

The World Social Forum fails to Address the War in the Middle East

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Up to 50,000 delegates from various non-governmental organizations and civil society groups attended the Seventh World Social Forum (WSF) in Nairobi, Kenya, from the 20th to the 25th of January.

The stated objective of the venue was to challenge “the assumptions and diktats of imperialism and its associated neo-liberal policies” underlying the World Economic Forum (WEF), held in Davos, Switzerland. The WEF venue brings together the World’s leading corporate and political elites.

The World Social Forum’s broad goals are “social justice, international solidarity, gender equality, peace and defense of the environment” . These themes were to be included in this year’s somewhat hectic program in Nairobi, Kenya.

Many of these underlying themes were addressed at the WSF venue. Discussion and debate on the theme of “peace”, however, failed to address in an articulate way one of the main global issues: today’s ongoing wars in the Middle East and Central Asia

The numbers are in this regard revealing. On the more than one thousand sessions (1153 self organized activities) only a handful of sessions pertained to the war in the Middle East:

3 scrutinized the war in the Middle East,

3 addressed the current situation in Haiti,

3 focused on the use of torture,

2 engaged on Iran,

2 concentrated on Iraq,

7 discussed the situation in Palestine, and Israel’s policies,

19 were generally on imperialism and war.

None contained a mention of Afghanistan.

These observations are based solely on an examination of the conference’s titles.

The general content of the activities was, nonetheless, laudable: many sessions addressed the role of women in poor regional economies, water and natural resources, as well as the

role of information and new communications technologies with a view to supporting grassroots social movements.

Other critical issues, however, were overlooked. These included the use of depleted uranium and cluster bombs in battlefields and civilian areas, the role of corporate weapons producers in today's global economy, the current geo-political configuration in the Middle-East, and the dangers of nuclear proliferation and nuclear war.

The World Social Forum (WSF) turns out after all to be more of an opportunity for dialogue and exchange for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from different parts of the World, than a real counteracting social force or movement in opposition to the World Economic Forum and its invited elites. The Davos venue was duly attended by representatives of the military industrial complex and the financial establishment. There was no real challenge of the Davos WEF by the representatives of civil society and social movements attending the WSF in Nairobi.

In a [Los Angeles Times oped, Steven Weber and Ely Ratner](#) point to another weakness of the WSF: the aim of the international gathering should be less to try to make the IMF, the World Bank and multinational corporations accountable, and more to make the governments of the countries who fund and legally control these institutions answerable for the policies inflicted on developing countries by the Bretton woods institutions.

A look at the composition of the International Council (IC) of the WSF, an organ responsible for the organization of the WSF venue, raises other concerns: Several Western NGOs taking part in the organizing committees of the WSF receive part of their funding from the very same governments which define and support IMF and World Bank policies.

With Kenya Air and CellNet's corporate sponsorship of the WSF, the anti-globalization movement's claim to independence and freedom of action is an open question.

The participants to the WSF venue rely on funding from official sources in their respective countries as well as from major Western foundations.

Media coverage

There has been on the whole very little media coverage of the WSF. And the media coverage tends to be biased, with misleading newspaper titles.

Media giant Canwest's Canada.com ran the same AP dispatch by Elizabeth A. Kennedy entitled "World Social Forum, annual anti-capitalist conference, opens in Nairobi".

Both Reuters and the Deutsche Presse-Agentur failed short of describing the Forum as something else than an anti-capitalist, anti-Davos, anti-Globalization jamboree. They equated those misnomers with the movement's "trademarks". For anyone without a clear idea about the Forum's program and attendees, this form of reporting was misleading.

Thus the real aim of the Forum was occulted from the general public. Moreover, it was grossly distorted by the mainstream media's lens.

The WSF heterogeneous composition, however, limited its ability and effectiveness to reach

out to the broader public

Moreover, the World Social Forum didn't question its ambiguous relationship to its corporate and government sponsors, nor did it address the broader issue of distorted media reports.

It largely preached to the converted, while demanding an entrance fee, which the large majority of Kenyan participants couldn't afford to pay.

The diverse and sometimes disoriented political voices at the WSF have no doubt hindered the ability of the WSF to send a strong, unified political message to the rest of the world.

At this critical crossroads, the war in the Middle East threatens to destroy the aspirations and ideals of the WSF.

War and Globalization are intricately related. One would therefore have expected the formulation by the WSF of a consistent antiwar stance directed against the Anglo-American military alliance and its corporate profiteers. The antiwar agenda must be an integral part of the broader anti-globalization stance.

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