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India must show leadership in combating caste-based discrimination, says UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

During her first official visits to Nepal and India from 18-24 March, the High Commissioner for Human Rights delivered two historic speeches urging the Government of India to show global leadership in the fight against caste-based discrimination, and calling upon the Government of Nepal to apply existing laws to end such discriminatory practices.

Copenhagen, Denmark (IDSN) March 25, 2009 -- In two historic speeches, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Navi Pillay, has broken years of silence in the international community on the non-recognition of the global scale of caste-based discrimination. The High Commissioner sends a strong signal to the governments of India and Nepal that caste-based discrimination must be effectively addressed, both as a national and an international human rights problem.

This is the strongest support ever shown by the principal human rights official of the UN to the global fight against caste-based discrimination, seen by international human rights organisations as one of the biggest and most overlooked human rights violations in the world today. Affecting more than 260 million people, caste-based discrimination involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. It is based on any distinction, exclusion, or restriction based on inherited status and is therefore often likened to apartheid.

In her speech, delivered to the National Human Rights Commission in New Delhi on 23 March, the High Commissioner challenged the Government's position stressing that, "Of particular concern is caste-based discrimination which is still deplorably widespread ... Policies and measures that have been established to ensure relief ... have neither sufficiently alleviated their conditions, nor have they satisfactorily curtailed the climate of impunity that enables human rights violations." She noted that the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh strongly condemned the practice of "untouchability" associated with caste-based discrimination and compared it with apartheid, stating that, "This is an area where India can not only address its own challenges nationally, but show leadership in combating caste-based discrimination globally."

The High Commissioner presented her strong and honest opinion about the responsibility of the governments following a meeting with a number of civil society representatives, where concerns about the Government's non-implementation of national legislation and UN recommendations were raised. She recommended the Government to take up the recommendations stemming from the Universal Periodic Review and the UN treaty bodies, and encouraged the Government to accept visits by the UN special rapporteurs.

In Nepal Ms. Pillay expressed concern about discrimination as one of the root causes of the country's conflict. While recognising the significant steps taken to eliminate caste-based discrimination in Nepal, she said that, "measures such as the declaration outlawing untouchability must be accompanied by the application of existing laws against discriminatory practices and – again – accountability for those who commit human rights violations." IDSN welcomes the initiatives to counter caste-based discrimination already set in motion in Nepal, including the recent announcement that two Dalit ministers will join the new cabinet, and look forward to seeing this momentum continue in future.

For more information or interviews regarding the issue of caste-based discrimination, please do not hesitate to contact IDSN on +45 35245080 or info@idsn.org. Further information and resources can also be found on www.idsnn.org including a [factsheet with specific information on the Dalits of India](#).

- Download the High Commissioner's speeches held in [Nepal](#) and [India](#)
- Download a [factsheet on caste-based discrimination and human rights](#)

NOTES FOR EDITORS

Background:

- Caste discrimination is any distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on inherited status such as work and descent, commonly originating from a division of society into castes or social categories. This chronic human rights condition, which is associated with the notion of impurity, pollution and practices of 'untouchability', involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.
- Those who are beneath the entire caste system – and are therefore literally 'outcaste' as well as 'untouchable' – call themselves 'Dalits'.
- There are officially 166 million Dalits in India – NGO and expert estimates however, say the figure is closer to 200 million. There are between 15-20% Dalits in Nepal.
- The Dalits of India are impoverished and excluded, abused and humiliated, denied justice, exploited and considered untouchable.
- The Dalits are subject to modern day slavery in the form of bonded labour practices and the forced assignment of dangerous and demeaning duties.
- Dalits in the labour market are commonly not ensured the same rights as others and are left out of agreements on corporate social responsibility due to their status as a virtual 'non-people'.

Photos and Interviews:

- For Interviews with IDSNs Co-ordinator Rikke Nöhrind or contacts for interviews with associates in India , or caste studies, please contact IDSN on +45 35245080 or info@idsn.org
- Please contact IDSN on +45 35245080 or info@idsn.org for photos – we have a good stock of high quality photos of Dalits in India taken by award winning photographer Jakob Carlsen – available for licensing from the photographer. For examples please see the [online exhibition](#).

Further Information:

- The IDSN website – www.idsn.org provides a wide range of resources and material on the topic of caste-discrimination including case studies, video materials, and material directly relating to the situation in India.
- Contact IDSN on +45 35245080 or info@idsn.org for more information on the topic.