

*If not us, then who? If not now, then when?*

**Solen Gratiet's Report on**

**The United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, March, 2008**

Between the 10th and 14th of March, Raphael Bate and I attended our first session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, thanks to funding from Susila Dharma International. We attended for one week of the seventh session, which lasted much longer.

Before the event, I was afraid it would be little more than a talking shop – and to some extent it was, as despite all the discussions and resolutions made, torture, genocide, rape, forced marriages, disappearances, and many other violations of people's basic rights will continue all over the world

However, the importance of this event should not be underestimated. First, the UN Human Rights Council has enormous symbolic value, representing a mobilisation of energy for change for the better in many domains. This in itself can give hope to the many people around the world battling to improve human rights. Secondly, it gives these same people a forum in which to voice their concerns and make their voices heard by those with power Thirdly, concrete positive results can and do come about because of the Human Rights Council, both in terms of changes in policy by individual governments and in terms of awareness-raising about particular issues, which can then lead to individual behavioural change or the aforementioned policy changes. It is an invaluable tool of peer pressure, where the behaviour of any and every nation is scrutinised and debated.

For a first-timer, things can be a little bewildering, from the procedure to get your badge to the last-minute timetable changes and the multitude of extra meetings (called "side events") going on all over the place which you are not aware of until the day they are happening and which can involve a real trek ("cross the pontoon, right, left, up to the fifth floor, then follow the signs..."). It is sometimes also necessary to fight your way across a morass of acronyms and jargon, not to mention reams of paper, to get to the crux of the matter. And if you find people in dark suits scary, then this is not the place for you! For me it certainly made a change from life in rural Brittany – not a cow in sight all week!



But you soon get the hang of it, understanding that the side events can be organised by NGOs or state missions, and learning to choose the ones likely to be most interesting, and that the plenary sessions can run on too long because people have a lot to say. Generally this is how it happens: the Special Rapporteur (SR) who has researched a particular topic, say migrants, over a number of years and in several countries, presents his/her report, followed by two other reports by SRs on other subjects. This is followed by comments from “concerned countries” and other country representatives who want to have their say on one of the three topics, and who have five minutes to speak. Finally, the NGOs can have their say—three minutes each, sometimes reduced to two minutes! This is often the most interesting part.



As I sat listening to statements in the plenary sessions, I heard some country representatives (in general the ambassador him/herself) rebutting the claims made in a particular report, stating it was not representative of the state of affairs in their country: I heard China supporting Myanmar’s (Burma’s) human rights record; I heard representatives totally ignoring lamentable situations in their own countries in order to attack another country’s record on a particular subject. This is all to be expected, this is politics, this is human nature. But I also heard countries expressing their unreserved support for the reports and committing themselves to change policies or, even more positive, enumerating the laws and codes of practice that had been rewritten or brought into effect to be in line with Council Resolutions.

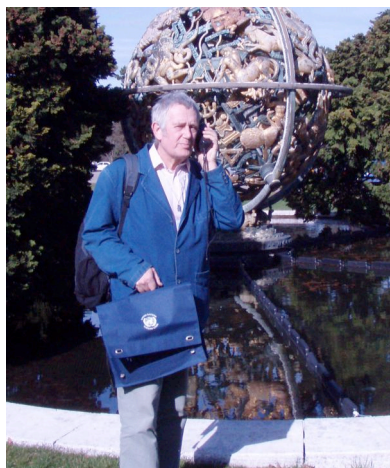
Occasional windows of brilliance illuminated the proceedings. such Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Jean Ziegler’s report, a passionate intervention on food security in which he drew attention to the number of children who die from hunger each hour and called the fact that a child had died from hunger during his speech, murder. This speech, which reiterated the fact the world has the means to produce enough food for everyone, and strongly criticised food dumping and using agricultural land to grow bio-fuel crops, brought rare applause.

There are issues for which there are as yet no guiding principles or conventions, and which are therefore all the more important to discuss. A case in point is the impact parental imprisonment has on children. This is a little-known area, and very relevant to Susila Dharma which supports the Tierraviva project in Argentina, whose main programme involves art, education and childcare workshops for women living with their children in prison.

On my first day in Geneva, I attended an “informal” meeting on this subject which provided me with many insights into an area which has been of great interest to me since SDF began supporting Tierraviva in 2005. It is surprising that, although this

issue touches developed countries as much as developing ones, it has not been addressed by the Human Rights Council or anyone else; so, there are no guidelines for best practice. Rachel Brett, of the Quaker United Nations Office, who was chairing this meeting, called for collaboration from individuals and organisations with expertise in this field who would be willing to work with her team to collect data about current and best practice.

I was able to obtain her details and pass them on to Rasjid Cesar of Tierraviva so he would be able to participate in this initiative. This could be the start of a collaboration that may help to lead to an HRC resolution that would provide a human rights framework for practitioners and governments to work within—a long-term process, surely, but a worthwhile one.



In part, it is these small personal connections that could lead to bigger things which make a Subud participation in the Human Rights Council interesting and useful. We also have a role to inform people in Subud generally, and in particular Susila Dharma project leaders, of developments in the field of international human rights which might affect or help their work. What better way of making Subud known in the wider world than participating in this or other United Nations events?

The UN Human Rights Council is not glamorous, spectacular or “sexy”: but this is where the nitty-gritty gets done. This is where we can take things forward. And remember, “There are three kinds of people: Those who make things happen, those who watch things happen, and those who ask, ‘What happened?’” (Casey Stengel). I believe we should try to belong to the first group! Participation in the Human Rights Council is one way of going about it...

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