

Translated from the official report on the budget session Foreign Affairs 2013 (discussion between the Dutch Parliament and the Minister of Foreign Affairs Mr. Timmermans)

Section on Dalits

From MP Voordewind (ChristianUnion) 18-12-12

“Compared to the previous Minister [of Foreign Affairs] who gave a lower priority to the human rights agenda, especially with regard to the trade relations with India and China, I have high expectations of this Minister. In these countries there are serious human rights problems. We just discussed in an interruption debate that we don’t know the exact number, but that many people are getting the death sentence in China. India is a country with which we like to do business. We just referred to Tata Steel. We also know – I have been there myself – about the difficult position of women, Dalits and working children. I hope the Minister does not shy away from the discussion about these issues with these countries which are important trading partners for The Netherlands.

I will continue to speak about this difficult country India, regarding the Dalits. In this Parliament a motion submitted by me has been adopted that requests to pay extra attention to thinking in terms of classes [he probably refers to castes] and the position of Dalits. This motion has, again, not been implemented. I am asking the Minister to look at this anew. I will hand over the motion to him.

I do find it very courageous that a Dalit from India will get the Dutch human rights award, the Human Rights Tulip. In the meantime also a strong resolution about Dalits has been adopted in the European Parliament. I am really happy about this.

I am continuing quickly to speak on Pakistan. Also there forced conversions of Dalit girls are taking place and discrimination, exclusion, violence and slavery (bordering on forced labour), are still commonplace.”

Reaction of Minister Timmermans (Labour Party) of Foreign Affairs - 19-12-12

“ Mister Voordewind has raised a very important and complex issue: the position of Dalits. It is my opinion that the social emancipation of population groups that for centuries are not even on the ladder, let alone on the bottom rung of a ladder, belongs to the desire of the international community to apply the universality of human rights to every human being. Therefore I think that we should carefully consider the position of Dalits and also have to invest in strengthening that position. The topic of discrimination based on work and descent has – as far as I am concerned – to be put higher on the agenda of the European Union.

The European Parliament has recently adopted a very relevant resolution about the position of Dalits and I think that we can also better shape European policy on that basis. After a proposal by The Netherlands and Denmark ISDN [meant is IDSN], an important Dalit organization, recently gave a presentation in the EU Council working group on human rights about the situation of Dalits worldwide. The Netherlands will continue to support various societal organizations on this issue, also via our Embassies.

I find it very gratifying to see that the central government is taking really big steps to improve the position of Dalits. At the same time we see that it indeed takes very long before these

steps actually translate to results on the ground. I could imagine that we would looking for methods by which we, with our knowledge about the circumstances, can contribute to what the Indian government wants itself: improving the conditions of Dalits. We can do that with practical support based on the experience that we have gained in other countries and other fields. The implementation of that law is very complicated and cumbersome. In the first place because the capacity for this of often missing locally and regionally. Secondly because it is very complicated to bring change to issues that are so fundamentally related to the culture and experiences in the history of a people.

The caste [group] in a caste-based society that is closest to the Dalits is on the one hand frightened to be incorporated or to be polluted by the Dalits, and is on the other hand afraid to be put in a negative position by the higher castes. Because of this the resistance on the ground to actually do something is quite substantial. One cannot close ones eyes to that and therefore we should not lose sight of those groups in the coming years.

This brings me to a more general point that I have already discussed with mister Voordewind several times before. Often you can do more for groups that are having problems, whether it is Dalits in India or Christians in Egypt or other Arab countries, by not always pinpointing them as groups but to wrap the issue in the broader context of general human rights policy. In such cases you do give priority to that group, but you don't always put it that way. You are directly supporting that group under the denominator of general human rights policy. I share the concern about the position of Christians in many parts of the world, but equally the concern that in some societies, and by way not only in Islamic societies, – Mr. Sjoerdsma pointed that out – the position of atheists is under pressure. There are also Christian societies where you get into problems if you are too openly saying that you do not believe in God or Creation. That is not only in Islamic societies dangerous for your position. Also these kind of issues will be dealt with in de human rights policy.

Sometimes you can do more for minority groups if you do not immediately name them. That seems to me an interesting 'division of labour' between the Parliament and me. The Parliament has more space and freedom to very specifically ask attention for these groups. If only we can translate it in such a way that these groups are supported and strengthened without the Parliament constantly expecting me to specifically naming these groups. I share the concerns of Mr. Voordewind about the Dalits, as well as I share his concerns about the position of Christians in many countries.”

Mr. Voordewind (ChristenUnie):

“I fully subscribe to the vision of the minister. He will also see that when we visit countries like Pakistan we write in our reports about minorities; within those minorities there are of course also Christians, but also from them we often get the advice to broadbase it. So we certainly are taking that into account.

With regard to the Dalits I thank the minister for his commitment. I also refer to the trade agreement that we have with India, in which there is also a human rights clause [Voordewind either refers here to the existing partnership agreement with a human rights clause or to the free trade treaty that is currently being negotiated but not finalized yet]. I am requesting the Minister to also in the European context and that trade treaty – which does give you a a much stronger position than traveling from the Netherlands to India – explicitly raise the issue of the position of Dalits. That was also the intention of the motion that was earlier adopted here but has not been implemented thus far.”

Minister Timmermans:

“With this way of putting it I can only fully agree. I also like to do that in the EU context. ”

During the ‘second term’ (after the full reply of the Minister) of the Members of Parliament:

Mr. **Voordewind** (Christian Union):

“I still have another small remark with regard to the Dalits. I want to ask the Minister of Development Co-operation [she is also Minister of Foreign Trade] to consider if we can make Dalits and the fight against caste-based discrimination a part of the CSR policy with regard Dutch companies that are operating in India.”

[This question was not answered by the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Co-operation].