

Report from Bangladesh to ESSF on the situation and activities during the year 2023

Friday 21 June 2024, by [ALAM Badrul](#), [BKF](#) (Date first published: 19 June 2024).

This report encompasses the activities of Bangladesh Krishok Federation, Bangladesh Kishani Sabha, Bangladesh Adivasi Samity which took place during the year 2023.

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A brief historical background

[For a more developed presentation, see the 2022 report.]

Bangladesh Krishok Federation(BKF) is the largest grass-root based peasants' organization in Bangladesh. It was established in 1976, 6 years after the country's independence war of 1971. Since its inception, BKF focussed on the issue of land which has still been a crucial one since the British regime when, in 1793, the permanent settlement system was introduced in the interest of the British rule by prioritizing the new style of Zamindari(landlord) system. Since then, the movement against Zamindari had started along with British rule.

During a certain period of long struggle, mainly by peasants, after the independence of the Indian subcontinent in 1947, East Bengal Legislative Assembly enacted East Bengal Estate Acquisition and Tenancy Act which abolished Zamindari system as part of land reform in 1950. Hence the new form of anti-Zamindari movement began at different places in Bangladesh, formerly in East Bengal. Finally, the Zamindari system was abolished formally after huge blood shedding of peasant communities and indigenous people. However, it lacked a genuine land reform that would empower the landless peasants with land. They remained as they were.

Even after the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the situation remained the same. Thus, Bangladesh Krishok Federation identified the land reform issue as prime importance for the benefit of landless peasants. It started with the Khasland (fallow land) occupation movement with the hope of a genuine and comprehensive land reform as well as agrarian reform in the new context of independent Bangladesh. From that point of view, BKF first occupied a khasland in 1980 after a series of movements, encirclement, submission of memorandums, ultimatums to the authority. However, that occupation could not sustain due to some shortcomings in the strategy. Therefore, there was a setback in the movement at that time.

After the setback of the movement, a series of meetings were held to find out the weakness in the strategies of the occupation movement. The findings came out that participation of women was not significant, the support of the local cross section was not much visualized and the proper legal instruments in relation to khaslands were very poor. There were only some circulars from the

government side on behalf of landless people which did not clearly imply the right of landless people to khaslands. Anyway, afterwards, BKF focused on building women's organizations among the peasantry and Bangladesh Kishani Sabha (BKS) was built in 1990 and another organization of destitute people which is Bangladesh Adivasi Samiti (Bas) was founded in 1993 officially, but it had started working in 1992.

Since 1993 Bangladesh Krishok Federation, Bangladesh Kishani Sabha and Bangladesh Adivasi Samity have been working on different issues like distribution of khaslands, exemption tax on peasants, public service to peasants, equal right for men and women, equal wages for equal work, constitutional recognition for indigenous people, etc. But the khasland issue was always a dominant one. In 1993 after the successful khasland occupation and its sustainability, all organizations got momentum to carry on this movement across the country. Since then, this movement has been continuing all over the country despite lots of impediments and obstacles.

THROUGH 2023

Given the fact that land is a serious issue for Bangladesh Krishok Federation and its allied organizations, the year 2023 was a bit terrible dealing with the khasland issue. Although the organizations occupied around 45 acres of khasland that year in Dashmina sub-district in Patuakhali District, in the south of the country, it had to deal with the serious issue of killing of one female leader in Sikdarerchar, in Bhola District next to Dashmina, Patuakhali. The killing just took place in the very last part of the year 2022, but its impact continues so far. The landless people of long ago occupied 4 islands in Dashmina in Patuakhali were also frightened by the atrocities to have been done in Bhola District. So, it was really difficult to tackle the panicky situation among the landless people, both in Patuakhali and Bhola district.

The Killing of Mukul Begum

The issue of the killing of Mukul Begum who played a crucial role in the khasland movement in Bhola District was taken seriously by the organization during the year 2023. The brutally wounded Bakul Begum (eldest sister of Mukul Begum) has also been being taken care of by the organization since the incident took place. From the beginning of the killing the local administration started playing games with the murder. Biased by the killers who represent the local big landowners, the local administration, like police, tried to put the responsibilities of murder on the victim party. They filed a murder case against 41 members of the BKF in Bhola, who are innocent. Whereas the case supposed to be filed by the victim party was not accepted by the Police station, as they are reported to have taken a huge amount of bribe from the murderers.

