

Disarm News!

Mexico DF Mexico 11 septiembre 09

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The Importance of Youth Activism: An Interview with Maria-Luisa Chávez

by Brady Collins and Stephanie Salvador



Amidst the activities of the 62nd annual DPI/NGO Conference on Peace and Disarmament, and despite her intense responsibilities as Chief of NGO Relations, Maria-Luisa Chávez willingly took the time to meet with two student journalists. She was clearly excited about the active participation of young people.

Hundreds of youth locally and from abroad came together to assist and to learn more about the activities of the United Nations and the topic of disarmament. Involving youth has been one of Chávez' goals, and the meeting in Mexico City has helped to bring that into reality.

Specifically, she wants students to raise awareness and encourage activism about global issues amongst their peers on campus and in their larger communities.

For those who want hands-on experience, Chávez explained that the United Nations offers various internship programs, which she strongly recommends. Walking her talk, Chávez brought five interns to the disarmament and development conference.

"The whole idea is that if you really believe in disarmament, and as Ban Ki-Moon said, 'you need the courage,' it's for you to continue to do the same work wherever you go," Chávez said.

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Her enthusiasm about the UN can be traced to her own experiences as a youth, growing up in a family with a long history of UN involvement and living on-site of numerous peacekeeping missions, such as in India, Pakistan and the Congo

“I used to see the role the United Nations used to play, and the power of the logo and the flag,” she said.

Given her own positive experiences, Chávez is disappointed about growing apathy worldwide among youth.

“You need to make noise, I think. You have to push, push, push,” she says, urging students to take charge. “We need leaders that we can look up to.”

Youth involvement in civil society and NGOs is particularly important.

As Chief of NGO Relations at the UN Department of Public Information, Chávez serves as a liaison among NGOs affiliated with DPI, and also between NGOs, civil society and UN agencies. The goal is cooperation and dialogue amongst all the stakeholders.

Difficulties arise when NGOs fail to work together and coordinate their efforts.

“The role of my office is to gather NGOs together so they can work together,” Chávez said.

Chávez recognized this problem in her own country and solved it. When she began her tenure at DPI a year-and-a-half ago, Mexico City had only 15 NGOs. This came as a shock to her given Mexico’s long history of revolution as well as political and civil unrest. Now there are 53.

Another challenge has been to increase networking among NGOs, which is being solved by increasing participation in workshops, committees and annual conferences such as this one on disarmament.

About 1,300 people participated in the current conference, far surpassing expectations.

“For me that was the biggest success,” she said.

Acknowledging the criticism often leveled at the UN for its inability to foster international cooperation, Chávez counters that communication between nations has no limits when they are part of the same global community. “The power of dialogue is incredible,” she says.

For Chávez, the youth participation at this year’s conference is exemplary of these goals. Student journalists and youth volunteers from Mexico and abroad increased their understanding and worked together diligently to raise awareness about peace and disarmament. Chávez is optimistic, evident in her message to youth for the future: “There’s a lot of work ahead, its not just three days here listening to speeches. It’s up to you to make a difference.”

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Education: A Gateway To Peace

by Akane Wilson

At the workshop on “Creating Communities of Peace,” held at the Popular Art Museum, three panelists from *Service for Peace* elaborated on the importance of creating peaceful communities through education in Latin America.

Juan Pablo Barrera from *Service for Peace* in Guatemala described the overall goals of the organization as engaging dedicated volunteers from all over the globe to assist with the most profound issues of communities in need.

“In our project we have no barriers, just a genuine initiative to serve others,” he explained, adding that education is the fundamental component of creating a peaceful community.

The director of *Service for Peace* in Nicaragua, Marcia Lorena Miranda, highlighted priorities of the organization. In addition to creating peace communities through education, the organization aims to create a global culture of service, mold leaders through active learning, and establish a lasting stability of peace and education within the community. The objective is to “learn by serving” and to be “agents of change.”



Marcia L. Miranda

Joan Alberto Mateo, executive director of *Service for Peace* in the Dominican Republic, detailed the role of an “agent of change” and the organization’s approach to developing communities. She pointed out that the facilitator of a project can only help if performing with a “high ethic of service.” Furthermore, those who assist are “just a channel and a way to facilitate” while the community itself must desire change and be integrally involved in all phases of progress towards attaining a stable environment free of violent elements that discourage development, education, and peace.

