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ITEM: 7 Meaningful and effective participation in economic and development policy-making  
ORGANIZATION: Congress of Nationalities for a Federal Iran  
SPEAKER: Ms. Nasrin Sulemani

Iran's population is a mosaic of ethnicities but the non-Persian ethnic groups are largely located in the geographic peripheries. Unfortunately their geographic location in the margins is matched by socio-economic, political, linguistic and political marginalisation due to engrained and institutionalised discrimination.

Equality of all Iranian citizens is enshrined in Article 17 of the Iranian Constitution, but the reality is very different.

Balochistan remains the poorest and most underdeveloped region of Iran with the worst indicators for life expectancy, literacy, school enrolment, access to water and child and infant mortality. About 76 percent of the Baloch population live in extreme poverty compared to a national average of 11%.

Why such low socio-economic indicators?

Baloch children suffer academically as a result of severe restrictions on the use of their mother tongue. There is absolute lack of investment in the region. Furthermore, forced relocation of Baloch people from profitable land goes unchecked. In 2005 Baloch houses in sought-after areas of the port city Chabahar were dismantled by Iranian Security forces with no alternative housing provided for those evicted.

Institutionalised discrimination against non-Shia Muslims means no Baloch has ever served as a minister of cabinet or as an ambassador. Gozinesh criteria means Sunnis cannot gain high level jobs in the State sector. Baloch cultural and political organizations are regularly dismantled. The restrictions on political organisations denies the Baloch people the democratic means to address their concerns.

How can the Baloch and other minorities in Iran make meaningful contributions and participate effectively in economic life?

The Islamic Republic is heavily centralised, silencing voices from the peripheries. The Baloch people seek to assume the responsibility of effectively participating in political and economic life. A federal system of governance would give an opportunity for the ethnic groups to participate in decision-making processes.

Support of such alternative, decentralised governing systems is missing from this Forum's Draft Recommendation Paper, and could be inserted into paragraph 18.

We want to claim our universal human rights, such as right to education in our mother tongue, right to share the wealth of our country and the right to the same opportunities as the ruling population as well as the right to participate politically in governing our country. A decentralised federal system would be real proof that Article 17 of the Constitution bestowing equal rights upon all people can be more than words on paper.

Thank you.