The landless people finally took shelter in the judicial court. The court registered the case and it is still going on. However, since the murder incident till now the leaders of BKF have been being continuously harassed in different ways and the police responsible for the investigation has been trying to make the people on the victim's side confess that they killed the Mukul begum for their own benefit. They arrested 5 persons and put them in the prison till today. The organization has been conducting the murder case and related all other cases at the lower court and at the high court and supreme court. To date, only one person got bail and all others are hiding for more than one year and a half in different places in the country. Their lives and their family lives have become miserable as they cannot earn a living in hiding. Initially some NGOs came to help them with eagerness but seeing the complex features of murder the case they are reluctant to deal now. They are just quite silent right now. So, the organization has to take almost all the responsibilities of the murder case and all other emerged and emerging situations there. In 2023 most of the resources of

Bangladesh Krishok Federation had to be spent on the issue of the murder case.

Cyclone 'Mocha' and Climate Change

In 2023, in May, there was a very powerful cyclone called 'Mocha' which hit partly Bangladesh and ended in Myanmar. Although this cyclone hit the country only partially, it caused huge damages to the people living in the southern part of Bangladesh where we have our organizational strongholds. Immediately after the cyclone came about, we took steps to help them overcome the disaster. We made a call to support them and gather funding to give the relief materials. Our international friends also stood by them, with a financial response at once that helped us to continue our task. As nowadays cyclones have its clear features with the fact that it is man-made and there are people who are responsible for this, we also had to campaign that time among the cyclone victims to demand reparation to the northern countries which have been contributing greenhouse gas emission continuously. At least, now the landless people can understand that cyclone, storms water surges, extreme weather events, drought, erratic rainfall, extreme cold and hot are the negative effect of global warming as well as climate change.

13 campaign programs

Throughout last year, we had 13 campaign programs which took place almost every month in different districts on land settlement, food and seed rights and sovereignty, climate change, asking for reparation for the damage due to climate change, fair price for the peasant produces, reduction of the electricity price and irrigation for the interest of peasants, introduction of a pension scheme for the peasants (both male and female) above sixty years, etc.

Some demands were met by the government. For example, last year the government announced the reasonable price to directly buy the rice crops from the peasants. Some peasants got the benefit of the decision of the authority, some could not avail of it because of the local intermediaries. Bangladesh Krishok Federation helped the peasants as much as possible to get their fair price.

Another one is that the government decided to give a pension to the elderly people who are more than 60 years old, but it is only for those who will start to give some premium from the age of 18. At the age of 60, they will be given a pension for their survival from the government. So, it is not in keeping with the proposal or demand we made to the government. So later we demanded a separate pension scheme for the elderly peasants only. The repercussions of 13 in 12 months were very positive. It has been educational, informative and motivated which made the peasants go forward.

Last year were three additional programs on tax justice, executive industries and income inequality. These programs were also very relevant because it is related to the poverty in the rural and urban areas where eventually our members normally reside.

Tax Justice

The question of tax justice is very relevant in the context of Bangladesh. Normally there are irregularities in relation to tax in different sectors in our country. These sectors include Multinational corporations, big national companies and other establishments. They are the big tax evaders who siphon off the money to other countries through an invoice or under invoices. Moreover, they are also laundering money and wealth to other countries through tax haven countries like Morocco, Bermuda, Luxembourg and Switzerland, Dubai and Malaysia, etc. The owners of the different companies in our country smuggled the money to Malaysia, Canada, Singapore, Dubai, etc. and built a vast area of residences, called Begum Para in Canada and M2H(My Second Home) in Malaysia.

Furthermore, the government has different kinds of facilities for the corporations which create tax injustice. There are tax holidays, tax grace period, tax exemption and tax cut, tax rebates, etc. Different companies are taking these facilities even though they do not deserve this. The higher tax irregularity is taking place in the extractive industry sector in the country. This sector involves gas, oil and coal companies. They are both national and international. There are some which have a long grace period for the non-payment of tax, some have tax-free options, some tax holiday measures. As a result, every year we lose millions of dollars in these sectors.

