

Speaking out, and listening, at a politicised forum

By Marianna Linnik



Marianna Linnik represents Australia before the UN Human Rights Council

I was very fortunate to attend the tenth session of the Human Rights Council at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. I was one of two interns at the Australian delegation and I was supervised by Australian diplomats from the Australian Mission in Geneva. It truly was one of the most interesting experiences of my life.

Prior to the internship, I was extremely interested in the UN and its role in protecting and promoting human rights around the world. However, I knew very little about what this actually entailed. I am very grateful to the Castan Centre for the opportunity to participate in this initiative and to get hands-on experience in this field.

As an intern at the Australian delegation, I attended the plenary session of the Council and many side meeting and events. At these sessions, I drafted reports which were used to inform the Department of Foreign Affairs in Canberra on what was occurring at the Council. I was also very fortunate to deliver Australia's statements on a number of human rights issues during various debates. Furthermore, I was given the opportunity to lobby delegates from other countries to support a resolution on torture.

A great deal of human rights issues were addressed at the Council, ranging from the rights of children and people with disabilities, to the situation in North Korea, the Middle East and Somalia. All of these issues were discussed in the plenary session of the Council and in side meetings, where diplomats from different states debated on and refined the wording of resolutions that would be passed at the conclusion of the Council. I also very much enjoyed attending the meetings put on by various NGOs. One of the best aspects of attending the Human Rights Council is that there were seemingly endless opportunities to attend talks put on by many prominent speakers about a vast amount of different human rights issues.

One meeting that sticks out in my memory was a panel of speakers that discussed forced disappearances in South America and the possibility of using forensic science to find and identify the bodies of the victims. One of the speakers was an elderly lady, who represented the organisation of grandmothers that were looking for their grandchildren, who had been disappeared by various regimes. The passionate stories told by this woman and her relentless search for her disappeared grandson brought tears to my eyes.

Of course, the Human Rights Council is not without its problems. Throughout the internship, the strengths and weaknesses of multi-

lateral forums, and the Human Rights Council in particular, were brought to my attention. This was highlighted by the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UPR is a process by which the human rights situation in every country is reviewed by other states and by civil society. Over a number of years, every state is given the opportunity to present a report and other countries and NGOs may make comments and recommendations regarding the report and the general state of human rights in that country. At the session that I attended 16 countries were reviewed. It was clear from the outset that the process was very political and that despite a country's actual conduct in relation to human rights, it was often praised by its peers and criticised by its enemies. It was difficult to escape politics throughout the duration of the Council and, even though this was disheartening, overall I still believe that the UN and large multi-lateral meetings have a role to play in promoting and protecting human rights around the world.

Another aspect of the Council that I enjoyed is that it truly is an international experience. It was incredible to look around the room and to see faces of representatives from almost every country in the world. Similarly, I really enjoyed living in Geneva, as it is also a very international city. Whether at the UN or on my days off, I met many interesting people from all around the world and this added to the richness of the experience. The city itself is very quaint and beautiful and the mountains surrounding it are spectacular.

Overall, I had an amazing experience. I would not have been able to learn so much about so many human rights issues and to get an insight into the intricacies of the UN without this opportunity.