

## PRESS RELEASE:

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# Norway urged to work against caste discrimination in UN Human Rights Council

**With the election of Norway into the UN Human Rights Council, NGOs are urging the Norwegian Government to make the fight against the inhumane practice of caste discrimination one of their main priorities.**

## Caste discrimination causes grave human rights violations

Caste discrimination constitutes one of the most serious and widespread global human rights challenges today.

The victims of caste discrimination call themselves Dalits. They suffer a hidden apartheid of debt slavery, sexual abuse, violence, intimidation, and many forms of discrimination in schools, at work and elsewhere in society, simply because they are born as members of a marginalized and stigmatised social group. One of the many forms this discrimination can assume is currently demonstrated in the Indian elections, where both media and NGOs report that Dalits have been intimidated and kept away from voting at polling stations. This discrimination affects about 260 million people globally, at least 170 million of whom are living in India.

National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights in India received the 2007 Thorolf Rafto Memorial Prize for their work to promote Dalit human rights by peaceful and democratic means.

## Caste discrimination a challenge for all countries

Despite several states such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Slovenia and Mauritius speaking out against caste discrimination at the recent UN racism conference in Geneva, there was no mention of caste in the final outcome document. India, with a history of considering caste discrimination an internal issue, objected strongly to the issue of caste being brought up and have been successful in keeping the issue out of the final document.

A large group of [Asian and international NGOs](#) subsequently 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." Similarly, Clive Baldwin, Senior Legal Adviser for [Human Rights Watch](#), commented that, "Caste discrimination is a major global human rights issue, that needs to be effectively dealt with at the international level." It is therefore hoped that Norway, with their goal of being front-runners on human rights, will take the lead in the council on this crucial issue.

The [Norwegian NGO-forum](#) including most of the influential Norwegian human rights organizations has also declared that this issue ought to be given priority in its recently published recommendations for Minister of Foreign Affairs Jonas Gahr Støre, on the occasion of Norway's entry to the Human Rights Council. Among the recommendations are that Norway "encourage India to cooperate with the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in its recommendations concerning caste and caste related discrimination."

The [UN High Commissioner for Human Rights](#), Navi Pillay, recently challenged the Indian Government's position in her speech in New Delhi where she stressed that, "of particular concern is caste-based discrimination which is still deplorably widespread." Pillay noted that the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, strongly condemned the practice of "untouchability" associated with caste-based discrimination, and compared it with apartheid. She also stated that "this is an area where India can not only address its own challenges nationally, but show leadership in combating caste-based discrimination globally."

## Appeal to the Norwegian government

In the run up to the UN Human Rights Council May elections, Norway has pledged that "human rights are a cornerstone of Norwegian foreign and development policy," and that Norway "attaches great importance to the work of the Human Rights Council and consider it essential in efforts to further human rights worldwide."

"To honour this pledge, it is imperative that Norway tackle caste discrimination in their foreign policy and take action on one of the most brutal and systematic forms of discrimination in the world today", says Coordinator of the International Dalit Solidarity Network, Rikke Nöhrind.

"Caste discrimination should be an important issue in the Norwegian Government's foreign and development policy, particularly in relation to its work in the Human Rights Council and in the development of the Government's India strategy," says Iver Ørstavik, Coordinator for Dalit projects at the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights.

## CONTACTS & RESOURCES

**PRESS CONTACT:** Please do not hesitate to contact Rafto\* at [iver.orstavik@rafto.no](mailto:iver.orstavik@rafto.no), +4755210933, or IDSN\* [rn@idsn.org](mailto:rn@idsn.org) or +45 29700630 for further information on the topic, relevant documents, case studies or interviews with Dalit representatives or victims of caste discrimination.

\* **Rafto** The Rafto Foundation is a non-profit and non-partisan organization dedicated to the global promotion of human rights. The foundation annually awards a human rights prize in memory of Professor Thorolf Rafto. [www.rafto.no](http://www.rafto.no)

\* **IDSN** The International Dalit Solidarity Network works on a global level to eradicate caste discrimination. In caste-affected countries, Dalit rights movements try to mobilize their governments to fulfill their human rights obligations. In Europe and the United States, solidarity platforms and international associates raise international awareness and stimulate action by governments and multilateral institutions. [www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org)

## NOTES FOR EDITORS

### Background:

- Read more about caste discrimination and the United Nations on <http://www.idsn.org/international-advocacy/un/>
- 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.
- 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 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.
- The National Dalit Election Watch is monitoring the Indian elections and the website [www.dalitvotes.in](http://www.dalitvotes.in) is updated constantly as new complaints from polling stations are received.

### Further Information:

- The Rafto website – [www.rafto.no](http://www.rafto.no) provides information about the recipients of the Rafto prize and other activities organized by the Rafto foundation.
- The IDSN website – [www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org) provides a wide range of resources and material on the topic of caste-discrimination including case studies, video materials, photos and research materials.
- Contact IDSN on +45 29700630 or [rn@idsn.org](mailto:rn@idsn.org) for more information on the topic.