

Human Rights Tribune

HUMAN RIGHTS TRIBUNE – Encounters

cordially invites you to discuss dilemmas and future perspectives on

CAN MULTINATIONAL COMPANIES IMPROVE HUMAN RIGHTS IN SENSITIVE COUNTRIES?

Media and NGOs report frequently on companies causing environmental hazards and putting employees health and safety at risk when operating in sensitive countries. Mining and electricity business operations are blamed for displacing thousands of people who lose not only their homes but also their traditional livelihoods. Contaminated water sources and soil too poisonous to farm are cited as consequences of multinational business operations. In the worst cases, such companies are accused of doing business with governments in conflict and supporting violent regimes. In some cases, such involvement can aggravate strife and contribute to human rights abuses.

In this context the debate is on where corporate social responsibility starts and where it ends. When operating in locations where state structures are weak and regions are ravaged by violent conflicts, is it enough for multinational business to respect local legal frameworks? Or should multinational companies be expected to automatically apply higher standards? Should business care more about the local population than their governments do?

In the case of violent conflicts, is it possible for companies to remain neutral to the conflict and carry on with "business as usual"? On the other hand, if multinational business is forced to pull out either by consumer pressure, disinvestments threats or sanctions by the international community, what does that mean for the future prospects of these sensitive countries?

Voices among both business leaders and activists suggest that for companies to succeed in the future, they must play a greater role in contributing toward a better world. But how to be good? Today, many agree that companies are not only financial but also moral actors. Could companies become moral authorities as well? And if so, how could this be reflected in companies' role in setting up an international business framework?

Media and NGOs have an important role to play in this debate. Media exposure is what gains public attention. The threat of negative coverage can also prove a powerful incentive for companies to ensure they have adequate risk assessment

mechanisms, human rights guidelines and corporate social responsibility programmes in place.

But with power comes responsibility. In relation to media, is reporting on these issues well informed and analytical enough? Is the role of all actors – local governments, international organisations (WTO, World Bank, IMF, Security council, peacekeeping operations etc.) in problematic cases addressed fairly and is the complexity of situations analysed thoroughly enough? Or do companies sometimes become easy scapegoats and receive the blame for problems that are in reality outside their sphere of influence?

Wednesday, 14 May, 10.00 – 14.00
Geneva Press Club/Club Suisse de la presse
Route de Ferney 106, 1202 Genève

(For information how to reach Geneva Press Club by public transport, visit www.pressclub.ch.)

Please, RSVP as soon as possible to confirm your participation to this Encounters as places are limited. You can send your registration by e-mail project@infosud.org.

Programme and speakers:

10.00 – 10.15 **Welcome and introduction**

10.15 – 11.15 **Presentations and debate**

Moderator

Mr. Dan O'Brien – Senior editor, Economist intelligence unit, **The Economist**

Mr. Ron Popper – Head of corporate responsibility, **ABB Group**

Mr. Malcolm Gifford – Head, Development of inspection system cluster, International programme for safety and health at work and the environment, **ILO**

Ms. Anne-Kathrin Glatz – Communications officer, **Déclaration de Berne**

11.15 – 11.30 **Coffee break**

11.30 – 12.15 **Presentations and debate**

Mr. Salil Tripathi – Senior policy adviser, **International Alert**

Mr. Jacques-Emmanuel Saulnier, Senior vice president communications and spokesman for Areva, **Areva**

12.15 – 13.30 **General debate**

13.30 – 14.00 **Lunch buffet**

This Encounter is organised by the Human Rights Tribune (HRT) www.humanrights-geneva.info an on-line journal started in March 2006. HRT is giving voice to all concerned players and highlighting neglected situations. Its impact has already been felt in the human rights negotiations. Two of its journalists were awarded a Nicolas Bouvier Award in 2007. HRT also trains journalists from all over the world during the Human Rights Council sessions and its Universal Periodic Reviews. HRT is run by InfoSud, a non-profit news agency and a multicultural network of journalists that has published 14 000 articles on development and global issues since 1988. InfoSud has also launched a Media21 programme, which is a platform for interactive sessions in global issues in Geneva for journalists and other actors.

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