

Conway Hall Declaration on Untouchability

We the delegates to the First World Conference on Untouchability, meeting in Conway Hall, London on 9 and 10 June 2009 under the aegis of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, hereby declare as follows:

Discrimination based on work or descent is widespread throughout much of Asia and in several countries in Africa. Extreme forms of this discrimination – untouchability – involve restrictions on the employment open to certain groups, prohibition of inter-marriage and restrictions on the use of water supplies, places of worship and even public roads. These restrictions are often enforced by violence and even murder.

India outlawed such discrimination in its 1947 Constitution, has passed laws against the practice since then and has set up exemplary programs of positive action, such as reservation in education and government employment. Nevertheless, the law is not enforced and caste discrimination remains endemic in India.

Similar practices remain widespread in other countries in South Asia, in Japan, Nigeria, Mauretania and other African States. Untouchability is the most widespread, pernicious and intractable form of discrimination, affecting the lives of millions of men and women, and with a negative impact on the lives of untold millions of children and their potential for growth and development. An estimated 250 million people worldwide are victims of such discrimination. Yet, many of the states concerned deny that such discrimination exists in their territories.

Recalling the recommendation of 29 November 2002 of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of 29 of November 2002,¹ that such discrimination is a form of racism,

Welcoming the resolution of the European Parliament of 1 February 2007 on the situation of Dalits in India,²

Recognising that the solution to this problem requires publicity, education (of both the oppressors and the oppressed) and the passage and effective enforcement of legislation,

We call upon:

1. All States where the practice of untouchability, discrimination based on work or descent or caste discrimination is prevalent, to introduce legislation where it does not yet exist to outlaw the practice, and to undertake programs of education for all sections of society, including public officials, the police and the judiciary, aimed at the elimination of the practice and at ensuring that these laws are enforced.

2. The United Nations Human Rights Council to recognise the need for action on this issue and:

- to appoint a Special Rapporteur and working group to study the full impact of such discrimination around the world
- to set up an office (an “observatory”) to receive complaints from victims of such discrimination,
- to support programs of human rights education towards eliminating social resistance to change,

3. Individuals and organisations throughout the world to create and support campaigns to raise awareness of the problem through media coverage, the creation of secular social organisations based on the principles of humanism, justice and equality, and by pursuing effective and timely redress through the courts.

The conference further resolves:

1. To communicate this declaration and its recommendations to the UN Secretary General and the High Commissioner for Human Rights, and to the delegations of all member and observer states of the Human Rights Council.

2. To set up an ad hoc committee to follow up the findings, recommendations and resolutions of this conference, and to request the IHEU to initiate the creation of a global secular alliance against untouchability.

Adopted unanimously by the Conference, 10 June 2009

¹ [http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/\(Symbol\)/f0902ff29d93de59c1256c6a00378d1f?Opendocument](http://www.unhchr.ch/tbs/doc.nsf/(Symbol)/f0902ff29d93de59c1256c6a00378d1f?Opendocument)

² <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P6-TA-2007-0016&language=EN>