

# Seeking Collaboration between CERD and NGOs

JADE JOHNSTON, IMADR INTERN

On August 3, 2010, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) held its first meeting with civil society to discuss ways of strengthening the role of civil society participation in it. Representatives of 11 NGOs, including IMADR, were invited to speak, and succeeded in having a constructive, interactive dialog with the Committee. The main issues addressed included:

- \* Formal briefings with CERD on country situations and the opportunity to discuss general issues of concern, for which there is currently none.

- \* Web broadcasting and video conferencing to make CERD accessible to NGOs with limited resources.

- \* Reprisals and threats against individuals and organizations submitting information to CERD. Speakers requested the Committee to examine how to deal with this and involve the High Commissioner in the process.

- \* The role of NGOs in follow-up to state reports and concluding observations. NGOs proposed taking part in the process by submitting information, and suggested using the Committee against Torture (CAT) as a model. It was also proposed that an NGO database for organizations working with CERD be created, and the public be informed about concluding observations.

- \* Opportunities for CERD members to visit countries as follow-up on progress of the implementation of recommendations.

- \* Increasing early warning and urgent action procedures awareness and access.

The Committee welcomed the suggestions made by NGO representatives and was keen to respond, addressing the issues raised and making further suggestions as follows:

- \* There were already steps being taken to reform and improve working methods and cooperation with NGOs. However, any requests made with financial implications would be difficult to implement due to lack of resources, particularly in regards to getting committee members into the field. Several committee members agreed that country visits were a good idea, and one said that CERD had also been stressing this point, and that regardless of the lack of resources, the matter would at least be looked into.

- \* There was an overall sense of agreement on the need to establishing formal meetings between CERD and NGOs, but there was no consensus on how they would

be coordinated during sessions, or if they should compliment or replace existing informal meetings.

- \* The issue of reprisals came as a surprise to the Committee, and one member said that documented occurrences would be useful in understanding the “dimension” of the issue, while in cases where people were being threatened, a more immediate solution was suggested through making a public denunciation.

- \* Several CERD members said that NGOs played an important role in keeping them informed, and that they no longer relied solely on State reports for information. CERD reminded NGOs of the importance of submitting their reports in advance, written as concisely as possible to best improve its output. It also stressed the role NGOs have to play in promoting the Convention in the field by filling information gaps and helping to promote Article 14 on individual communications.

- \* There were mixed reactions to suggestions of video conferencing and web broadcasting as a means of making the Committee more accessible. It was deemed a good idea, but NGOs may have limited resources for such modes of communication. In order to make information more available, and the Committee more accessible, it was suggested that NGOs organize themselves to collect and share information. It was also encouraged that NGOs in the North work with those in the South to change the situation.

CERD raised the interesting issue of the session taking place at inconvenient times during the year, believing that this scheduling hindered NGO cooperation with it due to meeting typically during holiday periods. Members were disappointed by the imbalance in the geographical representation of NGOs, and said that this was often an issue during CERD sessions. During the 77th session, which reviewed 11 countries, only four NGO briefings were held. One member made the observation that when CERD sessions coincided with other treaty body sessions, specifically the Human Rights Council, they received more information and had increased participation.

Overall, CERD seemed ready to move forward in its working relationship with NGOs. The meeting concluded with the statement of one member that “the message coming from the meeting as a whole was a sense of mutuality.” The chairperson informed that no decisions could be taken during the meeting, but that CERD would discuss it further to make decisions. 