

India fails to protect its lowest castes

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's police and legal system had failed "deplorably" to protect people from the country's lowest castes, an official commission said on Tuesday, suggesting exclusive courts be set up to ensure speedy justice.

Formerly called untouchables, the country's Scheduled Castes or Dalits make up around 160 million of mainly Hindu India's 1.1-billion population.

Despite special laws to protect them, they continue to face discrimination and violence, especially in rural areas.

Crimes against Dalits, including rape, murder and social boycott by upper castes, have lower conviction rates than the national average, at around 29 percent against 42 percent, the National Commission For Scheduled Castes said.

"We must admit...the deplorable, negative role of our men in uniform who, instead of protecting the victim, protect the culprits by inaction, inefficiency and rent-seeking," said Fakir



A mobile court in co-operation with the joint forces seizes huge date-expired medicines from Dolphin Clinic at Duara Para at Pallabi in the city yesterday.

Bhai Vaghela, the vice-chairman of the commission.

He was speaking to top police officers and officials from Indian states at a meeting organised by the commission, an autonomous body set up by the government to protect the interests of the disadvantaged.

The panel proposed "exclusive courts" that would deal with only cases of atrocities and discrimination against Dalits to speed up convictions which can take years.

"Seventy percent of people who commit crimes against Dalits are getting off," Phool Chand Verma, a NCSC member, said. "The police also do not register cases therefore atrocities continue."

In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, around 50,000 caste-related cases against Dalits are pending. But only four have been resolved by fast-track courts since 2002.

Dalits in rural areas were often discouraged by police from filing reports, Verma said, adding the actual number of attacks or incidents of discrimination in 2005 -- the year for which figures were last compiled -- were probably around 150,000.

Though India has reserved government jobs and college seats for Dalits and a Dalit is currently the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the community remains among the poorest and most socially and economically deprived.

In December, a hungry Dalit girl from the eastern state of Bihar had the fingers of her right hand chopped off by an upper-caste land owner for taking spinach leaves from his field.

In another case, all upper-caste passengers walked out of a bus in southern India when a Dalit got on, the commission said, according to a report it received last year.

"It is to be regretted that even after 57 years since untouchability was 'abolished'...we are unable to implement successfully basic provisions (of laws protecting Dalits)," Vaghela said.

WAR CRIMES

Karzai may reject amnesty bill

AFP, Kabul

President Hamid Karzai will likely reject as unconstitutional a draft bill adopted by the lower house that gives amnesty for crimes and abuse in Afghanistan's 25 years of war, his spokesman said yesterday.

The warlord-dominated lower house last week approved the document ruling out legal action against men accused of rights abuses in the past 25 years of brutal conflict, saying the move was in the interest of reconciliation.



Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) bulldozes illegal structures at Fatulla Launch Terminal in Narayanganj yesterday.

Tankers may ship water to parched cities of future

REUTERS, London

Fleets of supertankers could one day ply the world's oceans laden not with oil but fresh water.

Sounds far-fetched?

In Paris on Friday the world's top climate scientists issued the strongest warning yet that human activity was heating the planet. They forecast temperatures would rise by between 1.1 and 6.4 degrees Celsius this century.

By 2100, water scarcity could impact between 1.1 and 3.2 billion people, says a leaked, related UN climate study due to be published in April.

China and Australia, as well as parts of Europe and the United States would face critical water shortages, it says.

Maritime experts say shipping water by tanker is one of the least eccentric ideas raised of late to counter acute shortages.

Dragging icebergs from the Arctic, ships hauling enormous bags of fresh water, and cloud seeding -- in which clouds are sprayed with chemicals to induce rain -- have all been aired by water authorities in the past.

"You can ship any liquid commodity if the money's right," said Bill Box, spokesman for Intertanko, the world's largest association of tanker owners.

Tankers would need to be specially coated for the water trade or built as a dedicated fleet.

In 1996, the World Bank's then water resources manager, John Hayward, said: "One way or another, water will be moved around the world as is oil now."

WATER SHUTTLE

Daniel Zimmer, executive director of the World Water Council in Marseille, said there was a real prospect that fleets of dedicated tankers could shuttle fresh water between countries.

But he saw it only being feasible for essential supplies of fresh drinking water and not for low grade agricultural water where the cost of freight would outweigh the benefits.

"We definitely see it increasing. We expect in the future and even in the short-term, before 2050, more frequent heatwaves and dry periods which could make shipping water economically justifiable," he told Reuters.

He said exporting water by sea was already happening between France and Algeria and Turkey and Israel.

He said countries with abundant water supplies like Norway, Russia and New Zealand could also begin to ship water more regularly.

"You could imagine countries north of the Mediterranean sea shipping fresh water to the south, the dry areas," Zimmer said.

Some water firms are already taking the prospect of shipping water seriously -- last May, London's Thames Water investigated bringing water supplies by tanker from Scotland and Norway to solve emergency shortages due to drought.

Thames Water's Richard Aylard told the Times newspaper that alternatives had included towing icebergs from the Arctic and seeding rain clouds.

At the end of last year New Zealand firm Adsteam Agency proposed taking water by tanker to Australia when that country was suffering its worst recorded drought, shipping experts say.

In Australia, a firm called Solar Sailor is developing electric-hybrid supertankers powered by solar sails to carry water, according to its Web site.

The chairman of Solar Sailor, former Australian prime minister Bob Hawke, has said the concept could solve Sydney's water crisis.

Turkey to back Pak plan for ME peace

Says Pervez Musharraf

AFP, Ankara

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said here yesterday that he won backing from Turkey for his plan to form a group of Muslim countries that will work towards peace in the Middle East.

"We believe that this is a time for a new initiative of collecting like-minded countries to contribute towards a resolution of the Palestinian dispute, to contribute towards peace in the region and bring harmony into the Muslim world," Musharraf told a press conference here after talks with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"There was total consonance of views" with Erdogan, he added.

Musharraf said his plan was in its initial stages and that the first step was to get together a group of Muslim countries with similar policies on regional and international issues.

"The idea is to create a voice which is credible, acceptable to all and which is on a reconciliatory course (rather) than a confrontational course," he said.

"Having got this group together, we need to decide on our stand towards a resolution of the Palestinian issue. We will then proceed to get involved into the details of how to resolve the dis-

putes," he added.

Once formed, the group will also contact international players in the region so that "there is acceptability of the group and its ideas," Musharraf explained.

The Pakistani leader -- who has already held talks with the leaders of Iran, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and the United Arab Emirates on his plan -- said its "physical manifestations" would be seen in the coming days.

Erdogan, for his part, called for international efforts to end sectarian violence in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as recent clashes between rival Palestinian factions and the bottleneck in Middle East peace talks.

"The recent developments are seriously threatening the security and stability of all Middle East countries. I believe regional countries have a common responsibility to install peace and calm in the Middle East," he said.

Turkey, a Muslim, secular country, believes it can contribute to peace in the Middle East on account of its good ties both with Israel and the Palestinians.

Musharraf, who had already met with President Ahmet Necdet Sezer late Monday, was to leave Turkey later in the day.