

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/NK02Df03.html

Pakistan's minorities fail to see progress

By Isolda Agazzi

11/2/2012

GENEVA - Since the restoration of democracy in 2008, Pakistan has undertaken steps to uphold human rights, but the situation of minorities has only worsened, according to a group of non-government organizations. Dalits - formerly referred to as "untouchables" are in the worst state, facing both religious and social discrimination, they say.

The Pakistan government claims otherwise. "2008-2012 has been the most active period of legislation-making on human rights in the 65 years of the history of Pakistan," Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan minister for foreign affairs told the Universal Periodic Review in Geneva this week. After a first assessment in 2008, Pakistan was scrutinized again by the peer review mechanism of the Human Rights Council that all UN member states undergo every four years.

A new law was enacted in May 2012 to create a national independent commission on human rights, one member of which will be from the minorities. Pakistan has also ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICPR) and the Convention against Torture and it is now focusing on implementing them at the national level, the minister said.

"Our constitution is crystal clear on the rights of minorities to freely profess their religion and visit their places of worship," the minister said. "They are an integral part of the Pakistani society and all citizens are guaranteed equal rights and status, irrespective of religion or caste."

Independent groups cast their doubts. "Since the last review there has been some progress, but it is clearly not enough in terms of minority rights," Shobha Das, director of programmes at Minority Rights Group International stressed in an interview with IPS.

"Pakistan has ratified ICCPR, but its implementation is very slow. It has a quota system in politics where 4% of the seats in the upper house are reserved for non-Muslims - which reflects their percentage in the population. But in the lower house, the national assembly, only 10 seats out of 342 are reserved for non-Muslims. Non-Muslims are not safe in Pakistan, particularly those who speak out for their rights. We are very concerned about religious freedom."

Minority Rights Group International is particularly worried about direct, physical attacks on members of the minorities, and the inability, or unwillingness, of a "weak state" to protect them. It is also concerned over what it calls the institutionalized erosion of religious freedom - like having to declare one's religion when applying for identity papers.

"Even if religious minorities are not directly affected by violence, there is a pervasive atmosphere of fear because the state does not provide adequate response," Shobba Das said. "These people feel insecure. They feel Pakistani, but the message they get is that they are not."

NGOs are concerned also over the blasphemy law, which they say constitutes a fundamental erosion of human rights. Instituted in the 1860s by the British to protect all religions against blasphemy, it has been amended so often that today it protects Islam and not other religions. The law is often misused to settle personal disputes with members of religious minorities.

Zulfiqar Shah from the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network told IPS that members of supposedly "lower" castes, the Dalits, suffer acutely in Pakistan. "Dalits are discriminated against as much as in India and, in addition, they have the double disadvantage of being non-Muslim. Currently, there is no law against discrimination."

In 1947, at the time of the partition of India when Pakistan was created, about 24% to 27% of the population in the area that is present day Pakistan was of the minorities. The majority of Hindus migrated to India, others converted to Islam. Today the minority population in Pakistan is only 4%, which is 7.2 million people. Most members of the minorities who are still in Pakistan belong to Dalit groups. Their numbers are 330,000 according to the 1998 census, but minority groups say the real number is between two and four million.

Getting the real figures is politically fraught. But it is also difficult since most Dalits live in rural areas, and with very poor access to health, education and employment. They are confined to jobs like agricultural work in bondage labor. "Forced labour goes on from generation to generation because these landless peasants cannot pay off their debts," Shah said.

Currently, there is only one Dalit in Parliament and not a single one in a provincial assembly. "The government should set up a commission to implement affirmative action. Discrimination is built in Hinduism, not in Islam. Theoretically Dalits should have a better position in Pakistan than in India, but unfortunately it is even worse. India, at least, guarantees legal protection and affirmative action," Shah said.

One of the most pressing issues is the kidnapping of young girls who are forcibly converted to

Islam. In March this year, Rinkal Kumari, a 19-year-old Hindu girl, was kidnapped and forcibly converted. A few months later, 350 people from the upper Sindh left for India. "Pakistan should set up a faith conversion commission with members from all religions. Whoever wants to convert should approach this commission first," Shah said.

States participating in the interactive dialogue with Pakistan asked the government to adopt steps to amend the law on blasphemy and to uphold the rights of religious minorities. They asked it to investigate attacks against religious minorities and to hold those responsible for those acts accountable.