

## Focus of DPI/NGO activities broadened in 2008

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After holding their final weekly briefing session for 2008, **Department of Public Information (DPI) staff dedicated to interacting with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)** reflected on a busy year of activities with a strong focus on human rights and efforts to extend their reach to groups around the world.

The theme of the final briefing session was "Dignity and justice for all of us: After 60 years of the Universal Declaration, what's next?"



Joseph Paul Martin, Senior Scholar at the Centre for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University, was the speaker for the event, which coincided with the observation of **Human Rights Day 2008**.

A talent show added a festive note to the last briefing.

Within the last 12 months, briefings for NGOs were organized on a wide-range of thought-provoking topics, such as "Valentine's Day Flowers and Chocolates: To Give or Not to Give," "Understanding Autism," "Breaking the Silence on the Transatlantic Slave Trade," "Violence against Women," and "Millennium Villages: a New Approach to Fighting Poverty in Africa," among other issues on the UN agenda.

### DPI/NGO Conference in Paris

From bonding with colleagues, discovering new "talents," finding old friends and making new ones, to learning some cultural differences between life in New York and Paris, Ms. Maria-Luisa Chavez, Chief of NGO Relations, and her team concluded that holding the **annual DPI/NGO Conference** outside the UN Headquarters for the first time (in Paris) was an excellent initiative.

Besides their small group from New York, the team had the unique opportunity to work with and know colleagues from other UN agencies and duty stations, including staff of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (**OHCHR**) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**).

"They were of great help and a wonderful asset for the conference," said the team about their colleagues from UNESCO and OHCHR.

### Wider and diverse participation

The three-day conference in the French capital on the theme "Reaffirming Human Rights for All" was fitting and symbolic, as 2008 marked



the **60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights** on 10 December 1948 in the city's Palais de Chaillot.

Some 1,200 **participants** from countries across the world and from diverse groups gathered at the UNESCO Headquarters for the conference, which was dedicated to the implementation of the Declaration. From prisoners of conscience to those engaged in the daily fight against discrimination -- those with disabilities to those with different sexual orientation, the young, the old and other vulnerable groups, all came to Paris to have their voices heard.

"An 80-year old woman got in a couple of hours before the conference opened and said, 'I heard about the human rights conference and I am here to participate'," recalled one member of the team. The woman did not have access to the internet, therefore could not take advantage of pre-conference online registration but she had the opportunity to take part in the historic event.

"With Headquarters security, can you imagine anyone arriving on the day of the conference without pre-registration to participate in the conference?" asked Ms. Bindley-Taylor Sainte. Maybe not, but the octogenarian was not alone. "We had people coming until an hour before. We just had to close registration," she added.

"Taking the conference out on the road," noted Ms. Chavez, changed a lot. "We had a wider geographical representation," compared to past conferences held in New York. "It used to be 60% United States NGOs," she said.

A higher number of Member States also took part in the Paris conference as observers than before.

### **Major conference highlights**

For three days, participants in five roundtable discussions, mid-day workshops and subsidiary sessions, shared experiences and best practices in different areas of human rights protection. Their discussions covered a wide range of topics, including poverty, the rights of the disabled, the mentally ill, minorities as well as the growing challenge that terrorism poses to national efforts to address human rights issues.

One of the major highlights of the conference was the powerful keynote speakers it assembled including **French Ambassador Stéphane Hessel**, one of the original drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, described as a "living legend." Other key participants and speakers included Rama Yade, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Human Rights of France, Simone Veil, former Minister of State of France, Karel Vasak, who advanced the notion of three "generations" of human rights, and Jan Eliasson, former UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy to Darfur.

There was also a message via live video link from former Colombian Senator Ingrid Betancourt, recently liberated after being held by a rebel group for nearly six years. The speeches, many said, were very "exciting and enriching."

### **Preparing for the Paris conference**

Holding the DPI/NGO conference outside New York for the first time in 61 years was quite a challenge for a team used to relying on Secretariat resources. “We took for granted what was being offered in New York when we organized a conference. We had to ship everything, including name tags, notepads, pens, staples and clips,” recalled the team, adding that buying stationery from Paris would have been expensive in light of the weakening dollar.

For the many that witnessed the 61<sup>st</sup> annual DPI/NGO conference on human rights in Paris, it was a success in every aspect - the programme content, the speeches, the guests, and the efforts that went into organizing it.

Plans are underway for the next DPI/NGO conference scheduled for Mexico City in September 2009.