



**International Dalit Solidarity Network**

WORKING GLOBALLY AGAINST DISCRIMINATION BASED ON WORK AND DESCENT

## **OPEN LETTER**

**To: Ms. Catherine ASHTON, EU High  
Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security  
and Vice President of the European Commission**

21 October 2010

Dear Ms. Ashton,

I write to you to draw your attention to the issue of caste-based discrimination, one of the largest and most serious human rights problems in the world today, which warrants urgent attention by the EU through a comprehensive and multipronged approach.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDS N) promotes the elimination of caste-based discrimination, assisting affected communities in defending their human rights.

We believe that unless this issue is taken up with strong leadership at the highest levels of government, an estimated 260 million people around the world will remain condemned to a lifetime of abuse simply because of the caste into which they are born.

### **Caste discrimination**

Caste denotes a system of rigid social stratification that is reinforced through the threat of social ostracism, economic boycotts, and even physical violence resulting in severe violations of civil and political, as well as economic, social and cultural rights. In South Asia, Dalits - formerly known as 'untouchables' or 'scheduled castes', suffer routine violations of their right to life and security of person also through state-sanctioned acts of violence, including torture, with de facto limited access to justice and redress. Both state and private actors commit these crimes with impunity, despite as in the case of India longstanding constitutional, legislative and affirmative action measures. According to the ILO, Dalits constitute the largest single group in South Asia subjected to forced and bonded labour, including demeaning and hazardous jobs such as manual scavenging<sup>[1]</sup>. Dalit women are particularly exposed and subject to multiple forms of discrimination, including sexual abuse by the police and upper-caste men, forced prostitution, and discrimination in employment and the payment of wages. As a result they face even higher levels of poverty and exclusion.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Manual scavenging is the task forced upon or traditionally 'assigned' to Dalits to remove human faeces from dry latrines with minimum equipment

Fælledvej 12  
2200 Copenhagen N  
Denmark  
Tel: +45 60 43 34 32  
info@idsn.org  
[www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org)

As a major cause of poverty, caste-based discrimination is an obstacle to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, and evidence suggests that 'caste-blind policies', including in humanitarian responses may even exacerbate existing exclusionary mechanisms.

### **The role of European Union**

The EU has made human rights a central aspect of its external relations; in the political dialogues it holds with third countries; through its development policy and assistance; and through its action in multilateral fora such as the United Nations.

We urge you as High Representative for the European External Action Service to ensure that caste-based discrimination is given the attention appropriate for a human rights problem of this magnitude - in multilateral cooperation as well as bilateral cooperation with caste-affected countries and encourage development of policies to enhance and strengthen the EU's role in the above mentioned areas.

Caste-based discrimination warrants separate and distinctive treatment in the UN human rights system and— in an important step in this direction—UN experts have proposed a comprehensive set of UN Principles and Guidelines for the effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent. Last year, Ms. Navi Pillay called upon the international community to support international efforts and urged the UN Human Rights Council to adopt the guidelines. We call upon the EU to play a key role in this process.

We suggest that the EEAS structure - within the framework of the Human Rights Policy Review – considers the progress made so far by the Commission, the Council and the Parliament to address discrimination based on 'work and descent' and prepares a strong EU policy and related EEAS involvement towards the elimination of the same.

Since 2001, the European Parliament has repeatedly called on the Commission and the Council to take concerted action to address the issue of caste discrimination, and in 2007 the Parliament adopted resolution B6-0021/2007 on the human rights situation of the Dalits in India. In 2009, the Commission asked IDSN to undertake a study on caste discrimination in South Asia and to provide operational guidance on caste-sensitive programming. In May this year, the Working Party on Human Rights (COHOM) conducted a hearing on caste discrimination and invited IDSN to present its recommendations. A copy of IDSN's consolidated policy recommendations to the EU is enclosed for your kind consideration.

### **EU-India Summit**

On 10 December— the international Human Rights Day, dedicated to human rights defenders acting to end discrimination – the EU will host the annual EU-India summit in Brussels.

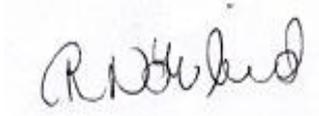
On this occasion we urge you to raise the European Union's concern over the widespread discrimination against an estimated 200 million people in India in social, economic and political spheres of life, and the culture of impunity that surrounds it.

We suggest immediate strengthening of the EU-India human rights dialogues to include this topic, and ask the EEAS to invite civil society organisations for a consultation on the topic prior to the next annual EU-India Human Rights Dialogue.

We encourage your office to take relevant UN treaty body observations into consideration in the human rights dialogues and other senior ministerial-level meetings.

We express our sincere hope that you will be able to take action on the points raised.

Yours sincerely,



Rikke Nöhrind  
Co-ordinator

Encl. IDSN Policy recommendations to the EU

**IDSN Members and Associates:** The National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) – India; The Dalit NGO Federation (DNF) – Nepal; Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM); Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network; The Dalit Solidarity Network – UK; The Dalit Solidarity Platform – Germany; The Dalit Network – Netherlands; The Dalit Solidarity Network – Denmark; The Dalit Solidarity Network – Sweden; The Dalit Solidarity Network – Belgium; The Dalit Solidarity Network, Finland; RAFTO Foundation – Norway; National Conference of Dalit Organisations (NACDOR) – India; Feminist Dalit Organisation (FEDO) – Nepal; National Federation of Dalit Women – India; Human Rights Watch; The Lutheran World Federation; The International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism; Anti-Slavery International; The Minority Rights Group International; The Asian Human Rights Commission; The Robert F. Kennedy Foundation; Pax Romana ICMICA/MIIC; FORUM-ASIA; The World Council of Churches; The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative; Asian Centre for Human Rights; Centre for Human Rights and Global Justice, NYU School of Law