

PRESS RELEASE

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Human rights violations against 170 million people is not an “internal issue”

In statements at the UN racism conference yesterday states and NGOs put caste discrimination on the agenda, while India objected

Geneva, April 24, 2009 (IDSN) --- Despite caste-discrimination being left out of the official programme and the final outcome document at the Durban Review Conference, states and NGOs spoke out strongly on the issue in statements at the conference yesterday.

Nepal spoke with great concern about the many problems associated with inhumane untouchability practices, resulting from caste discrimination in Nepal, and alongside Slovenia, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Mauritius put the issue back on the conference agenda. India, who has a history of considering caste discrimination an internal issue, objected strongly to the issue of caste being brought up at this conference. Meanwhile, there are at least 170 million victims of caste discrimination in India alone and 260 million globally.

In a similar vein, Justice B.C. Patel of the National Human Rights Commission in India spoke out at a side event on caste discrimination earlier in the week, referring to caste issues in India as internal issues which should be dealt with as ‘family affairs’. This statement was strongly objected to by the many Dalits (victims of caste discrimination) present at the event, who feel nothing is being done to implement laws and stop discrimination at the local level.

Following the statements yesterday, a large group of Asian and international NGO’s issued a statement saying, “We strongly reject the argument that caste-based discrimination is an ‘internal affair’ which should not be addressed by relevant UN mechanisms, including this Review Conference.”

At a press conference, Co-ordinator of the International Dalit Solidarity Network, Rikke Nöhrlind pointed out that victims of caste based discrimination suffer a hidden apartheid of segregation, modern-day slavery and other forms of discrimination, stating that “This issue has been skilfully hidden by certain governments and Dalits are simply being treated as lesser human beings and denied justice.”

India has objected to caste being associated to the issue of race and while the group of NGOs comment in their statement that caste is not the same as race, they contend that it results in similar manifestations as reaffirmed by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in its General Recommendation 29.

“Caste discrimination is a major global human rights issue, that needs to be effectively dealt with at the international level,” Clive Baldwin, senior legal advisor at Human Rights Watch commented in a press release. “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.”

In a press conference earlier this week UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay said that the conference was about racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, and she personally felt that “related intolerance” would cover issues of caste, class and social status. Ms. Pillay has also spoken out strongly against caste discrimination in her visits to India and Nepal in March.

Despite these assertions, caste discrimination was left out completely of the final outcome document of the conference. Commenting on this Paul Divakar of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) in India, said that officially, “This Durban Review Conference has totally eliminated any mention of caste or discrimination based on work and descent, despite including text on similar groups such as the Romas”

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. For an immediate interview contact:

Paul Divakar, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR), +41 787392726 available from 14-17 for telephone interviews

Rikke Nöhrind, Co-ordinator, International Dalit Solidarity Network, +45 29700630 available from 12-16 for telephone interviews.

[> Press kit for journalists](#)

[> Press Release from Press Conference on Caste Discrimination – 22 April](#)

[> Joint statement by Asian and International NGOs on caste and Durban – 23 April](#)

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

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 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.

Further Information:

- The IDS
- Contact IDS