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Discrimination against Al-Akhdam people in Yemen criticised by CERD

Copenhagen, August 22, 2006: The *UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD)* expressed deep concern about the discriminatory practises performed against the Al-Akhdam people in Yemen, when CERD reviewed the fifteenth and sixteenth periodic reports of the Republic of Yemen on 3-4 August.

In its Concluding Observations, issued on 18 August, CERD recommends the State Party to develop a national strategy to eliminate discrimination of members of marginalised and vulnerable descent-based groups. The Committee further recommends that Yemen develop legislation and prohibit all forms of discrimination based on descent in employment, housing, access to health care and social security services for members of affected communities, in particular the Al-Akhdam.

In Yemen, the Al-Akhdam community constitutes an estimated 250,000-500,000 people who suffer various forms of discrimination. A comprehensive shadow report submitted to CERD prior to the review provides in-depth information about the past and present social, economic, and political exclusion of the Al-Akhdam. The report prepared by Ms. Huda Seif from Alternative World in collaboration with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) suggests that the systematic discrimination against the Al-Akhdam people is a practiced social reality in contemporary Yemeni society. One of the findings is that the discrimination faced by the Al-Akhdam resembles the practises of “untouchability” and extreme social exclusion, experienced by the Dalits of South Asia. The marginalised groups in Yemen, particularly the Al-Akhdam community, are subjected to a caste-like system of discrimination.

Till date, no laws have been enacted to make punishable the socio-cultural practices of persecution of Al-Akhdam, which include prohibitions on access to land, housing, market places, and public health care. According to the shadow report, the Al-Akhdam have for centuries suffered discrimination and persecution. They are systematically excluded from mainstream society as an “untouchable” ethnic outcaste. They are subjected to dehumanizing social practices, and to physical violence such as public beatings, rape, and torture. They are prohibited from living in mainstream society, and forced into slums areas that do not allow secure, peaceful and dignified existence. In this extremely marginal social position the Al-Akhdam are economically exploited and forced to carry out society’s most degrading, despised, and polluting tasks such as removing manually all forms of human waste and refuse, including the removal of human excreta from latrines in rural and urban areas.

“It is high time that the Government of the Republic of Yemen as well as the international community and international NGOs supporting development and human rights initiatives in Yemen take action to address the plight of Al-Akhdam and secure their basic human rights” says Rikke Nöhrind, co-ordinator of IDSN.

The recommendations issued by CERD are seen as a crucial step in the campaign for justice for Yemen's Al-Akhdam people. "I believe that the recognition of the plight of the Al-Akhdam has reached an unprecedented momentum, one that can neither be ignored nor reversed. The proceedings of the Session have opened up for the first time a fundamental platform for dialogue - one through which to claim the individual as well as collective rights of Al-Akhdam people in the Republic of Yemen", states Dr. Huda Seif.

In recent years, CERD has focused on this form of discrimination referred to in UN circles as 'discrimination based on work and descent' which is practised in countries as diverse as India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Japan, Senegal and Bangladesh. It is estimated that at least 260 million people globally are deprived of their basic rights by this form of discrimination.

The shadow report and relevant UN documents are available at www.idsn.org. The state report and the concluding observations are available at the website for the [69th session of CERD](#).

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Note for editors

Caste discrimination is a rigid form of social stratification based on work or descent. Caste systems create hierarchies of social prestige, of labour, of access to power and of wealth. Quite simply the hazard of which family one is born into in a caste system pre-determines one's quality of life. Prevention of inter-marriage between castes is one of the most strictly enforced rules of the caste system, ensuring that the system is self-perpetuating. Those at the bottom of caste systems are considered untouchable, and should live, work, study and eat separately from higher caste people.

Caste and related forms of discrimination dehumanise people in both overt and sinister ways. Dalits and other low caste communities are considered to be born as 'polluted' and 'polluting' to their neighbours, and stay this way until they die. They are discriminated against in every sphere of life. Their family of origin determines not only their social status, but also impedes their choice of occupation, their living conditions, their ability to participate in social practices and their freedom to marry. Dalits and other low-caste groups are at the bottom of every social indicator and can generally expect to be poorer, to be more illiterate, to have worse jobs, to be victims of violence and to die younger than other groups in their societies.

Many countries have established laws and statutory bodies designed to end such practices. However, the caste system has proven more resilient than these measures, as the political will to implement the reforms is grossly insufficient. As a result, when victims suffer violence, forced labour, segregation and humiliation, their higher caste oppressors simply escape justice.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network (www.idsn.org) has been working for a number of years to ensure that caste discrimination is recognised by the international community as a major human rights problem of our time. In April 2005, the UN Commission on Human Rights adopted by consensus a decision to appoint two Special Rapporteurs to tackle the entrenched problem of caste-based discrimination. IDSN sees this step as a breakthrough at the political level in the UN, following great pressure created by Commission's special mechanisms and the UN treaty bodies.

IDSN is a network of national solidarity networks, national advocacy groups from affected countries and international organisations* concerned about caste discrimination and similar forms of discrimination based on work and descent. IDSN brings together organisations, institutions and individuals and links grassroots priorities with international mechanisms and institutions to make an effective contribution to the elimination of caste discrimination.

* Human Rights Watch, the Lutheran World Federation, the International Movement against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, Anti-Slavery International, the Minority Rights Group, Asian Human Rights Commission, the International Catholic Movement for Intellectual and Cultural Affairs, FORUM-ASIA, the Robert F. Kennedy Foundation and the World Council of Churches.