

World Social Forum: Setting up and getting active

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The first day of the World Social Forum began with setting up. The Control Arms campaign team got things started with a pile of toilet rolls and another of chewing gum sticks. Volunteers rewrapped the rolls and the gum with Control Arms covers.

Then it was on to the Forum venue to get the stalls set up and decorated. The main AI stall concentrating on the Stop Violence Against Women, Human Rights Defenders and Economic Rights campaigns, with the Control Arms stall next door shared with Amnesty International's partners in the campaign, Oxfam and IANSA. It was all hands to the decks to organise the flyers for our first workshops tomorrow, on Control Arms and the role of the media in relation to the work of Human Rights Defenders.

Once the stalls had been decorated and an AI banner hung with a display of acrobatics on a ladder, and the use of some kindly donated pins to stop the banner blocking the corridor, it was time to prepare for the planned Dignity Rally that was to launch the Forum proper. The theme was dignity for all as a human right.

Thousands upon thousands of people lined the streets of Porto Alegre, the main march fed to other marches that joined from down side-streets, over bridges, as the Forum's spirit of autonomy and freedom led many to follow their own routes. It's hard to think of a struggle or an issue that wasn't represented, as environmentalists, grassroots activists, political groups and NGOs gathered together to add their message to the over-all theme of the Forum that another world is possible, accompanied by the ever-present sound of samba drums.

For AI, that world would be one without human rights abuses - one where arms were controlled and violence against women were eradicated. The members of the AI delegation, made up of people from the International Secretariat and many from AI sections around the world as close to Brazil as Paraguay and as far away as Switzerland, carried two banners on the march. The first accompanied by chants of "no mas violencia contra las mujeres" ("stop violence against women") and "derechos humanos ya!" ("human rights now!") followed closely by a Control Arms banner.

The march came to its end in the Anfiteatro Pôr-do-sol, the hub of this year's Forum venue, surrounded by tents and stalls. The tens of thousands of participants gathered to display their colourful flags before the business of the Forum begins tomorrow.