



PRESS RELEASE

TIME TO TEAR DOWN THE WALL OF CASTE

UN Rights Official calls on world to end caste discrimination like it did apartheid

October 9, 2009 -- Governments in countries with caste systems should respond to the call from a top UN official to end this form of discrimination, Human Rights Watch, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) and the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) said today. The organisations urged governments in South Asia and other regions to cooperate with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, who has issued a strong call to end caste discrimination.

In an [opinion article](#), Ms. Pillay stated that “the time has come to eradicate the shameful concept of caste” and called on the international community to come together “as it did when it helped put an end to apartheid.” She argued that “other seemingly insurmountable walls, such as slavery and apartheid, have been dismantled in the past” and concluded that “we can and must tear down the barriers of caste too.”

“Governments in India and other caste-affected countries should support the new UN framework to eliminate caste discrimination,” said Rikke Nöhrind, coordinator, International Dalit Solidarity Network. “It is time for these nations to cooperate with the UN to address a human rights issue that affects 260 million people.”

The High Commissioner’s strong stance has been welcomed by Dalit rights groups, particularly in South Asia. As many as 200 million victims of caste discrimination live in India. Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka also have sizeable Dalit populations, and communities in Africa, Yemen and Japan are similarly affected.

“Dalits and similarly discriminated-against communities across the globe have been oppressed for thousands of years,” said Paul Divakar, general secretary of the NCDHR in India. “India’s ban on caste-based discrimination will not be effective unless the government makes it a priority to enforce it. Violence and other human rights abuses against Dalits are still committed with impunity. The government should work with the international community to address this problem.”

A key step for caste-affected countries, the groups said, is to adopt the UN principles and guidelines on caste discrimination – the first comprehensive UN framework to prevent and address this serious human rights problem. In her article, Pillay called on “all states to rally around and endorse these norms”. The adoption of the guidelines could lead to the establishment of a UN monitoring mechanism on caste discrimination.

Nepal recently expressed its support for the guidelines, describing them as a “good reference” and “useful tools”, and the EU also expressed support.

“Nepal’s response is an example for other governments,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. “Political will to end this scourge is needed at all levels of government to alter traditional attitudes and turn well-meaning laws into reality.”

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 problem, 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, especially in South Asia, where they are known as Dalits, but also in Japan, Yemen and several African countries. The social exclusion and segregation suffered by Dalits is comparable to conditions during South Africa's apartheid regime.

- The draft [UN principles and guidelines for the effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent](#) are contained in the [final report on this subject](#) which was published by the Human Rights Council in May 2009. This framework is based on existing human rights principles and obligations and proposes general and special measures to be taken by multiple stakeholders, including governments, multilateral bodies and private actors.
- On 17 September 2009, a group of international NGOs, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Government of Nepal joined forces with victims of caste discrimination at a side event in Geneva to inform governments about the guidelines. The event triggered a [considerable amount of media debate](#).
- Several UN bodies have 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

- Photos from the meeting between the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Dalit activists that was mentioned in Ms. Pillay's opinion piece, are available free of charge from IDSN. Please contact info@idsn.org. We also have a good stock of high quality photos of Dalits in South Asia taken by award winning photographer Jakob Carlsen – available for licensing from the photographer.

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Further information

For background information on caste discrimination, please check the IDSN website at www.idsn.org