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World Conference against Racism: Governments should set aside political differences in the interests of effective action

Durban: On the eve of the World Conference against Racism, Amnesty International calls on the world's governments to show solidarity with victims and survivors, and act constructively to combat racism.

"The Conference is a huge opportunity for the world's governments to rise above narrow political interests. It is an opportunity for truth, a chance for commitment, accountability and action," said Irene Khan, Secretary General of Amnesty International.

Amnesty International is urging governments to ensure that the outcome of the Conference – the Declaration and Programme of Action – is adopted by all governments, so as to make this conference a truly global effort against racism.

The conference will give prominence to issues that seldom receive the profile they deserve in international forums such as indigenous peoples and the Roma. However, the plight of millions of Dalits, suffering discrimination on the bases of descent, has yet to be recognized explicitly in the draft documents. A number of governments are also opposing the recognition of multiple discrimination resulting from racism and sexual orientation.

"Racism infects every country in the world. Governments must pro-actively tackle it to ensure that justice is administered on the basis of equal rights for all," Irene Khan said.

As a specific contribution to the conference, Amnesty International has highlighted ways in which racism affects the administration of justice. Patterns of arrest, conviction, sentencing and the treatment of refugees show that around the world governments turn a blind eye to racial prejudice.

In line with its opposition to the death penalty, Amnesty International is urging governments to ensure that the draft Programme of Action addresses its racist application. Countries where the death penalty is still used should investigate any disproportionate impact of the death penalty on racial groups and declare a moratorium on executions until the investigations are completed.

There are still serious disagreements over how to address the legacy of slavery and colonialism and the issue of discrimination by Israel against the Palestinians. Amnesty International appeals to governments to engage seriously in searching for a solution to these disputes – a solution that is informed by human rights rather than politics.

“The stakes are high. Victims and survivors around the world are looking to the conference for recognition and commitment to action. Governments should listen,” Irene Khan said.

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