If this system were not in effect, the country would gain a huge amount of income which could be used for the development work. In fact, the extractive activities are not beneficial for the country in the long run. They are causing much harm to the environment, ecology, human health, human habitation, crops and indigenous people. Sometimes, it causes subsidence and fire on a larger scale and the damages are enormous. By the way, in Bangladesh we urgently need to establish tax justice in the extractive sector. For this the government has to play the pivotal role to introduce people's friendly rules.

There is also a movement in Bangladesh around extractives. In 2006, when there was strong opposition against open-pit mining, six people were killed by a British company called Asia Energy in Fulbari in the northern district of Dinajpur. There were horrible incidents like the Maguchhara gas blowout in Moulvibazar which caused damages worth 12 billion taka. Canadian company NIKO is responsible for this disaster. However, they have not yet paid compensation to our country. With reference to taxes, we can say that there is a regressive tax system prevailing in the country for which people are devoid of various opportunities. There is a universal VAT system, which is affecting all people in the country. Fifteen percent VAT which is valid for all rank-and-file people in the country. There is no way for the poor, women, working people, even beggars to avoid it because people must pay VAT on every purchase in the market. This system should be streamlined for tax justice.

We also must say that fossil fuel-based energy systems with a view to extractives is not sustainable. It contributes massively to climate change that is a big concern right now globally. It needs a vigorous and rational shift to a sustainable system.

In conclusion, we proposed some recommendations to be implemented in Bangladesh in order to ensure tax justice. 1. A progressive tax system should be introduced in place of existing regressive tax system 2. Regularities should be brought in the extractive industries 3. Tax holidays, tax exemption and Tax-free system should be cancelled 4. Illicit flows of money should be stopped. 5. The money and wealth already siphoned off should be brought back to the country and used for hunger and poverty eradication 6. Rapid and just transition in energy to 100% renewable energy.

Agroecology

Having said that, we are promoting agroecology in Bangladesh to build our future food system based on environment, ecology and ecosystem. For this purpose, a Agroecological Platform has been established last year which will run different programs with a view to reviewing existing food policy and seed policy, recommending holistic and sustainable agroecological practice and approach.

There are many routine programs to be done as usual, as for instance, observation of national Independence Day, Victory Day, May Day, Peasants' Struggle Day, death anniversary, etc. We also performed all of this even last year.

Additionally there were 3 programs we organized under the banner of the national level peasants' organization alliance called the Pragotisheel Krishok Sangram Parishad (Progressive Peasants'

Action Council). It also had an important impact on the government to make decisions on fair prices for peasants' crops and pension schemes. One leader of the Executive Committee of the above said alliance died this year.

Illnesses

Last year, some people of the organizations and befriended organizations got sick. They deserved the support of the organizations. We did our level best to stand by them. They are now Ok, but not fully cured. Especially the person whose one kidney was transplanted is facing new problems of infection, and the woman who is facing neuropathic problems also feels uneasy recently.

Furthermore, Jabeda Satter Khan, wife of late comrade Abdus Satter Khan (who was the founding president of BKF) was taken ill for several times. She was hospitalized again and again. On humanitarian ground we supported for her medical treatment although she is not active in organization these days. It is also not possible for her to play an active role because she is now 101 years old.

Last year we decided to publish a book on comrade Abdus Satter Khan's life and struggle in Bengali. It has been published already. A substantial amount of resource has been spent for this. It has been brought out in Kolkata India. A prominent writer named Amitav Chakraborti from India edited the book.

In conclusion, last year, the organizations had lot of challenges and achievements as well. Towards all of these activities, our partner organization ESSF has a big contribution in terms of finance and suggestion, for which we are extremely grateful to it. We warmly thank all the donors who helped us so much. We hope we continue to get such support this year 2024 too, to allow us to maintain all the practical work we are engaged in.

Badrul Alam

President

Bangladesh Krishok Federation

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