

Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network

The Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) was formally launched in Karachi on 5 April 2009 in connection with a consultation entitled “Problems faced by Dalits: Strategies for Solution.” Although the network has been in place for some years, it was re-launched in the presence of a wider group of civil society organisations. The consultation took detailed account of the problems faced by Dalits in Pakistan and discussed PDSN strategies to raise these issues.

In 2009 PDSN engaged in a number of activities to highlight the Dalit issue in Pakistan. A main focus area concerned preparations for the next national census, due every ten years. The latest census was held in 1998, but the next one was only announced by the Government in October 2009. The census is a major issue for Dalits because the previous censuses have undercounted the total numbers of Scheduled Castes, as Dalits are officially called. Official statistics have been widely contested, and representatives claim that the current number (330,000) has deliberately been made lower and may be as high as two million. PDSN therefore included this issue in its advocacy agenda and organised a series of meetings at grass root level, including a major consultation in Hyderabad in June. PDSN also raised the issue in consultations on the topic organised by other organisations. PDSN sent its recommendations on changes in census forms to the Central Census Office. The Central Government, however, postponed the census process, and a new date has yet to be announced.

The PDSN secretariat, which is currently based at the Pakistan Institute of Labour Education and Research (PILER), maintained a database with press clippings on violence against Dalits and related government actions. On this basis PDSN issued several urgent calls for action against such attacks, and wrote letters to the higher judiciary on the matter. One appeal concerned the case of Mr Ramzan Bheel, a Dalit who was beaten and humiliated by private guards of a landlord in Sindh province in May. PDSN also informed the Ministry of Human Rights of this case.

An overwhelming majority of the thousands released from labour bondage in 2009 were Dalits. Given that bonded labour is one of the main sources of economic exploitation of Dalits, PDSN remained engaged in advocacy on the issue throughout the year. This involved grass root support of bonded labourers when they were released and help with unionisation and advocacy at a national level.

In August Christian villages and colonies were attacked in Punjab based on allegations of blasphemy, and several people were burnt alive and homes set on fire. Most of the victims were ‘lower caste’ Christians who were occupied by the local municipality to do cleaning and other menial jobs. PDSN was among the first few organisations that visited the affected villages and sympathised with the victims. A press statement was issued condemning the incident.

In mid-2009, the Government of Pakistan established a committee to receive recommendations on constitutional reform. Civil society organisations also formed a committee, and PDSN participated to raise the Dalit issue. While the process halted due to political uncertainty, this will remain a priority area for PDSN.

One of the main challenges for Dalits in Pakistan is the need for acceptance; caste discrimination is still not accepted and recognised, neither by state institutions nor at the local level. Though there has been some change over the last years, there is a long way to go. Dalits continue to be

“The committee urges the State to intensify its efforts to implement the laws and programs adopted to put an end to bonded labour and discrimination against marginalised groups such as the scheduled castes.” CERD concluding observations on Pakistan, February

economically exploited by landlords that thrive on the Dalit labour force. Hence, a large number of Dalits remain in bondage. Those who are successful in securing their freedom have no place to live, and the Government offers no rehabilitation plan for them. A number of Dalits also face eviction threats due to the lack of any entitlement documents, as the majority of Dalits in Pakistan are without such documents. There is an urgent need for comprehensive constitutional and legal reforms to address such issues.

The Dalit rights movement in Pakistan is still very young, and faces several challenges in its struggle to highlight the Dalit issue. The network lacks capacity and resources within the Dalit rights movement. Also, the situation in the country poses a constant obstacle to any serious progress, in particular political uncertainty and terrorism. With daily incidents of suicide attacks and terrorist threats, it becomes

Kidnapped for helping bonded labourers

PDSN and its members actively joined the struggle for the release of a Dalit activist, the advocate amar chand. He had helped with the release of a group of 78 bonded labourers through legal means from a landlord in early 2009. Following this action, the landlord turned against him. mr chand was kidnapped by armed people when he was travelling to appear before a court in a false case registered by the landlord. PDSN actively participated in a hunger strike and campaigned for his release. He was released two days after the PDSN secretary and relatives of mr chand approached the Sindh chief minister.

difficult to raise the Dalit issue because most of the Government functionaries, media and other stakeholders are preoccupied with security related issues.