



Fifth Annual Conference of the International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR). Novi Sad, Serbia 2017

In September last year, in the midst of what has been labelled one of the worst humanitarian and migration crises to date, more than 170 human rights defenders from all corners of the world convened in Novi Sad, Serbia for the fifth annual conference of the International Society for Health & Human Rights (ISHHR), with a robust agenda and one mission in mind – progress. DANIELA AROCHE provides a personal recap of the event and an overview of the key insights presented throughout the four days.

ISHHR 2017: A snapshot of Novi Sad, Serbia

Arriving at the buzzing Novi Sad Fair (Novosadski Sajem) hall in the heart of the city, it was impossible not to be swept up in the joyful exchanges of meeting and greeting as attendees arrived at the colossal venue for this meeting of minds.

The excitement was warranted. After all, this event – organised every four years – brought together industry thought-leaders, friends and colleagues from across the world (28 countries, to be exact). For many, the global reunion afforded them the opportunity to exchange ideas and discuss their specialities in detail and within a collegial environment. Many were crossing paths for the first time after years of working collaboratively over Skype and email.

While the modern, tumultuous history of Novi Sad dates back little more than three hundred years, archaeology shows that the area was populated even in the Palaeolithic period. This crossroads where the Danube and Tisza rivers meet marks where civilisations from East and West have collided, ethnic and religious groups have found shelter and numerous peoples have visited and settled, from Romans to Gepids, Huns, Avars, Slavs, Germans, Hungarians, Byzantines and Turks. It has also been the site of unspeakable

human rights violations.

Today, however – having been crowned one of the three European Capital of Culture cities for 2021 – it seems the city has been reborn as a place that champions the importance of diversity and fellowship and, in the process, it has become an example of what is achievable when a holistic approach is taken to healing a painful and fragmented past.

These aspects of the city’s history, together with Serbia’s position as a transit state in the so-called “West Balkan route” –were not lost on the 2017 ISHHR organising committee (led by Mariano Coello of STARTTS) and were, in fact, pivotal in selecting Novi Sad as the host city for the event.

Thus it was that, in the heart of this post-conflict region, health and human services professionals converged from all corners of the globe to discuss the effects of war, unrest, persecution, forced migration and mass displacement on international communities; the subsequent response of the European neighbourhood; and how to foster positive change and proactive solutions for the future.

Titled “Mental health, mass people displacement and ethnic minorities” and split into two days of workshops and

two full conference days, the 2017 ISHHR program featured 50 talks in areas as diverse as clinical research, innovative pilot support programs, new therapeutic modalities, neurofeedback and provided, inter alia, revelatory insights into the refugee experience.

Prominent speakers and professionals were welcomed from the human rights, health, psychology and psychiatry sectors, including UN keynote speaker Dr Jeff Crisp, Dr Boris Droždek, and UN Women Policy Advisor on Governance, Peace and Security, Sabine Freizer.

Insightful, investigative and, at times, controversial, the conference was distilled into three key themes: examination, introspection and review.

As the days' topics unravelled and speakers weaved their narratives into the mix, it became clear many were seizing the opportunity of a global platform to dissect the global refugee situation as a collective, in a bid to share and learn in detail exactly how those involved are responding and have responded across Europe and beyond.

In this vein – in a rare talk representing the media's viewpoint and the part it plays in reporting on conflict, human rights abuses, torture and trauma – Natasha Dokovska and Filip Spirovski of Journalists For Human Rights (JHR), Macedonia, opened one of the first workshops of the first day, September 26, to shine a light on what journalists experience before, after and during reporting from conflict zones and the negative effects of not having the proper support systems and procedures in place.

Titled “The needs of journalists who cover crises in Republic of Macedonia”, their talk presented research focused on the migrant crisis in Macedonia and drew on a survey of 48 journalists (18 local, 30 foreign) from the Macedonian and Greek sides, investigating how journalists experience traumatic stress and psychological distress and the factors that put journalists at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Almost all the journalists interviewed experienced stress while covering refugee crises, with key factors including lack of infrastructure and tech support in developing countries, and limited access to officials and critical information. The top three were listed as: contact with refugees (20 journalists); the testimony of suffering of children and women (12); and confrontation with the police (six).

