## Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN)

The disasterous floods that ravaged Pakistan in 2010, affecting more than 20 million people, hit Dalits hard. The flooding started in July 2010 but continued until late September in Sindh province, where more than seven million people have been affected.

Thousands of Dalit families faced caste discrimination in relief efforts, hampering their access to necessary help. There is only limited disaggregated data available about the affected population. The estimated number of Dalits affected is 500,000, mostly in the Sindh province. The information collected by PDSN and its member organisations suggests there was severe discrimination against Dalits during emergency rescue and relief work. Media, both printed and electronic, have also reported that scheduled caste Hindus were discriminated in distribution of food and denied shelter.

PDSN took up the issue of discrimination in relief work with the government by writing letters and also through holding meetings with local officials. The issue was also highlighted during civil society meetings across the country. Following the PDSN letters and media reports, the President of Pakistan, Asif Ali Zardari, ordered an inquiry into the matter but the results of the inquiry are yet to be published.

In September 2010, the President stated that relief work in his country should not be influenced by considerations of caste, creed or ethnicity. A spokesman for the President said that such discrimination would reflect poorly on the country's image and adversely impact on national unity. The President also called for action against officials found to be involved in discrimination in relief and rehabilitation work.

As a result of the President and media highlighting the caste discrimination issue, civil society organisations paid more attention to the Dalit population and provided immediate relief in some cases. PDSN provided food and warm clothes to 500 displaced Dalit families.

Besides this direct intervention key PDSN members, Pakistan Institute of Labour and Research (PILER), Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP), and Pakistan Fisher Folk Forum (PFF) are actively engaged in flood relief and rehabilitation work and have incorporated specific relief activities for Dalits into their programmes.

IDSN issued a statement on the case of Pakistan urging the international community to incorporate measures against caste discrimination in disaster relief operations as well as development programmes.

To ascertain the losses of livelihood and impact of floods on Dalits, PDSN, through its members PILER and UMID (Upgrade Minorities in Development) conducted a detailed survey of 500 Dalit families affected by floods. Final results of the report, which will be shared with policy makers and the government, are yet to be made public; although initial data suggests that Dalits sustained substantial losses and specific measures must be taken.

In collaboration with other NGOs, the PDSN secretariat started a series of advocacy activities for the early recovery and rehabilitation of flood-affected people. Dalit issues are part of this effort and Dalit communities are provided opportunities to raise their issues. In a flood related conference held on November 11-12 in Karachi, two Dalit representatives shared their views on the discrimination against them in relief camps. Over 100 delegates, including high government officials, representatives of civil society organisations and ministers, attended the conference.

PDSN and its key members also remained active in a number of other important areas. A national census was due in Pakistan in November 2010. PDSN organised two consultations where participants raised the issue that many Dalits were not counted in the previous census.

It was decided that PDSN and its member organisations should launch a campaign during the census period and establish district level facilitation centres. The Government of Pakistan later postponed the census to March 2011. PDSN

"Humanitarian agencies, whether multilateral, governmental or non-governmental must accept the responsibility to ensure that Dalits are not discriminated against and left out in relief and rehabilitation operations." IDSN 2010 Statement

furthermore participated in a workshop organised by the Census Commission of Pakistan and gave its feedback for revising census forms to include a caste column so that the actual number of Dalits can be ascertained.

A recurring issue in Pakistan is the religious tensions between the dominant Muslim population and the minority Hindu and Christian population. In 2010 a number of cases of rape, forced conversion and migration of Dalit communities were reported in Pakistan. In one particular case a 15-year old Dalit girl was kidnapped and forced to convert to Islam and marry her Muslim landlord. The case caused uproar among Dalits in Sindh province and made 71 Dalit families leave their ancestral village. PDSN member TRDP played a key role in highlighting this issue.

The Green Rural Development Organization (GRDO), another key member of PDSN, also took up a similar case and is still leading a campaign for the rehabilitation of 86 Dalit families, expelled from Tharparkar district by influential landlords.

The Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) also received information that a Muslim mob attacked a Dalit village in Sindh province following allegations of blasphemy. Houses were burnt and villagers forced to leave their homes. The village in Mirpurkhas district has been populated by a Dalit Meghwar community for a century.

To lobby for the general rights and welfare of the Dalits of Pakistan, a PDSN delegation led by Mr. Zulfiqar Shah, visited Islamabad in May 2010. The delegation met several members of parliament both in the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan. The PDSN delegation shared a 2007 study with them on the plight of scheduled castes and argued that there has been no change in the socio-economic conditions of Dalits. Some made commitments to take up the issue and follow-up activities are now required.

The Scheduled Castes Rights Movement (SCRM), a newly formed Dalit organisation, also organised several conferences and workshops in which the issues of scheduled castes were highlighted. As a result of these efforts the Hindu marriage registration draft bill was submitted to the Ministry of Minority Rights and it is expected that the bill will be presented in the National Assembly next year for legislation.

2010 also became the first year that a Dalit activist was given the highest civil award in Pakistan "Sitara-e-Imtiaz". Dr. Sono Khangharani, Chief Executive Officer of Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) received this award in recognition of his services to social development in rural Pakistan. This was an encouraging sign to all those fighting for the rights of marginalised communities in Pakistan.