

UN experts call for an end to caste-based stigma and slavery

UN officials and Dalit activists called on states to address the stigma and exclusion caused by caste discrimination at a side event during the 21st session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

GENEVA, 13 September 2012 -- Two United Nations human rights rapporteurs called on UN Member states to recognize the stigma, exclusion and slavery-like conditions that caste-based discrimination result in worldwide. Speaking in Geneva on Wednesday at a Human Rights Council side event on 'stigma and untouchability', the special rapporteurs on water and sanitation and contemporary forms of slavery urged states to take action to address these illegal, yet widespread practices.

"Stigma is imposed by society and authorities, and result in pushing people to the margin of society, as I have seen it for example with regards to Dalits and other marginalised groups," said Catarina de Albuquerque, UN special rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

The rapporteur said that she was shocked to see the conditions that Dalits lived under, when she visited Dalit communities in Bangladesh. She recommended states to promote a thematic debate on stigma in the Human Rights Council, and to address the issue in Universal Periodic Reviews.

The second UN rapporteur to speak at the event highlighted caste systems as a root cause of forced and bonded labour in Asia. The ILO estimates that there are 23 million bonded labourers around the world; the majority of them from marginalised communities, including Dalit and tribal communities.

"Caste discrimination is one of the most pernicious forms of discrimination, as it condemns individuals from birth to a life of marginalization. The links between caste, social hierarchy and slavery are strong," said the rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Gulnara Shahinian, giving examples of caste-based slavery in Mauritania. She called on states to support the draft UN Principles and Guidelines for the elimination of discrimination based on work and descent as a framework for ending caste discrimination.

The two UN rapporteurs were joined by Dalit rights activists and a representative of the International Labour Organisation in a discussion on ways to overcome the challenges posed by caste discrimination. Dalit activist Hannah Johns gave examples of the stigma and discrimination faced by Dalit women and girls, e.g. when fetching water or seeking medical aid during conflicts and disasters.

The Indian human rights campaigner Ashif Shaikh pointed out that although manual scavenging, the practice of removing human excreta manually, is prohibited in India, it is still widespread. Mr. Shaikh called for a swift adoption of a new bill recently tabled in the parliament, and for a comprehensive rehabilitation package to be included herein.

In his statement, Zulfiqar Shah of the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network urged UN Member states to take up the issue of caste-based discrimination when Pakistan is being reviewed by the Universal Periodic Review mechanism on 30 October. Specifically, he recommended states to address bonded labour conditions and forced conversions in Pakistan in the review.

The event was moderated by UN human rights official Jyoti Sanghera who, drawing on her experience as a former representative of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal, noted that Nepal is one of the few states that have moved forward on this agenda.

She highlighted the progress made, such as the enactment of a new law, which criminalises caste-based discrimination and untouchability in Nepal, and the proposed bill on manual scavenging in India. However, lack of political will and effective implementation were identified as major challenges to eradicate this practice, which continues to be widespread, mainly in South Asia.

The side event was organised by a number of international human rights NGOs in association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network.

More information:

- Programme of the side event:
http://www.idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/pdf/New_files/UN/HRC/HRC21sideevent_stigmaand_untouchability.pdf
- Short film 'End caste-based discrimination now' screened during the event:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=M5eyXPAvGfM
- Written statement for the 21st session of the Human Rights Council:
http://www.idsn.org/fileadmin/user_folder/IMADR_Stigma_statement.pdf
- Campaign to end caste-based discrimination: www.endcaste.com
- More information about IDSN's work can be found on www.idsn.org
- Contact person: Ms. Rikke Nöhrind, Coordinator of IDSN: +45 2970 0630