

World Social Forum: Building solidarity

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On Sunday, Amnesty International joined with a range of other organisations to put together two seminars that strongly represent the spirit of the Forum. The issues involved were corporate abuses and women's human rights defenders and both were similar in how they provided a platform for people with their own stories to tell. Both seminars also aimed to build new international networks for action and create solidarity between people from different parts of the world.

The seminar in the morning began with testimonies from a range of campaigners on issues of corporate abuses. From oil fields in Nigeria to dams in Brazil, Caterpillar bulldozers in the Occupied Territories to mines in the Philippines. There were stories of how much damage corporate crimes can inflict on communities and on land. However, there was also an inspiring tale of the success of mass public action from Peru, where it put an end to a deal between the government and the Belgian energy company Tractebel and halted the government's privatisation plans.

After the speakers finished, speakers from the floor added their stories and voices -- more Africans suffering due to the actions of oil companies and a Cambodian man in a wheelchair as a result of a landmine blast who spoke of the unwillingness of the manufacturers of the many more unexploded landmines to deal with them. The clear message from all assembled was that what was needed to counter abuses by multinational corporations was international co-operation and solidarity. Those assembled spent the rest of the day discussing different strategies -- economic, political and legal -- and brainstorming on how to put them into action and create a global movement to fight corporate abuses.

Across the main field of the Forum later in the afternoon, another part of the Amnesty delegation, as part of a coalition of women's rights and human rights organisations, organised a seminar on women human rights defenders (WHRDs). The overall aim of the program, by the International Coordination Campaign on WHRDs, was to visualise the challenges women face when defending human rights. They are engaging women from different parts of the world on the international campaign on WHRDs in advance of an international meeting in October 2005.

The panellists were women from diverse backgrounds, but with similar stories to tell. One speaker spoke about women human rights work in the context of the rise of fundamentalism in Yemen and how it has infringed on women's rights, another spoke of how the conflict in Colombia has impacted upon women's lives and on the safety of lesbian women in particular, another spoke of the effect the recent tsunami has had on women in Indonesia. And the good news here was the woman who spoke about how women have led the fight for justice in Chile -- and are finally seeing the fruits of their struggle in the cases of Augustus Pinochet and other violators of human rights in Chile.

Once again, speakers from the floor voiced their own experiences and all spoke of the need for women's groups and human rights groups to campaign together to help women achieve their human rights to safety, security and freedom.

The spirit of the movement represented at the WSF has, since the beginning, been one of convergence and solidarity. The forum is not about diversity for its own sake, but diversity among equals fighting similar fights and needing and offering support and whatever help they can give. Amnesty International is proud to help bring people together to strengthen the fight for human rights wherever and by whomever they are threatened.