The objective of *Service for Peace* is to progress towards universal education for people of all ages, which constitutes one of the UN Millennium Development Goals. The organization has catalyzed educational development, and created crucial resources of education, for people of all ages, religions and nationalities.

Barrera concluded the workshop with the profound statement that “We young people are today, not tomorrow. We are all ‘young’ in spirit. That’s what counts.”

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Peacekeepers discuss methods of non-violent protection from conflict



by Alaska André

In the workshop titled "Challenges and Opportunities in the Creation of Unarmed Civilian Peacekeeping," the essentials of creating peace were discussed by speakers from various perspectives. They presented their involvement in the peace movement and how to further peace throughout the world by using non-violent methods.

Speaker Peter Dougherty described the efforts of a number of organizations involved with the Non-Violent Peace Force that work in various regions of the world experiencing conflict. In one example, an organization of which he is part, the Michigan Peace Team, went into Nicaragua in 1983 to protect citizens from the Contra Army. The result was that the mere presence of internationals in the area succeeded in keeping soldiers' bullets away.

Other methods have been used by peacekeepers stationed abroad to deter violence from being perpetrated on innocent civilians. In one instance where soldiers were unnecessarily beating peaceful protesters, the peacekeepers created a 'puppy pile' around the victims, which involves simply covering the victim with their bodies. This technique worked to stop the beating because the soldiers did not have any interest in beating internationals.

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Another example relates to the frequent and violent attacks on illegal immigrants near the U.S.-Mexico border. Over 80 bodies of illegal immigrants have been found in these areas each year, but the numbers have decreased significantly in areas where outside peacekeepers are present.

Brian Barrios, a 20-year-old philosophy student from Venezuela, presented a more theoretical approach. Emphasizing the universality of peace, he explained: "Water has been water everywhere; here there, and everywhere. Nobody has been able to change its meaning according to their own goals. The same goes for peace, and both peace and water are fundamental for human life."

Barrios rationalized his position by identifying specific changes that must be made to accelerate efforts of the peacemakers. He asserted the need to "eliminate radicalizations that lead to conflict, overcome impunity mechanisms for human rights violations, and repudiate discriminations of all kind, because those who have been discriminated against lose their rights." His message centered on the immediate need to defend actions when peace is threatened in any area of the world .

The last speaker, Sandra Salcedo from the Nonviolent Peaceforce, offered an inspiring message that effectively summarized the theme of the workshop: "From grassroots organizations to the United Nations, a growing number of people understand that peace cannot come from the barrel of a gun."



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The Best Medicine for Nuclear Disarmament

by Brady Collins

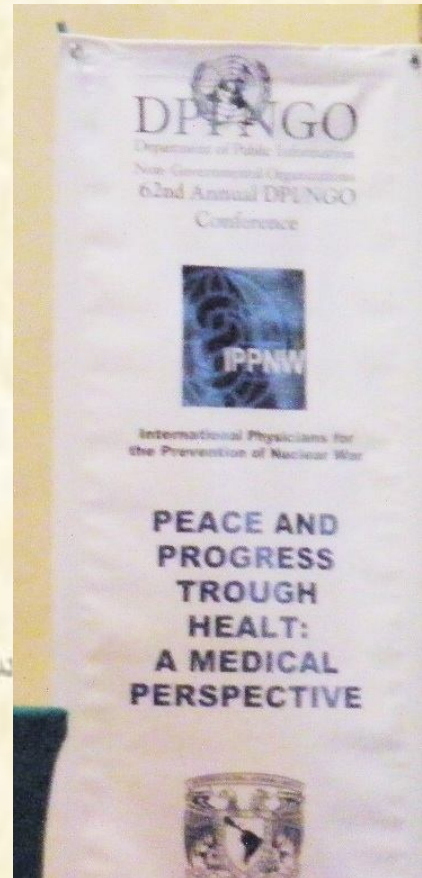
An announcement about shocking statistics of the devastating, long-lasting effects of nuclear war opened the workshop entitled, "Peace and Progress through Health: A Medical Perspective." Slides depicted children sick from radiation exposure and nuclear winters hovering above Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Such imagery explicitly showcased the destructive capabilities of nuclear armaments. Even worse, the rippling effects on health and all aspects of society significantly hinder progress towards a peaceful global society.

Considering the progression of issues involved with peace and disarmament from a pyramid model of intensity, nuclear war is at the peak. The underneath layers are regional war, civil conflict, and individual violent acts. This model of disarmament demonstrates how peace begins from the bottom up, that is, at the level of individual acts. Thus, working to develop a healthy non-violent citizenry at the interpersonal level is the first step towards preventing mass destruction.

