh as a whole. And I know that this principal resonates deeply in Bangladesh, whose birth was inextricably linked to the assertion of its own culture and language.

To conclude, the United Nations Team in Bangladesh looks forward to working with all of you, towards sustainable peace and development of the CHT.

Thank you.