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Bangladesh

# The 2018 Char Conference of landless people

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**On 14 April, 2018 the Char Conference of landless people took place at Charhadi of Dashmina Upazila in Patuakhali district of Bangladesh. This event was jointly organized by Bangladesh Krishak Federation, Bangladesh Kishani Sabha, Bangladesh Adivasi Samity and Bangladesh Bhumihin Samity.**

5000 landless people across the country participated in the conference starting at 11 a.m. and finishing at 4 p.m. Before its commencement, the landless people from different char participated with processions and chanting slogans.

Some 100 participants joined the conference hailing from different faraway districts throughout the country: north Bengal indigenous groups, Dhaka, (in particular a student group) and various sectors (peasantry, workers...).

At the beginning of the event, both the chief guest and his wife were welcomed with garlands. Then, as a part of showing respect to the departed and wounded activists and leaders of land struggles and movements since 1976 to date, the participant remained silent for one minute. At the end of the conference, the declaration of Char conference of landless people -2018 was approved setting some specific aims and objectives [see below].

One of the most important parts of the declaration was to observe 27 November as ‘National Land Action Day’ in every year. On this particular day in 1991, the occupation of Khasland was declared formally.

The conference was presided over by Badrul Alam, President of Bangladesh Krishok Federation. In the conference, Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, former adviser to Caretaker Government and other participants delivered their valuable speech.

The participants delivering speeches including the organization or location they represent are stated below:

1. Fakruzzaman Badal, Vice-Chairperson of Dashmina Upazila
2. Dr. Samsunnahar Khan Doli, Female Vice Chairperson and President of Bangladesh Kishani Sabha
3. Md. Nazir Ahammed, Chairperson of Charborhan Union Council
4. AbulKalam Azad, Forest Bit Officer
5. Mukhlesuddin Shahin, Politburo member of Bangladesh Communist Party- ML
6. Subol Sarkar, General Secretary of Bangladesh Bhumihien Samity
7. Dr Samsul Alam ,Central leader of Bhumihin Samity
8. Omoli Kisku, General Secretary of Bangladesh Adivasi Samity

9. Zayed Iqbal, General Secretary of Bangladesh Krishok Federation
10. Abdus Sattr Hawlader, Assistant General Secretary
11. Naimia Shikdar ,President of Dashmina Upazila
12. Pran Krishna Das, General Secretary of Dashmina
13. Mokaddes Ali Shikdar, General Secretary of Kurigram District
14. Abdur Gaffar Leader of landless movement from Shatkhira
15. Md. Hasan from Faridpur
16. Md. Khalilur Rahman from Laskar Barguna
17. Abdur Malek and Alom, Bachhu Bholra district leaders
18. Shorab Akon, Char Bangla leader
19. Ashraf Shikdar and Shorab Hosain Char Shahjalal
20. Moti Matubar, Charhadi leader
21. Sabina Yasmin, General secretary of Bangladesh Krishani Sabha
22. Rekha Rani, Santal Adivasi leader from Dianjpir
23. Sabiha ,BKS President, Dianjpur District
24. Nehar Parvin Runu, Bangladesh Bhasman Nari Shramik Union President
25. Hosne Ara Begum, Leader of Bangladesh Bhasman Nari Shramik Union

It was a gathering of 5000 people and most of them were the inhabitants of different Chars occupied by the organization. They are entitled to permanent land settlement rights in the Charland. They established their food sovereignty through their development of Charland. They are the proud owner of a piece of land. These landless people who have become the owner of land once were helpless and poverty-stricken part of the society. They lived in the house of other people as client (locally called *Okrait*) and it was a disrespectful life. They had to survive relying on the sympathy of their lord or patron.

Today, their miseries are over. The horizon of opportunity has opened up for them to lead an independent and respectful life. But health and education services are not improved yet. There is no health and education

infrastructure nearby their localities. Some landless people still do not get a settlement in Char Khasland. Special measures should be taken to resolve this issue.

The participant leaders of landless people from different Chars pointed out on the multiple challenges they encounter in Chars. They see the negative impact of climate change as a great challenge for them. Climate change induced disaster, to a great extent, has already generated negative impact in their lives and livelihoods. It took many years for them to recover the losses incurred in SIDR, a severe cyclonic storm that smashed into the coastal belt violently in 2007.

