



PRESS RELEASE

MEPs: The EU must act now to help end one of the biggest human rights issues in the world

Brussels, March 1, 2011 (IDS N) --- MEPs stated that EU action must be taken to help end caste discrimination, affecting 260 million people worldwide. The statements came during a hearing on caste discrimination in South Asia, at the European Parliament Monday afternoon. This was also the message delivered by Dalit rights advocates at the hearing, who informed MEPs that concerted action to combat caste discrimination through EU development work, trade agreements and political dialogues, must be taken if development goals in caste-affected countries including India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal, are to be achieved and human rights respected.

Co-chair, MEP Mr Nirj Deva, opened the session with an explanation of what the consequences of caste discrimination are. As he read through the list of segregation, rape, murder, modern slavery, cleaning human excrements by hand, discrimination in access to basic services, education, health, he suddenly stopped himself and said that he could not read any more because it was simply too disgusting. He did not accept caste as a cultural or social value that should not be interfered in.

"I'm sure that everyone in this room will agree that if someone had cooked up the theory that we had to have slavery because the slaves are paying for sins in their previous life, that would not have washed. The same applies to caste discrimination and we have to do something in cooperation with South Asian countries to stop this," Mr Deva commented.

Coordinator of the International Dalit Solidarity Network, Ms Rikke Nöhrhnd called for a specific EU-wide policy to address caste discrimination, stating that, "It is experienced far too often that without a policy and special measures, caste discrimination 'falls off the agenda', whether in human rights dialogues, in country strategy and development programming."

Dalit Human Rights Defender, Manjula Pradeep, from India told MEPs how Dalits (formerly known as 'untouchables') suffer from severe human rights violations and live in segregation and fear of violence and abuse.

"Children as young as 3 years old are being told that 'you are untouchable' and are forced to sit separately from other children," Ms Pradeep stated. The consequences of the caste system are much like the consequences associated with South Africa's apartheid regime and this has widespread implications for Dalits in all aspects of their life, Ms Pradeep explained.

MEP Peter van Dalen said, "The Parliament needs to take a much more robust stand. Enough words – it's time for action. We must take action through our external action service – they need to make caste discrimination a priority. We are concluding a free trade agreement with India and we must include a clause on caste discrimination."

Antti Korkeakivi, Chief of the Indigenous Peoples and Minorities section at the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) explained that fighting cast discrimination was a key priority in the OHCHR's work in South Asia and that the High Commissioner takes a very strong stance against caste discrimination. He gave examples of the OHCHR's work in Nepal where significant progress has been made.

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Maria Lensu, from the European External Action Service, explained how the EEAS are incorporating measures to counter caste discrimination into various programmes and funding the work of Dalit human rights defenders.

Speakers and chairs also commented on the problems with the lack of enforcement of laws to protect Dalits in South Asia.

The hearing was concluded by co-chair Ms Kolarska Bobinska saying that this was the first of a series of meetings on caste discrimination and that the next one, to be held very soon, should be on what action the Parliament can take.

More information:

Contact IDSN Communication Officer, Maria Brink Schleimann, on mb@idsn.org or +4560433430 for further information, photos from caste affected countries, contacts for interviews, case studies and more.

Read more about caste and the EU: <http://idsn.org/international-advocacy/eu/>

Read more about caste and the UN: <http://idsn.org/international-advocacy/un/>

Documentation in connection with the hearing:

[Draft UN Principles and Guidelines on Discrimination Based on Work and Descent](#)

[IDSN Policy Recommendations for the EU](#)

[EP Resolution on Human Rights of the Dalits in India \(2007\)](#)

[IDSN study on caste-based discrimination in South Asia \(commissioned by the European Commission\)](#)

[IDSN's letter to EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, urging action on caste discrimination](#)Cases:

[Dalit Children in India – Victims of Caste Discrimination](#)