

Journal Letter November 2004

“I’ve got what:?!?” That was my first reaction to the news that I had been given an interview for this job! The following days passed me by in a blur of disbelief as I researched and wrote a paper, had the interview itself and then was finally told that I had actually been chosen. Now I’ve been here for three months and can barely believe that it’s been that long. I am the Programme Assistant to the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) in Geneva. QUNO is a non-governmental organisation that holds consultative status with the UN through its umbrella body Friends World Committee for Consultation. This status means that QUNO staff members can attend UN sessions and make written and oral statements. A major part of QUNO’s work however does not take place in the public domain of the Palais des Nations. Through quiet diplomacy and the use of Quaker House to host informal meetings QUNO staff try to influence the policy makers and close the gap between civil society and international political processes by bringing together NGO’s and governments. It seeks to represent the international community of Friends and their commitment to peace and social justice through the three main programme areas of human rights and refugees, disarmament and peace and trade and development. My time is split between helping with the general running of the office and focusing on my programme specific work. I am working on the peace and disarmament programme and so work closely with David Atwood on a range of issues from biological weapons to small arms and light weapon proliferation. Not having a background in disarmament has meant that the last three months have been quite a steep learning curve. If you think acronyms have a special place in the Religious Society of Friends, try combining the Quakers with the UN!

David’s programme is split into two parts with the main focus being on small arms and light weapons (SALW) but simultaneously keeping abreast of other weapons issues (such as biological and conventional weapons) too. Much of our programme’s work is actually carried out outside of Quaker House through an organisation called the Geneva Forum, of which QUNO is a founding partner, along with the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) and the Programme for Strategic and International Security Studies (PSIS) within the Graduate Institute of International Studies. The Forum employs a coordinator who organises regular meetings between governments, international organisations and NGO’s in order to facilitate informal dialogue on peace and security issues such as biological weapons, conflict goods and ‘non-lethal’ weapons. Within this Geneva Forum, a separate practice has sprung up entitled the Geneva Process, which deals solely with issues concerning SALW. This area has become particularly pertinent over the last few years because of the creation in 2001 of something called the ‘United Nations Programme of Action to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illegal Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects’. (Or the PoA for short.) The Geneva Process therefore works to promote and monitor the implementation of the PoA by bringing together states, NGO’s and international organisations to encourage forward-thinking discussion. This procedure is particularly important at the moment because in the Summer of 2005 there will be a Biennial Meeting of States Parties to the PoA and then in 2006 the first Review Conference will be taking place. The Geneva Process is an ideal opportunity to influence governmental thinking and to ‘hammer out’ issues before they reach the official UN session. Both governments and NGO’s alike find it useful to know another government or organisation’s position on certain issues before they reach the negotiating table. In my first week here I was very lucky to be able to participate in an NGO strategy meeting that brought representatives from NGO’s all over the world to Geneva to discuss the ‘common voice’ that NGO’s should be presenting in 2005 and 2006. The day after that meeting had finished we had a meeting of the Geneva Process to which many of the NGO’s from the previous meeting came,

offering a few of the governments in the room some salutary advice! If we can get a group of governments to 'vanguard' a particular issue and push strongly for progress during official sessions then we are much more likely to see results.

But what exactly are these results I am talking about? Something that has really quite astounded me is just how specialised people become in the UN setting. There have been times over the last three months when I have felt sure I am signing up for a career in engineering or even the military rather than peacebuilding! The issues that NGO's are trying to push for at the Biennial Meeting of States next summer are, among others, marking and tracing of weapons (so one can immediately trace the origin of a weapon); brokering (introducing legally binding regulations to try and eradicate the activities of brokers or 'middle men' in the international transfer of SALW) and 'demand'. This last issue is one that QUNO has been focusing on particularly and will probably be where most of my work will be based in the coming year. Traditional thinking around the regulation of the trade in SALW has stemmed from export and import controls – the 'supply' side of the issue. What many people are now starting to realise is that the issue of why people want access to these weapons (the 'demand' side) is equally as important. For a long time, governments have refused to even consider the issue of 'demand', claiming that the issue is too broad and 'wishy-washy' to be able to negotiate any kind of commitment to action from states. In recent years however, we have seen a willingness on the part of some governments to work with this issue and recognise its significance. Of course, getting all governments to think like this and therefore produce a resolution that requires states to act is another matter!