Despite all these challenges, their hope and courage did not weaken. They adopted multiple strategies to cope with the adverse situation. In terms of mitigation, they stressed carrying out social forestry. In 1992 when they start dwelling in the char, it was an uninhabited place without trees. Now it has transformed into a greenish village. The social and cultural bondage and harmony among the char dwellers has also developed. Nevertheless, the Char has distinct geographical and environmental features; this reality with distinctiveness should be reflected in the state's plan and initiative.

A significant number of youths, both male and female, joined in the event. They paid tribute and respect to their previous generation after listening their struggling memories, stories and histories from the senior Char dwellers. They also pledged to carry forward the spirit of struggle.

The chief guest, Dr. Hossain Zilluar Rahmanin, in his address pointed out that the development of Char can be possible within the framework of Sustainable Development Goals. He specially stressed 'leaving no one behind' in any development agenda and program. He stated that courage and a moral position made them successful. He informed the Char dwellers that he had supported the Char movement from the beginning. So, he was extremely delighted to come and join in the process for the first time.

Bangladesh Krishok Federation President Badrul Alam, in his presiding speech, stated that carrying forward the Char struggle and movement is a painstaking and risky job but it is not impossible. He stated that the movement of landless people is successful through long and hard struggle and fight. According to him, the occupation of KhasChar generates legal base of land entitlement for the landless people.

He emphasized on achieving food sovereignty for the landless people. At the same time, he focused on environment and ecology friendly agriculture. As a part of promoting a respectful life for the landless peasants, the rights of the peasants should be established. He urged the peasant to encourage their children to engage in agriculture. He stated that agriculture cannot be controlled by corporate solely.

He said: 'we have to preserve our local seeds together with traditional agriculture; otherwise the whole agrarian system will be destroyed on account of aggression of corporates'. He encouraged the Char dwellers to produce chemical and pesticide-free agro-products. He warned small-scale food producers about using genetically modified seeds.

The other leaders stated that occupied 22 chars, 9 shrimp enclosures, abandoned railway property of the British regime and other waterbodies used in the interest of the landless and fisher folks. They promised to strengthen solidarity among themselves. They also expressed their intent to occupy new Chars in different locations. The leaders also aspired to develop an equality based society. The leaders stressed on strengthening the Adivasi land occupation movement and preserving traditional land rights.

The leaders pledged to move the Char movement forward, combining values and strategies. They urged the mass

intellectuals to support land movement. Last of all, they stressed on widening the struggling domination and called on building unity and solidarity among the landless people of the globe.

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# Declaration of the “Char Conference” of landless peasants

Today on 14th April 2018, we, approximately 5000 landless, peasants, agriculture workers, fisher folk and rural workers across the country have gathered at Charhadi of Dashmina sub-district under Patuakhali District.

We have discussed with regard to different aspects of distribution, settlements and management of Khasland, precisely Char Khasland together with the relentless struggle and movement for land.

We get the opportunity to share our accumulated knowledge and experience in this event. We will be able to integrate the reflections of our thoughts and actions to manoeuvre and devise a trajectory for our future struggle and movement in this process.

As a part of prime demand of the conference, we have called on the government to distribute 5 million acres of Khasland among the real landless people. We have set five objectives in this conference. The objectives are stated below:

1. Declaration of National Land Action Day
2. Documenting and preserving the history of Khasland movement
3. Prepare planning and strategy to settle down in new Khasland
4. Publishing souvenir on the remembrance of activists and leaders departed or wounded in the land struggles
5. Write down and publish the biography of the legendary guide and leader late Abdus Satter Khan

The land struggle we started in 1976, got final shape on 1 January 1992 (in Bengali 16 Poush) through the successful occupation and settlement in land of four Chars of Dashmina. Though we occupied the land on 1 January 1992, we declared the occupation on 27 November by observing historical strike and hunger strike; this particular day from the perspective of occupying Khasland is very significant. So, this day should be remembered. Considering all these aspects, we are declaring 27 November as “National Land Action Day”.

We are remembering the departed or wounded activists and leaders who fought for the land rights.

We are firmly declaring our determination along with the declaration:

1. We will continue our struggle to promote the right of landless people in Khasland located in different parts of the country

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2. We will continue our effort to carry forward a comprehensive agrarian reform as well as land reform at the interest of landless and peasants
3. We will carry out our campaign for establishing food sovereignty
4. We demand for introducing 'agro-ecology' as a part of promoting environment and ecology friendly agriculture
5. We will carry on our campaign to support the Char dwellers with the provisioned 500 million Taka of national budget

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[1] Adivasi are the indigenous peoples of South East Asia; today only around 1.5% of the population of Bangladesh