Epidemiologist Dr. Jorge Ramirez detailed how achieving a peaceful environment requires an understanding about interconnectedness.

He explained how Mexico has historically experienced economic growth when its health programs were strongest and widely distributed. As Mexico's GDP continues its decline, so does social security and domestic health levels. The result is "an environment of doubt." To counter this, Ramirez stressed the important role health experts around the world can play in uniting together, to raise the standard of living in their respective areas. Further, an active medical society that organizes peace movements at the local and international levels is the best hope for a country not only economically, but also as a healthy, peaceful society.

In summary, the panelists emphasized three major points: that disarmament can only be achieved by working at the grassroots level, insuring a healthy populace; that progress of a continually developing civilization with an improved standard of living requires ongoing effort; and that health is not solely about combating disease, but about fundamental values, social responsibility, and social action.



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PEACE ACTION: Interview with Dr. Judy Lerner



*Interview conducted by
Chendil Venkataraman*

*Lerner, in her 80s, was
honored as the oldest
conference attendee*

Question 1: Why is Mexico the key player in peace and disarmament?

Lerner: Mexico is the closest neighboring country to the United States. The United States has arms and nuclear weapons aimed in all directions. This affects Mexico. Mexico is a developing country that needs money for resources, agriculture, and infrastructure. Putting Mexico in this position makes Mexico guard its borders and produce arms and weapons; which is impossible. That is the reason Mexico is key in telling the world and the U. S. to STOP producing arms and nuclear weapons.

Question 2: How could Mexico accomplish that?

Lerner: Greater collaboration between the governments of Mexico and the United States is required. The United States has a new government under President Barack Obama. Mexico has to say to the United States, "You are powerful; you are influential and have a new government. Do something the way I think about it. Let us stop manufacturing arms, ammunitions and nuclear weapons. Stop hostility and begin to talk about nuclear disarmament."

Question 3: What is the role of the United Nations in peace and disarmament?

Lerner: The United Nations is the agency that represents 192 nations. The United Nations is responsible for maintaining peace, disarmament, and social justice. The issues of nuclear disarmament are raised in the United Nations.

Question 4: What is the role of Peace Action?

Lerner: As the United Nations NGO representative for Peace Action, I have to lobby governments. First of all, I have to lobby my State Department. Peace Action did not have access to the State Department under the government of President George W. Bush. The State Department under the new government is accessible. The State Department is headed by Susan Rice; she will listen to the nuclear disarmament issues. Peace Action will carry the message to the State Department that 1,500 people, 60 nations, and 300 organizations participated in the 62nd Annual DPI/NGO Conference in Mexico City September 9-11, 2009, and resolved for peace and disarmament.

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Where is the rest of the globe? An Interview with Amina Sharif from Voice of Somali Women

by Hawwa Muhammad

In recognition of the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the 62nd Annual DPI/NGO Conference titled “DISARM NOW! for peace and development” served as a great venue where civil society, international students and other members of the international community came together to discuss innovative approaches towards peace and development. I loved meeting members of civil society. My conversations with them were especially meaningful to me because it provided me with an international perspective on problems of disarmament.



Student journalist Hawwa Muhammad (left) with Amina Sharif, NGO Representative from Voice of Somali Women for Peace

Particularly interesting to me was the absence at this conference of a stronger presence from the African and Middle Eastern communities. Yet, obstructions to peace and disarmament persist in both these regions. For the Middle East, the threat of nuclear weapons posed by Iran presents a crucial perspective to any meaningful dialogue. African nations suffer from ongoing problems of child soldiers and the proliferation of small arms across the continent and worldwide; these are difficult subjects to approach without the presence of players from the African continent itself.

During my interview with Amina Sharif, an NGO representative at the United Nations from the Somalian NGO *Voice of Somali Women for Peace*, she recalled lessons learned from the conference. The problem of disarmament is very complex and multidimensional. Within the context of the African community, Sharif explained, “. . .because they [the more developed countries] have shelter, food and peace [relative to developing countries], for us we are still struggling for life.” Given the trajectory of Africa’s development, the issue of urging African leaders to stop nuclear proliferation does not align with the needs of the continent.

According to Sharif, another serious problem is the apparent lack of transparency amongst governments in such regions, as well as globally, which makes the possibility of nuclear arms proliferation more likely. Also relevant and important for countries in the developing world, environmental hazards posed by nuclear waste must be addressed in such regions where basic necessities are still absent.

