

11th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

Item 2: Update by the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights

General Debate - 4 June 2009

Joint Statement on behalf of International Movement against all forms of Racism and Discrimination, the Lutheran World Federation and Pax Romana (International Catholic Movement For Intellectual And Cultural Affairs And International Movement Of Catholic Students) ¹

Mr. President,

The endorsing organizations welcome the update by the High Commissioner on Human Rights, in which she underlines the universal respect for the protection of all human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, without distinction of any kind and in a fair and equal manner. We would like to extend our appreciation to the High Commissioner for her strong emphasis on non-discrimination and the promotion and protection of rights of marginalized groups facing multiple forms of discrimination.

While the Durban Review Conference addressed the human rights of some specific groups, including migrants, we regret that one of most entrenched forms of discrimination – discrimination based on work and descent – was once again left out of the final outcome document, as it was in the first Durban conference. The number of persons affected by this form of discrimination, approximately 260 million people worldwide, and the range and severity of human rights violations indicate that this is one of the biggest, yet most overlooked human rights problems that face the affected countries and the international community today. We therefore welcome your commitment to addressing discrimination on the basis of caste, class and social status as a form of “related intolerance” covered by the DDPA.

¹ The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) also shares the views expressed in this statement.

Madam High Commissioner,

In your update to the Council, you mention the role played by your office in Nepal's peace process and the continuing challenges in the country. On a similar note, we wish to congratulate you for the constructive role you played during your first official visits to Nepal and India in March this year. During these visits, the two governments were urged to take effective measures to eliminate caste-based discrimination. In Nepal, the Government was recommended to accompany "measures such as the declaration outlawing untouchability [...] by the application of existing laws against discriminatory practices and – again – accountability for those who commit human rights violations." In a speech to the National Human Rights Commission in New Delhi, the Government of India was urged to "not only address its own challenges nationally, but show leadership in combating caste-based discrimination globally." We sincerely hope that your recommendation to show global leadership in this fight will resonate in the affected countries. We therefore recognize the pivotal role played by the Government of Nepal, which expressed its clear commitment to dealing effectively with the practice of "untouchability" during the Review Conference, and hope that all affected governments will not neglect this human rights concern in the UN in the future.

Finally, in your update you point out that "a neglect of basic human rights, as well as discriminatory practices, is often to be found at the roots of conflicts." As reflected in your statement in India "long-standing grievances of minorities, 'lower castes', or the poor may turn into violence". It is regretful to observe again and again how violent clashes in affected countries (latest in the Indian state of Punjab and in Orissa in 2008) are often related to caste dynamics with communal forces continuing to insist that Dalits remain at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Such dynamics also exacerbate the vulnerability of affected groups in the relief and reconstruction phases following emergencies and post-conflict situations. Likewise, Dalit women often suffer multiple forms of discrimination as women, as poor, and as 'untouchables'.

In conclusion, we urge you to continue to call for increased international recognition of caste-based discrimination and to make the promotion and protection of these victims' rights a key priority in the work of your office. Therefore, we would like you to elaborate on the plans of your office to address the issue of caste-based discrimination in the years to come.

Thank you.