Earlier in November, I was able to sit in on some of the discussions of the Group of Governmental Experts to the CCW (the Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May be Deemed to be Excessively Injurious or to have Indiscriminate Effects... no comment!) This was the first official UN session I had sat in on and it proved to be an absolutely fascinating insight into the 'shadowy' world of international politics. I say 'shadowy' because it quickly became apparent that there is a big difference between how states justify their position in public and the 'real' motivation behind their actions (or lack of). A large part of me wanted to take much of what I heard at face value – to give governments the benefit of the doubt. There doesn't seem much point in starting out from a stance of cynicism. On the other hand, I felt at times that I wanted an 'interpreter' to sit beside me and fill me in on the 'other' side of the story! The issues on the table were 'explosive remnants of war' (ERW's) and 'mines other than anti-personnel mines' (MOTAPM). It was at the point in the discussion when phrases such as "Magnetic influence is proportional to the inverse of the cube of the distance from the sensor ..." started to get bandied around that I felt sure I had stepped into the wrong room! Once you get through the technical language however, the broader issues become much more interesting. For instance, how sensitive does the fuse on an anti vehicle mine have to be before it becomes an anti-personnel mine (banned under the Ottawa Convention)? Unfortunately, very little progress was made on either of these issues and the negotiating mandate that many NGO's were hoping for (to enable governments to begin to negotiate a binding treaty at the next meeting) wasn't forthcoming. I think a lot of people who have been working in the Geneva setting for a number of years are extremely disillusioned with the disarmament machinery. The CCW is really the only process in which there is any kind of movement and even that seems to make incremental, if any, progress. I feel quite fortunate to be right at the very start of my career in this field – still optimistic enough to jump on every little concession made by a state and still excited enough by the mere presence of this dialogue 'machinery' to not let the snail-like pace get to me. Ask me how I feel about it all in July 2005 and I might be singing a different tune! I hope not though.

As for Geneva itself, I'm feeling pretty settled. I have a nice little 'studio' room in a Foyer (an international residence for young people) with my own tiny kitchenette and bathroom. I have to say though that as nice as it is to be 'self-contained' in that way, I am running out of inspiration for things to cook on a hot plate – any suggestions gratefully received! I have met some great people and seen some lovely places. Geneva is a good city to be in although coming from London it is amazingly compact! As you would expect there are people from all over the world here doing all kinds of interesting work. I only wish my French were better so I could talk to more of them! I came with virtually no French at all and have been taking lessons since September. I am slowly improving but Geneva is so international that it can be hard to 'immerse' yourself in the language. Or maybe it's just that I'm too scared to take the plunge and strike up conversations with French speaking people... Geneva is also a great place to be if you like the outdoors. You can hike, climb, ski, sail, parascend, cycle and do pretty much any other form of outdoor activity you can think of! The city seems to have it all – a town centre with a truly international outlook, a beautiful lake in which to swim in the summer and easy access to the mountains all year round. Another absolutely wonderful activity I have found for the winter months is a sauna right on the edge of the lake. I haven't had the urge to step out of a 90 degree wooden room and into the icy cold lake as of yet but you never know...!

I feel a little as though this journal letter has been largely descriptive of my work here at QUNO rather than the more personal reflection I would have liked it to be. I think this is because I have really been using the time since September to get my head around the issues that are out there and to figure out my place within it all. I hope that by the next time I write, I will be able to give some more detailed consideration to what it means to work on peacebuilding issues with a Quaker organisation in an international institution. But until then, it's afternoon tea-time and I can hear the leftover raspberry meringue cake calling me from the kitchen! (A wonderful perk of working for an organisation that bases much of its work around hosting lunches!) I hope this letter finds you all in health and happiness and wishing you all a wonderful Christmas and New Year.

Love and light,

Rachel