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World Youth Against War



by Stephanie Salvador

Eight youth from the Fundación Cultural Baur came together on the third day of the 62nd annual United Nations DPI/NGO conference to speak out in favor of ending all wars at a workshop entitled World Youth Against War.

Each youth passionately delivered a speech encouraging their peers to take a stand to end all wars, given that the youth generation can make a difference.

“People say we are the generation of the future but that’s not true. We are the generation of today!” said panelist, Maria Jose.

Wars negatively affect many men, women and children everyday. The panelists agree that wars are unnecessary.

Youth Roccio Garcia noted that one motivation for war is man’s ambition to gain more land.

“Territory will always define wealth but what will happen when man’s land runs out? What will we fight for?” said Garcia.

She warned against being uninvolved, quoting Albert Einstein, “The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who kill people but because of those who look and do nothing.”

Youth Pablo Reyes stated that the production of nuclear arms has increased over the past 40 years. However, no international law exists that prevents these weapons from “falling into the hands of abusers and violators of human rights.”

The students vowed that they will not lower their voices and instead will continue to campaign and advocate to end all wars. They want to see the end of all wars, to create a peaceful world for all, and to fulfill the basic human right of safety. Through their campaigns, they feel optimistic about achieving this goal.

Youth panelist Jessica Serrano made a provocative statement: “We do not want any more conferences on Peace and Disarmament, we want the end of war!”

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New Challenges and Perspectives for Global Development and Security for the 21st Century

by: *Hawwa Muhammad and Chendil Venkataraman*

In remembrance of this day, the anniversary of the attacks on New York's World Trade Center, the moderator of the roundtable titled "New Challenges and Perspectives for Global Development and Security for the 21st Century" began the session with a moment of silence. Adalberto Saviñon, Director of the Centro de Información e Investigación Lindavista, then gave the floor to Carolina Owens from the U.S. Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict. Owens highlighted three challenges regarding children in armed conflicts: extensive consequences of war on children's social, emotional and physical condition; difficulties getting abducted children released; and extreme complications of re-integrating child soldiers into their families, community and society in post-conflict times.

Since World War II, increased conflict has occurred within states rather than between states. Accordingly, there has been an increase in using children as child soldiers. Owens reported that within the last 20 years, two million children have been killed in conflict-affected countries, while six million children have been permanently disabled, displaced or disadvantaged by lack of access to health and education.

The UN has established a "naming and shaming list" to identify states and non-state actors that commit violations of human rights, for example, killing and maiming of children, rape, abduction, and attacking hospitals and schools. Also, a legal framework exists to hold perpetrators responsible. For example, in its first case, the International Criminal Court sentenced to death Gédéon Kyungu Mutanga, 2003-2006 militia leader in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for crimes against humanity including recruiting child soldiers and alleged cannibalism. In light of this success, the monitoring and reporting procedures need to conform to idiosyncratic situations of each culture and country.

Hiro Sakurai, President of the Committee of Religious NGOs at the United Nations, spoke about the need to explore a multidimensional approach towards security.



From left to right: Hiro Sakurai, Carolina Owens, Mokhtar Lamani, and Adalberto Saviñon

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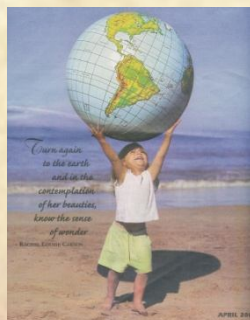
“Real security is placing people in the center,” Sakurai said. “Real security should give real strength to the people and empower them to be independent and contribute to the goodness of society.”

A unique perspective to the theme of the roundtable was provided by panelist Mokhtar Lamani, given his experience with conflicts in parts of East Africa and the Middle East. The latter was a result of his role as a former ambassador to the Arab League of Nations. He is currently serving as a senior visiting research fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation. Witnessing horrors of these conflicts and the severity and persistence of injustices, he explained, can lead to ignoring laws established by the UN and other entities.

Lamani explained that the root of the conflict in Iraq, for example, derives from the fragmentation of society into four groups: political, tribal, religious and intellectual. Within this framework, there are more than 400 parties and more than 100 insurgent groups. “I have never witnessed such a high level of mistrust between groups like in Iraq,” he said. This mistrust and fragmentation that is basic to conflict in a region and internationally, must be resolved for peace to prevail. A resolution he offered is the establishment of solidarity within a country as well as among neighboring countries, in order to provide a common ground for security which is essential in order for the peace process to progress.

