

This is a joint press release issued by: Human Rights Watch, Lutheran World Federation, Pax Romana, International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and FORUM-ASIA

PRESS RELEASE

--- FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE ---

UN Racism Conference fails to address caste-based discrimination affecting 260 million people

Those, for whom the Racism Conference should have been a platform for dialogue, are being relegated to the margins in the final outcome document

Geneva, April 22, 2009 --- The international community should take action on caste-based discrimination which violates the rights of 260 million people globally, a group of non-governmental organizations including Human Rights Watch, Lutheran World Federation, Pax Romana, International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and FORUM-ASIA, said at a news conference on caste-based discrimination and the Durban Review Conference.

The Durban Review Conference was organized to evaluate progress towards the goals set by the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Millions of victims of caste-based discrimination, hoping that the conference would serve as a platform to highlight their problems, were left deeply disappointed.

“Caste discrimination is one of the most important issues being left out of this conference and because of the predominant attention to one specific issue, all other concerns within the field of racism, discrimination, xenophobia and racial intolerance, are being excluded,” said Peter Prove of the Lutheran World Federation, who has worked for many years towards eliminating caste discrimination.

Dalits have long claimed that caste- and descent-based discrimination falls under the remit of this conference. Despite this, the final outcome document makes no reference to caste-based discrimination.

“Caste discrimination is a major global human rights issue, that needs to be effectively dealt with at the international level,” said Clive Baldwin, senior legal advisor at Human Rights Watch. “As the UN racial discrimination committee has made perfectly clear, caste discrimination falls under the Race Convention, and thereby within the scope of this review conference.”

Even as the issue is ignored at the conference, caste discrimination remains a massive problem in countries like India, where ongoing elections have once again exposed the challenges faced by Dalits. NCDHR, which has been monitoring the elections, has found that many Dalits are not being allowed to freely exercise their democratic rights, and are being beaten, threatened and obstructed from voting at local polling stations.

“This Durban Review Conference has totally eliminated any mention of caste or discrimination based on work and descent,” said Paul Divakar, of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in India, where more than 167 million from the Dalit communities suffer from caste discrimination.

Representatives from the Dalit communities present at the news conference also included Fatima Burnad and Dibakar Poricha who explained how Dalits were subjected to violence, rape, inhumane untouchability practices, and suffered routine discrimination, socially, culturally and politically. They also explained that due to the high level of impunity in cases involving Dalit victims, they have no way of asserting their rights through the judicial system.

Pointing out that victims of caste based discrimination suffer a hidden apartheid of segregation, modern-day slavery and other forms of discrimination as a result of having been

born into a marginalized group or caste, Rikke Nöhrind, Co-ordinator of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), stated, "This issue has been skilfully hidden by certain governments and Dalits are simply being treated as lesser human beings and denied justice."

Determined to keep fighting for their rights and to try and get the international community to listen, a sizeable delegation of Dalit representatives have travelled to Geneva to stage a number of side events and raise their voices against the wall of silence they are met with at the Durban Review Conference.

CONTACTS & RESOURCES

PRESS CONTACT: Please do not hesitate to contact mb@idsn.org or +45 61701218 for further information on the topic, relevant documents, case studies or interviews with Dalit representatives.

[> Press kit for journalists](#)

[> Programme of Dalit solidarity events at the Durban Review Conference and the Civil Society Forum](#)

[> Joint position paper prepared by IDSN, Human Rights Watch, NCDHR and other organisations.](#)

[> More information about the Durban Review Conference](#)

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. It is estimated that 260 million people are affected by caste discrimination worldwide.
- The Durban Review Conference is being held in Geneva between 20-24 April 2009 with the purpose of reviewing the implementation of the [Durban Declaration and Programme of Action \(DDPA\)](#).
- The Durban Declaration and Plan of Action (DDPA) includes several provisions relevant in the fight against this form of discrimination, and several UN bodies, in particular the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), have repeatedly reaffirmed that caste falls under the Race Convention.
- Several UN bodies have furthermore reaffirmed that [discrimination based on work and descent](#) - the UN terminology for caste discrimination - is prohibited by international human rights law, and that it is a global human rights phenomenon which should be addressed comprehensively through existing human rights mechanisms.
- Human Rights Watch has also previously highlighted the need for tackling the causes and consequences of this kind of discrimination by, among other things, encouraging delegations to welcome the work carried out by CERD on discrimination based on descent, to review CERD's General Comment No. 29 on Descent, and to include reference to it as a guiding opinion in defining and combating descent-based discrimination.

Photos and Interviews:

- [Press Kit](#): includes an overview of the issues, a list of relevant events and interview profiles for the many Dalit representatives travelling to Geneva to raise their voices on behalf of the millions of victims of caste based discrimination. Many of these representatives are also available for interviews during the conference, and for interviews after the conference in their own countries.
- Photos: Please contact IDSN on +45 61701218 or mb@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 research materials. [For more information on the Durban Review Conference please see the overview](#) on the IDSN website.
- **Contact IDSN on +45 61701218 or mb@idsn.org for more information on the topic.**

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