

18th World Congress International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)

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The International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War [IPPNW] World Congress was held in Delhi, India from 9 to 12 March 2008. It was preceded by a student congress on March 7 and 8. The event was attended by 604 delegates from 59 countries, including four New Zealand medical students and one physician. IPPNW is an organization of medical students and doctors who are committed to helping facilitate nuclear disarmament and promoting world peace. The organisation was founded in 1980 by two cardiologists, one from the United States and the other from the Soviet Union who both realised their common interests in peace transcended the politics of the Cold War. IPPNW has been a leader in the promotion of peace, demilitarization and nuclear disarmament since this time, receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985. IPPNW is represented in New Zealand through Medical Students for Global Awareness (MSGA); local MSGA groups are active or being established around New Zealand.

The Student Congress

Topics such as global warming, small arms and nuclear disarmament were discussed at the student congress. Of most interest were talks from students about the work they were doing in their own countries, often in very unsupportive government contexts. One poignant example was from a medical student from Iran who had hosted a 'Target X' event in Tehran to educate locals on the likely effects of a nuclear strike on the X target point. A Palestinian student presented his intention to organize a summit bringing together Palestinian and Israeli students. A Medical Alliance to Stop Global

Warming awareness campaign in the US has been developed (see www.psr.org/site/PageServer?pagename=MedicalAlliance_to_StopGlobalWarming). A workshop on One Bullet Stories explained how clinical students on electives in areas affected by small arms violence could collect small arms injury data to help scope the extent of the problem. Such talks were inspiring and provided an insight into the freedom we have in New Zealand to act on our beliefs.

It was exceptionally valuable to hear from different IPPNW student chapters - their different national interests, foci and involvements and how these were advocated for within IPPNW. Small-arms control, for example, was a particular priority for students from Africa and South America. Medical students from the Pacific region spoke about initiating a project to document the public health consequences of armed tribal conflicts in Papua New Guinea. They presented data at the Congress and now aim to integrate their clinical research into civil society campaigns back in New Zealand and Papua New Guinea. The American students were concerned about global warming and were running education campaigns. The diversity of interests amongst the student groups suggested the organization was of value as it could accommodate such a breadth of concerns.

The Student Congress was preceded by a four day Peace March undertaken by 74 students. It went from Wagah (the only border crossing between India and Pakistan) to Rajghat (where Mahatma Gandhi was cremated in Delhi). This was reported to have been a great success. It offered students an opportunity to educate Indian villagers firsthand on nuclear issues and to understand the reasons some groups of Indians might have for supporting India's nuclear proliferation. The camaraderie and solidarity of the March made it a highlight for students who participated.

The IPPNW Congress

The full Congress included formal presentations addressing topics ranging from small arms violence, globalization, sustainable energy and religious intolerance to anti-nuclear action. The anti-nuclear flagship for IPPNW is the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN; www.icanw.org). This international campaign for a Nuclear Weapons Convention is based on a ground swell of public opposition to nuclear weapons and political advocacy. ICAN presentations at the congress offered a positive message for a nuclear-free future and provided simple resources for public education on nuclear issues.

As part of IPPNW's nuclear abolition movement, the environment and health effects of uranium mining in India were explored. A speech by Dr Shakeel ur Rahman, from the Indian Doctors for Peace and Development (IDPD), about the local health impacts of the Jadugoda uranium mine in Northern India was particularly compelling. Primary sterility, congenital deformations and mortality due to cancer and deformation were all



Medical students from 59 countries joined together to March for peace through Delhi.



Medical students at four day peace march.

significantly more prevalent in a village next to the uranium mine than in a similar sized village 30 kilometres from the site (see www.jadugoda.net). Dr Shakeel's speech was followed by a moving short speech by an indigenous miner from the affected community. The elder told of women being ostracised from the community because they could not bear children. He described how unlike other villages where people celebrated a birth, in his village 'the people cried because they did not know if the baby would live a long life or be normal'. The villagers, who are representative of some of the 800 million Indians living on less than US\$1 per day, believe 'it was better to die of cancer with a full belly than to die of hunger'. This session brought home the many layers of harm caused by nuclear arms. Not only do they threaten future harm, they cause immediate health effects on vulnerable populations and divert funds from health and education. The discussion on future energy options further illustrated the breadth of issues associated with an anti-nuclear stance. Speakers from Germany, Nepal and Indonesia presented non-nuclear solutions to the demand for more energy being pursued in their region. This showed how people from a variety of different countries and backgrounds were taking responsibility for finding alternative solutions.

India as a Congress host

India is one of eight confirmed nuclear weapon states yet has a strong Gandhian tradition of peace and non violence. This dichotomy made the congress a particularly interesting exercise in history, rhetoric and political practice. The congress was opened by the Vice President of India and the Minister of Health and Social Welfare spoke at the congress dinner. The Vice President acknowledged that medical students and young doctors were the future decision makers and commended them for spreading

awareness of the nuclear disarmament process. This high level of support for the IPPNW appeared as a contradiction. Both speakers called upon India's culture of peace dating back to Gandhi to signal India's support for peace while at the same time acknowledging India was pursuing nuclear armament. At no time in the congress was there any discussion of how we might help alleviate local poverty issues.

The Congress as an experience

The IPPNW congress offered unparalleled opportunities to meet international peers interested in peace and social justice issues. There were several students present who had taken a year out to do volunteer work or public health research projects. It was also invaluable to hear how qualified doctors combined social justice issues with practice; particularly a German psychiatrist working with refugees suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This illustrated the possibilities for action and involvement available to doctors.

The congress alerted us to the importance and urgency of the anti-nuclear campaign and the bid for a global Nuclear Weapons Convention. It is essential that New Zealanders continue the landmark work of our anti-nuclear laws by contributing to international disarmament efforts. Medical professionals in New Zealand have a unique opportunity to contribute to a preventative health model for involvement in peace and health issues. The next Congress will be held in Basel, Switzerland in 2010 and aims to enlist Masses for Weapons Destruction.

If you wish to join the 'masses' contact your local Medical Students for Global Awareness group or msga.nz@gmail.com.

All photos taken by Roman Sandoz.



The IPPNW Congress was attended by many Indian politicians including the Vice President and the Minister of Health and Social Welfare



Senator Douglas Roche welcomes Shri M. Hamid Ansari, Vice President of India to the congress.