The discussion period was exceptionally lively, including questions about how to make peacekeepers accountable for the violations of local laws, and how to include perpetrators and survivors together in post-conflict resolution.

The theme of this roundtable captured central messages of the conference by stressing the need for a multilateral approach that brings multiple actors into dialogue in order to achieve peace and development. In addition, security must be human-centered instead of based on economics and other factors. This means that stakeholders must establish a humanistic standard that takes people and their needs into account when addressing issues of security and human development.



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Closing Ceremony: Calls for More

by Brady Collins

The 62nd annual DPI/NGO Conference ended where it began, inside the majestic former convent of San Hipólito. After three intense days of meetings and workshops, and valuable networking, the participants were tired but full of new ideas and valuable connections. Most did not want the magical time to end, and eagerly filed into the room with its atmospheric lighting. The brightly lit stage displayed accomplishments of the meeting as trophies, namely the completed conference sculpture signed by Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. A bright green plant sprouts from a hand grenade, shattering the weapon and turning its debris into its foundation for beautiful growth.

The sculpture was a symbol of the efforts and progress made.

The closing ceremony was aptly guided by UN Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information at the United Nations Kiyo Akasaka.

The keynote address was appropriately delivered by a leading figure from the very city that knows about the terror of nuclear attack, Hiroshima Mayor Tadatoshi Akiba. As the President of Mayors for Peace, Akiba asked the assembly to imagine the devastation of his beautiful city and the horrors of nuclear destruction in the 1940s and to picture a contrasting nuclear-free world by 2020. Equally a pleasure for Akiba would be to welcome the Olympics in Hiroshima. Inviting a new generation able to tackle problems in a more humane way, he urged people to visit their mayor, even with their spouse, family and friends, and to write letters to world leaders, asking them to join the campaign for a nuclear-free world. He also suggested creating educational materials in collaboration with their mayor, and to bring these to New York this coming Spring when a major peace march will take place.



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Conference chair Charles Hitchcock proudly read the “NGO Declaration: Disarming Peace and Development,” drafted by experts from the Mexico and New York planning committees, covering thematic issues from the conference. Pausing only to gaze out into the crowd during the applause, he encouraged all to adopt the declaration, calling for “ayes” which received a resounding response. No nays were registered. Hitchcock was visibly gratified and uplifted by the support. His reaction was well deserved, for under the stone ceiling of one of Mexico City’s proudest architectural achievements, sat NGO and government representatives from around the world. The document serves as a emblem of international cooperation for peace. It requests all peoples, organizations and governments to recognize and promote efforts of the thousands of NGOs and civil society organizations worldwide that promote peace and disarmament. Substantive suggestions for improvement were invited at a meeting to take place the next day and also via email at ngodeclaration@gmail.com. All are invited to contribute, Hitchcock explained.

Hitchcock presented the declaration to the panelists and to Mexican officials, Sergio Duarte, United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs, and Roberto Zamora, lawyer and member of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict. Almost by surprise, a traditional folklorico band bounded onto the stage, their instruments slung over their shoulders and their red and white suits glowing under the spotlights from above. Soon afterwards, the raised platform exploded with energy, as two women in white dresses swirled their white lace skirts in dramatic movements. They were soon joined by men and then a troupe, lavishly dressed in traditional Mexican attire, dancing a Folklorico, stomping their feet and swinging their hips in perfect unison as the musicians energetic melodies crooned on.



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As if anything could top that excitement, a cast of characters wearing enormous masks swooped on stage and skipped through the aisles to the audience's sheer delight. The crowd cheered at their dramatic gestures and the entire thrilling spectacle. The authentic Mexican tradition was unleashed in true exciting and engaging Mexican style, culminating in a performance always to be remembered for its intense pride and vigor for life.



When the band, dancers, and performers left the stage, the crowd lept to their feet, clapping wildly, and chanting, "Otra! Otra! Otra!" Understandably, they wanted more of the energetic and charming celebration. The entire event could not be a more perfect closing on a positive note to this years' conference with such a serious theme. The return of the characters to the stage in response to the audience's genuine appreciation was symbolic of the enthusiasm for a peaceful, cooperative world community that had been displayed throughout the conference. After all, it is essential to stay focused, call for more, and recognize that there is more to be done to reach the goals addressed in the three-day conference, for Peace and Development: Disarm Now!

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