

World Social Forum: Building activism and discussing alternatives

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Human Rights Defenders Diary - 27/01/2005

A representative from Amnesty International's Human Rights Defenders Programme gave a presentation at a seminar looking at the role of the media in the Americas in relation to human rights and how the media can be used sometimes by some to discredit the work of human rights defenders (HRDs) and social movements. The panel put across the perspective that this is a global issue and not one confined to the region.

Among the other panellists were activists from Argentina, Ecuador and Brazil; an Argentinian journalist working in alternative media and a Brazilian journalist from Le Monde Diplomatique.

The defenders painted a clear picture of the complexities they face -- they continue to receive threats because of the work they do and are subjected to raids of their premises, misuse of the judicial system against them and slander campaigns by some government officials. Within this context, in the last couple of years, media reporting on the work of human rights defenders sometimes creates a negative public image of the work defenders carry out.

The defenders and those who work in alternative media put forward proposals on how to use alternative ways of communicating positive messages about the work HRDs do. Some ideas included the use of the cinema and theatre as educational vehicles, especially with the young. They also highlighted the importance of positive messages about defenders' work on the radio comunitarias (community radios). There was overall agreement amongst all of the panellists on the importance of human rights work and how much worse the scenario for HRDs would be if there was no reporting at all of human rights issues in any part of the media - "el silencio de los medios en temas de derechos humanos".

Some participants expressed concern about the rising number of cases of defamation and libel against alternative media that appear to be designed to silence their efforts to support and protect human rights work.

Control Arms Diary - 27/01/2005

Following the preparations of the first day, we finished setting up the stall and organised volunteers to collect images for the Million Faces Petition. We had nine digital cameras and we sent volunteers all over the Forum taking hundreds of photos of people who support the campaign. We put up a huge Control Arms banner on one of the main roads beside the Forum venue and lots of material was distributed.

The Control Arms samba band from Sapobemba, Sao Paulo, played music around the banner on the street to attract attention and people. At 3:30, a Control Arms seminar took place with five speakers, including César Marin from Amnesty International Venezuela and other speakers from Viva Rio, Instituto Sau de Paz, Oxfam UK and the Arias Foundation - organisations that are working together to control the arms trade.

The seminar was attended by around 150 people and the speakers dealt with the problems linked to the arms trade, both in Brazil and internationally, and proposed their solutions to the issues - introducing the Control Arms campaign. The talks were very well received and there was the feeling that activism was being created.

After the speakers finished, many people took the mike and explained the situation in their own countries, including Italy, USA, Japan and DR Congo. They made clear that this is truly a global issue that affects many countries in similar ways. The event ended with a plea for everyone there to give their image to the petition and volunteers were ready around the venue to collect their photos.