

PARTICIPANTS' CONTRIBUTION
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Working group:

The situation of minorities in Europe-Belgium

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This little kingdom of Belgium is the heart and arena for socio-economic and political deliberations in Europe. With its beautiful historic and cultural metropolitan centres, Belgium is considered one of the best and hospitable nations in Western Europe. It hosts a multitude of people of all races, most of them cramped in the large cities. These cramped areas do attract attention just as they are avoided. To the attracted visitors, these mixed races in Belgium give a flare and image of hospitality and multiculturalism. But to some of the citizens (indigenes) the multiculturalism is a burden and nothing to reckon with.

It would be an overstatement to mention that the situation of minorities is or has dramatically improved during the last months in Belgium. Minorities continue to live in wanton fear, insecurity capped with insurmountable prejudices, isolation and more so, discriminated against.

Economically, following the increasing bankruptcy of companies and the increasing unemployment rate, the incidence of unemployment within the minority community has greatly increased. We already live in a society whereby the minority would only be employed in very mean paid jobs, or jobs where there is absolutely no or little competition from the white Belgians. Or would only be employed when all other Belgians have been employed.

The system and its machinery continue to plunge the minority community into secondary positions.

If we have to follow the far-rightist slogan, "Eigen volk eerste" (own people first), then we immediately slump into the trap contrary to the various Human rights conventions that preach equality of rights for all citizens. By this slogan, (own people first) minorities are directly castigated, and subjugated to permanent second-class citizens, if not exaggerated, who can have a meal only when the Belgians have had enough of their share,
Who can have shelter only when all others have had the best of houses,

Who can have education only when all others have had the best schools,
Who can have a say in the political game of the country only when some parties
are in dire need of votes. Or just for the sake of positive discrimination.

The system continues to open up various frontiers whereby the minority groups
can only be USED for political gains. When a dysfunction occurs in the process of
being used, they immediately become scapegoat or targets of that very system.
The "scapegoat syndrome" against minorities doesn't only remain at higher
political levels, but quickly transcends to the economic, social and grassroots
levels.

The system continues to open up avenues that lead to a polarised society- the
"We" against "they", whereby the "we" connotes a positive pole, and the "they"
connotes a negative pole. So long as the minorities continue to be categorised in
the negative poles of this society, there would never be a head-way in seeking
sustainable solutions for the improvement of every citizen's state of being!

In this system of ours, minority groups have been unwillingly tuned into spiritual
zombies, whose hunt for the holy ghost has become the epitome of reliance and
survival, than the state and its actors.

On a recent television debate, the chief of the rightwing party, clearly made his
point clear about the situation of asylum seekers. He shamelessly called for and
proposed that all asylum seekers should carry labelled electronic bands around
their arms, legs or necks in order to be identified and controlled. His aim of
voicing this gruesome proposal was to scale down the number of unprocessed
refugees who dwindle and disappear into the society. Secondly electronic bands
would easily help the police track down those who are ripe for deportation.
The question is, are all the minority groups of asylum seekers criminals if not
why should such a suggestion be voiced in public medium? Or is it another of
way of reviving the tactics and methodologies used by the Nazis to identify,
control and dehumanise the Jews in the concentration camps? It does arouse the
picture of the slave trade era when the slaves where bundled in chains and neck-
pegs in order to limit or inhibit escape until they embarked on their horrible
journey to the land of Columbus.

Voting rights.

This issue of whether the minority groups be granted voting rights has become a
centre of heated debate in the Belgian parliament as well as within the circles of
politicians and political parties. The rightist party out-rightly refuses voting
rights to foreigners because it would imply more votes against them. They claim
Flanders is already full and no place is left for foreigners.

The government, on its part, has shown absolute sluggishness and reluctance in
processing the almost 3500 files of asylum seekers. This attitude has plunged the
asylum seekers in a state of uncertainty and despair. The asylum centres have
"unconsciously" been turned into a tourist site or human museum, where people
and school children flock at clock-pace to see the asylum seekers, as if to say they
are new species of human beings from one of the solar systems. Without their

papers being processed, they would not be able to obtain work permits, thus their state of welfare remains jeopardised.

Despite all these negative developments against the minority groups in Belgium, there has, however, been some positive actions demonstrated by local government officials as well as NGO's to fight racism.

In the city of Leuven, the welfare service of the local government has started a stout campaign against racism. This campaign is being carried out by educating the populace about racism and its negative consequences in the society, educating the populace about the positive role of foreigners as a social enrichment factor and in the economic sustainability of the province as whole.

This city, Hasselt, hosts the seat of the Provincial Government of Limburg in Belgium. The story of migrants in this city is nothing new to the inhabitants. All began in the 1950's when the Belgian Government opened its doors to foreign migrant workers to boost coal mining which was an important source of energy at the time. Since then, till this very moment, the aspects of racism, xenophobia and social exclusion have unfortunately been widely and openly prevalent in this beautiful Province of Limburg.

It has been proven that people with slightly darker skin or even hair colour, are not allowed into certain clubs. The city police corps of Hasselt have received several complaints from minority groups about the existing racism and exclusion in clubs. To their dismay, no action has ever been taken to their favour. But the course of history had to change when Mr. Marc Rubbens, the Crown attorney of the city passed on a strict warning to all clubs, dancings and bars that harbour racist practices. He openly called the owners of public places to respect basic Human Rights laws as stated in the Human Rights charters.

The victims were all called upon to make their cases open either to the police or to other Human Rights groups for immediate action.

"With faith, hope, perseverance and open hearts, we will build a better intercultural society."

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