

## **Summary of the CERD Meeting with NGOs on 3 August**

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On 3 August 2010, CERD held its first meeting with civil society to discuss ways of strengthening the role of civil society participation with the Committee. NGO representatives were invited to speak and succeeded in having a constructive, interactive dialogue with the Committee. NGO representatives from the following organizations took the floor: Human Rights Law Resource Centre; Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action; Amnesty International; International Service for Human Rights; Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities; International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism; Human Rights Watch; TAMAZGHA; Réseau Amazigh Pour la Citoyenneté; Centro de Estudios Legal y Social; and Comitato per la Promozione e Protezione dei Diritti Umani .

The main issues addressed by speakers 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 the Committee. Speakers requested that the Committee 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 CAT as a model. It was also proposed that an NGO database for organizations working with the Committee 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.

Among other issues addressed were the establishment of a pre-sessional working group to maximize NGO submission, maximizing the use of NGO submitted materials, increased involvement during the dialogue between States and CERD, involvement in the nomination process of Committee members, translating the Convention into more languages, enhancing the role of NGOs before deciding on the themes for each State, and allowing the submission of questions for the State under review

The CERD welcomed suggestions made by NGO representatives and were keen to respond. They addressed the issues that had been raised and made further suggestions as follows.

- Mr. Avtonomov was the first Committee member to respond and stressed that there were already steps being made to reform and improve working methods and cooperation with NGOs. However any requests made with financial implications would be difficult to implement due to a 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 Mrs. Dah said CERD had also been stressing this point, and that regardless of a lack of resources it would at least be looked into.
- There was an overall sense of agreement on the necessity of establishing formal meetings between CERD and NGOs, but there was no consensus on how they would be coordinated during the sessions or if they should compliment or replace the existing informal meetings.
- The issue of reprisals came as a surprise to the Committee and Mr. Thornberry said the issue hadn't been considered in the Committee before but certainly would now. Mr. Martinez stated that documented occurrences would be useful in understanding the 'dimension' of the issue, while Mr. Cali Tzay suggested a more immediate solution by making a public denunciation in cases where people were being threatened.
- 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. The Committee reminded NGOs of the importance of submitting their reports in advance and written as concisely as possible to best improve its output. CERD 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 concerning 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 as Mrs. Crickley pointed out, NGOs may have limited resources for such modes of communication. In order to make information more available and the Committee more accessible, Mr. Diaconu suggested NGOs organize themselves to collect and share information, while Mr. Ewomsan encouraged NGOs in the North to 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 and believing this scheduling hindered NGO cooperation with the Committee due to typically meeting during holiday periods when many people are out of town. Members were disappointed by the imbalance of geographical representation of NGOs and said this was often an issue during CERD sessions. Mr. Diaconu said that out of the eleven countries up for review during its 77<sup>th</sup> session, only four NGO briefings were

scheduled. Mrs. Dah 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. She purposed that if no additional resources could be given to the Committee they could at least request a better time for the session to be held to increase participation.

The only member to have a less than positive outlook on increasing collaboration with civil society was Mr. Lindgren. He stated that the members of the committee were not paid UN employees, 'meaning they had other jobs' and could not spend all of their time paying attention to what was going on in CERD and in world. He responded to the concern over submitted NGO reports not being used by saying that NGOs could submit whatever they wanted, but if it was too long it wouldn't be read, although could still be distributed by the secretariat if necessary.

Overall CERD seemed ready to move forward in its working relationship with NGOs and in the concluding statement by Mr. Thornberry said 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 some decisions.