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Press Release

The issue caste discrimination is ignored by UN member States at the Durban Review Conference, took Place in Geneva on the 20-24 April. **India still unwilling to address Caste Based Discrimination in the UN While Several Dalit organizations from Asia demand the UN to include it in the agenda of the Durban Review Conference 2009**

Eight years have passed since the World Conference against Racism in Durban, a conference at which the voice of Dalits was heard loud and clearly at the international level. Since then, the road from international recognition to action on caste-based discrimination, officially referred to as 'discrimination based on work and descent', has been and continues to be an unfinished story of progress towards addressing this grave human rights concern.

It is against this background that 19 participants from the Asian Dalit Rights Movement (ADRM) coming from 5 Asian countries – Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Nepal, and Sri Lanka – descended on Geneva for the Durban Review Conference (DRC) last week. The final outcome document adopted in the DRC Plenary did not explicitly refer to discrimination based on work and descent, a fact noted by a number of Swiss and international media. This can be contrasted with the much greater awareness and articulation of caste based discrimination against Dalits manifested by both civil society organizations and certain state delegations from all over the world during this Conference.

Recognizing the limited formal spaces for interventions in this Conference, Dalit organizations including ADRM as well as Dalit solidarity organizations did nonetheless succeed in raising global political visibility for the issue of caste based discrimination with a number of government and non-government stakeholders both within and outside the Conference. Meetings with a number of government delegations showed that caste based discrimination are becoming known among a number of UN member states as a burning issue to be tackled. Nepali delegates met with their Ambassador and members of their national human rights institutions for open discussions on tackling caste based discrimination within their country.

ADRM commends the governments of Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Mauritius and Slovenia for explicitly referring to caste based discrimination in their official statements. In stark contrast, the official Indian government statement was conspicuously silent on this issue, despite India having the largest population of people discriminated on the basis of work and descent in the world.

Prior to the official conference, ADRM participated in the public rally organized on 17 April through the city of Geneva, the first opportunity for Dalit issues to be publicly raised and consequently broadcast on a local TV news channel as well as across several countries in Europe. To end this rally on a note of determination to uphold Dalit dignity, baskets were symbolically burnt to signify the eradication of the obnoxious and inhuman practice of manual scavenging. The following day, Dalit and Buraku representatives of communities discriminated on the basis of work and descent, along with international solidarity groups and other civil

society organizations, participated in a workshop during the Civil Society Forum on work and descent based discrimination. The Declaration and Recommendations issued from this working group included strong support for the inclusion of discrimination based on work and descent in the final outcome document of the Conference, alongside specific measures in the National Action Plans of all concerned countries to implement the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

This stand was reiterated in the DRC Side Event “Social Exclusion in South Asia: Challenges and Responses” organized by NCDHR-India in collaboration with HDO-Sri Lanka, FEDO-Nepal and Pax Romana. The Chairperson of the National Dalit Commission of Nepal, alongside Prof. Gay McDougall, the Independent Expert on Minorities and Prof. Doudou Diene, the former Special Rapporteurs on Contemporary Forms of Racism, all spoke strongly of the need for national as well as international action in order to eradicate caste based discrimination, change casteist mindsets and to promote social inclusion of Dalits into South Asian societies. The Chairperson of the National Dalit Commission of Nepal spoke of the steps being taken to address this issue of caste discrimination in his country. Members of the National Human Rights Commission India also attended this Side Event, and on request from the Chair one member, Justice B.S. Patel, was invited to speak. The international response in favour of action on caste based discrimination was further reiterated at two other side events organized by IMADR and LWF, and Forum Asia and others, with Githu Muigai, the current Special Rapporteurs on Contemporary Forms of Racism, and Yakin Ertürk, the Special Rapporteurs on Violence against Women. Further interventions by ADRM delegates in other side events, such as on the role of the CERD Committee and on combating racism in the workplace organized by the ILO, served to highlight the different aspects of human rights concerns linked with the Dalit situation.

Overall, the reference to CERD General Recommendation 29 in the DRC outcome document, mention of caste based discrimination by certain countries in their official statements, as well as the informal special session ADRM Delegates had with the staff of the OHCHR attest to the growing international attention being paid to this issue. But the equally significant gain lies in the political importance given to this issue in the public fora through the well attended Side Events and the extensive media coverage of caste based discrimination, thereby exposing its absence from the final outcome document of the Conference. What started in Durban almost a decade ago highlighting caste based discrimination as a form of hidden apartheid has emerged today in Geneva as a substantive political issue demanding international attention and response. For the peoples discriminated on the basis of work and descent, the next decade will be therefore a defining moment to gain official recognition from the international community as peoples entitled to occupy centre stage in UN deliberations as well as in the history of humanity.

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