

Asia-Pacific Model United Nations Conference 2013

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The Asia –Pacific Model United Nations Conference (MUN) that was held in Wellington in July was an eye-opening experience for the three of us. MUN brings like-minded individuals together to discuss pertinent and current issues that the international community has faced difficulty in addressing. In MUN, groups of people form “delegations” and go on to represent various international actors. These can range from representing nations to Non-Governmental organisations and even various press organizations that report on the events of the conference. Within our delegation of nine from the University of Canterbury, the three of us (Jasveet Sandhu, Kate Macfarlane and Laura Stills) study law with a particular focus on public international law. We were each assigned to represent the delegation of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Poland and Finland in differing UN committees which addressed issues ranging from matters of health, human rights to legal issues involving international law. In representing our designated States, we had to be mindful of accurately presenting the State’s domestic and foreign policies with regard to each issue. When discussing the various issues, MUN has a very distinct process of procedure and conduct when speaking within committees, in which the main objective was to successfully draft and pass a resolution. The aims of such resolutions were to create action statements which qualify the international community’s remedy to the important issues under consideration by the UN.

Jasveet: In representing the DRC in the Legal Committee (otherwise known as GA6), both topics in question were of importance to the DRC and thankfully my background in public international law came to be very handy. The issues discussed were by far the most interesting and current as they tackled firstly, the issue of establishing an international definition of a terrorist and secondly, the use of drones in modern warfare. With major Western powers such as the USA, UK and France being represented along with developing nations such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Cuba and African nations, these issues provided for heated debate between the delegates within the committee. The issue of determining what a terrorist is depends a lot on the context and perception of various nations on criminal acts against the State while considering relevant issues of foreign and domestic policy needing to be considered. Key elements in our definition involved a terrorist needing to commit destructive acts, spreading mass terror and fear in the population, these acts needing to be politically motivated at all times. The second issue of drones was a far more contentious one. The differences on the use of drones in modern warfare left much of the committee divided and unable to compromise on key issues owing to opposing sides having such clear policies on the use of drones. Points such as undermining one’s national sovereignty (like the US does in drone strikes over Pakistan) and the argument of protecting one’s national security through conducting drone strikes were discussed in depth. However, though we were unable to create a viable resolution on the issue, the committee could agree on certain points. These included the fact that unarmed drones for the purposes of surveillance were not an issue as well as the fact that a level of accountability and review process on the decision to conduct drone strikes should be introduced. While this committee dealt

primarily with the legality of the problems, it was extremely interesting to see how politics and governmental policies also play such a large role in the decision-making process of such contentious issues in the UN. I would definitely recommend such a committee to interested law students out there, especially those with a background or interest in international law as this provided valuable insight to the functions and procedures within the UN.

Kate: In representing Poland on the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), my previous focus on international law within my studies was extremely helpful in allowing me to fully understand and engage the issues that the committee was charged with addressing. We discussed two topics, firstly, the application of the death penalty for drug related offences and secondly, the rights of transgender persons.

In discussing the death penalty, the committee quickly discovered that any resolution requiring the outright abolition of the death penalty for drug related offences was not going to receive enough support to pass. Instead, the committee focused on introducing more stringent measures to monitor the situations in which the death penalty may be applied. With the support of other European and South American states, Poland was able to draft and pass a resolution which introduced a number of safeguards. These focused on ensuring that trial standards of due process were adhered to, that foreign nationals received adequate access to their government and legal aid, that the penalty could not be applied to minors, that states adopt a policy of transparency and the resolution further recognised that those that are involved in drug related offences may often be the most vulnerable members of society.

While discussing the rights of transgender persons, some African nations such as Uganda adopted an extremely hard-line approach and called for the prosecution of all transgender persons. This directly conflicted with the liberal approach of the European states which initially made it difficult to reach a consensus on the issue. After heated debates, a resolution was passed which encouraged implementation of the Yogyakarta Principles, required educational programmes to encourage greater awareness and acceptance of transgender persons and included measures to ensure adequate access to medical services and gender re-identification surgery. The debates on these issues were extremely enjoyable and while there is a degree of competitiveness to the committee sessions, by the end of the week the committee had formed a tight bond and many friendships were forged. I would highly recommend other students interested in issues of international importance to attend a MUN conference in the future.

Laura: Representing Poland on the Fourth Committee of the General Assembly was a fantastic experience. The first topic that we discussed was the peaceful use of outer space. The second was the institution of democratic reforms. Both of these topics were something that I had never really studied before. I was very thankful that I had undertaken the Legal Research Studies Course! My research skills enabled me to quickly get to grips with the topics so that I could put together an argument from Poland's perspective.

My legal background was particularly useful in discussing the institution of democratic reforms. Without the base knowledge provided by my international public law background I would not have had such a strong understanding of the topic and I certainly could not have

successfully passed an amendment to the resolution that was concluded by the committee at the end of the week. The ability to think quickly, gained from many different experiences at law school, from tutorials to exams, was exceptionally handy.

The experience offered the chance for great personal development both in communicating and conducting yourself in a professional manner, and since finishing my law degree it has been an element of my CV that sets me apart, every interviewer has been very interested in my involvement with MUN and the skills it has taught me. I would recommend AMUNC to everyone. It is a fantastic experience that teaches and expands on a myriad of skills. It backs up knowledge gained at law school and offers an insight into just one of the many ways that a law degree can be used in an international context.

Conclusion:

The whole delegation found the conference a highly enjoyable and rewarding experience and we would encourage others to involve themselves in future MUN's. The next AMUNC is being held in Brisbane, Australia in 2014 and is an opportunity not to be missed! While the conference is highly informative and educational experience, it also has a strong social aspect which allows you to meet people from all over the region who have similar interests and this allows for a highly enjoyable experience.