



Press release

European Parliament urges the EU to fight caste discrimination

The elected representatives of half a billion Europeans from 28 countries in the European Parliament (EP) today adopted a strongly worded resolution on caste discrimination.

Copenhagen (IDSN)/10 October 2013 – The European Parliament has sent a strong message of support to hundreds of millions of people all over the world who are subjected to caste discrimination by urging the EU to step up efforts to address a human rights issue that causes almost unimaginable suffering.

Prior to adopting a resolution on caste discrimination, MEPs from a wide cross-section of political groups spoke passionately about the topic and condemned this form of discrimination in very strong terms. Some even argued that goods from caste-affected countries should be boycotted, and there was broad agreement that EU institutions are not doing enough to address the issue.

The EP resolution calls on EU institutions to recognise and address caste discrimination on par with other grounds of discrimination such as ethnicity, race, religion, gender and sexuality; to include the issue in EU legislation and human rights policies; and to raise it at the highest level with governments of caste-affected countries.

In the debate's opening speech, Green MEP Eva Joly, chair of the Committee on Development that tabled the resolution, quoted the Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. A few years ago he compared caste discrimination in his own country to South Africa's despised apartheid system. "Despite this declaration, despite the abolition of 'untouchability' in the Indian constitution, despite laws, 260 million people are suffering daily from atrocities committed with complete impunity," Ms Joly said, referring to the estimated number of people across the globe who are subjected to caste discrimination. Most of these live in South Asia and are known as Dalits.

Other speakers noted that caste discrimination has no place in modern, democratic societies. Labelling it "one of the biggest paradoxes of the 21st century", the liberal MEP Leonidas Donskis noted that "it is imperative to ensure that the fight against caste-based discrimination becomes part of the standard EU human rights language and is systematically included in the Union's efforts worldwide."

EU Commissioner Cecilia Malmström claimed that this was already happening and listed a number of tools that the EU system is using to address the issue, including human rights dialogues with affected countries, and development programmes. However, her statement was met with some scepticism from MEPs.

"I don't really agree that this is put on the agenda quite often," said Alf Svensson of the European People's Party Group, and others went further: "If we have all these EU instruments, and 260 million people still suffer caste discrimination, we are failing," Michael Cashman of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats said.

Many MEPs spoke of the brutal violence that Dalit women and children are subjected to. Others argued that trade relations with caste-affected countries should be examined. One speaker mentioned the importance of the draft UN guidelines to eliminate caste discrimination, and urged the EEAS to promote them. Speaking on behalf of the GUE group, MEP Paul Murphy praised the work of Dalit activists, saying that they were pointing a way forward to confine "this barbaric feudal remnant to the dustbin of history."

IDSN and its members now urge EU institutions to take action on the numerous points raised in the resolution in order to address caste discrimination. Speaking from the EP in Strasbourg, IDSN coordinator Rikke Nöhrind and Manjula Pradeep, IDSN Executive Board member from India, noted that the resolution had secured very broad cross-party backing.

"We were encouraged to hear from Commissioner Malmström that caste discrimination is a high priority for the EU, and that it wants to fight against it. However, we also agree with the many parliamentarians who say that more could be done. Caste discrimination is one of the world's most serious human rights problems, and we believe that the EU can play an important role in ending it."

Notes for editors

Links

[Download the motion for a resolution on caste discrimination >>](#)

[Click here for the oral questions on caste discrimination >>](#)

Watch a [webcast of the EP debate on caste discrimination >>](#)

Download [transcripts and transmissions from the debate >>](#)

Tweets from the debate are sent out via www.twitter.com/idsnupdates >>

Media interviews

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Photos

For high quality photos of Dalits in South Asia, please contact IDSN on +45 6043 3433 or mb@idsn.org – available for licensing from the award winning photographer [Jakob Carlsen](#). See [examples here >>](#)

Background on caste discrimination

Caste systems divide people into unequal and hierarchical social groups. The ensuing caste-based discrimination involves massive violations of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including rape and murder. Those at the bottom of the caste system are considered ‘lesser human beings’, ‘impure’ and ‘polluting’ to other caste groups. They are known to be ‘untouchable’ and are often forcibly assigned the most dirty, menial and hazardous jobs. Many are subjected to forced and bonded labour.

Caste discrimination affects an estimated 260 million people around the world. The majority of victims of this form of discrimination live in South Asia where they are known as Dalits. Similarly affected groups are found in a number of African countries, Japan, Yemen and in diaspora communities of South Asian origin in Europe, North America and Asia.

[The European Parliament and caste discrimination](#)

The European Parliament has spoken out strongly on the issue on numerous occasions, most notably in December 2012 when a [resolution on caste-based discrimination in India](#) condemned the high number of human rights violations committed against Dalits – including sexual violence against Dalit women - and deplored the lack of intervention by the authorities in acts of communal violence against them.

The EP has referred to the issue on several other occasions, including a resolution on violence against women in India in January 2013 that included references to caste discrimination and the situation of Dalit women.

Further information

For further information on caste discrimination, see www.idsni.org or contact Maria Brink Schleimann, IDSN Communications Officer, at +45 6043 3433 / mb@idsni.org