The accumulation of these stressors, combined with the lack of conflict training available in Macedonia (in contrast to other countries, such as Switzerland), exposed the reporters to the effects of secondary victimisation, psychological stress and fear of strangers, and identification with the protagonists. Yet only three of the local journalists sought counselling from an expert.

Dokovska pointed out that the three who sought support were women. These factors combined to suggest

a lack of support and serious stigmatisation in the industry.

Commenting on sector stigma, the dearth of information on the social and psychological challenges facing journalists and the lack of adequate support for reporters, Dokovska added:

“Research shows that being a journalist is one of the most stressful professions in the world, yet so little is known about the exposure of these influences and crisis situations on journalists. We need to focus more on these topics, journalists need to speak out and they need to feel that they can speak out about these things. Because right now, it's not generally accepted in the industry to have any psychological repercussions post-mission.”

The study from JHR also sparked discussions in audience workshops post-talk about the flow-on effects of inadequate support and training for media, and how that can lead to skewed reporting, public distrust of media and inaccurate public perception of current events.

One audience member commented that “information cannot be innocent” and that “we need to be careful when talking about victims to ensure that we [the media] don't marginalise them further through skewed, overly negative or insensitive reporting and excessive victimisation”.

These sentiments – the shortcomings of support systems, response policies, the increasing public distrust of media and NGOs and the proliferation of misconceptions around conflicts – were themes echoed in talk that followed, particularly those by Dr Akande Williams (“Politics, Petrol Dollars & Human Rights”), Gail Womersley of Médecins sans Frontières and the conference day panel discussion by Dr Anuj Kapilashrami (University of Edinburgh), Neil Quinn (University of Strathclyde) and Remco van de Pas (Maastricht University), plus Crisp's later keynote speech later.

His inauguration of the first conference day of the event (September 28) kicked off with thought-provoking questions that essentially queried the validity and accuracy of statements in the press, asking:

“Is this truly an unprecedented refugee crisis? Is it a global refugee crisis?”

Drawing on his experience in senior positions with UNHCR, Refugees International and the Global Commission on International Migration, Crisp debunked generalisations and widely-held notions about the present refugee situation, particularly in Europe.

Crisp suggests “that we, in fact, don't have a refugee crisis on our hands in the sense that we are being completely overwhelmed by numbers, but rather what we have witnessed and what we are experiencing are two other forms of crisis: an emergency prevention and



response crisis; and a policy and protection crisis.”

His review spotlighted areas of hope for the future, but also pointed out shortcomings in responses and policy-making by organisations such as the UN Security Council, as well as institutional and political bodies, particularly the European Union.

“What has become very apparent over the last few years is that the UN Peace and Security councils have become highly dysfunctional,” Crisp said.

“Syria provides a perfect example of the way that the UN Security Council cannot provide the function that it was designed for. In fact, four of the five permanent members of the council are directly involved in the armed conflict. Rather than bringing peace and security to the world, the permanent members of that council are actually actively involved in that conflict.

He also noted that at the same time as this failure of emergency and prevention, this year there has been a serious lack of humanitarian investment. Figures presented by Crisp show the current reality is that “the UN has appealed for about US\$22 billion for humanitarian operations around the world, but less than US\$10 billion has actually been provided”.

Additionally, the Syrian insurgency has left other countries scraping for funds.

“Countries such as Uganda that have admitted very large numbers of refugees are unable to get the funding they need to support those refugees because so much of the money has been pooled towards the Syrian crisis.”

Turning his gaze on the European neighbourhood, Crisp said:

“In terms of emergency prevention, the European Union really failed very badly in 2015 when refugees started to come to this continent.

“There was a complete lack of preparedness, planning and cooperation among EU member states. I would argue that the influx experienced in 2015 and 2016 could have been handled and managed in a much more effective manner if the European Union had actually got its act together. So we have a crisis, in fact, not of refugee numbers, but of the international community’s ability to prevent and to respond to humanitarian emergencies and refugee movements.”

In contrast to Crisp’s broader overview, the panel of Shaun Nemorin (STARTTS), PHD graduate Olivera Hinić and photographer Blake Noyes homed in on



“The Forgotten Rohingya: An Emergency in Northern Rakhine State, Myanmar” on 27 September to give audiences insights into the Rohingya people in the eye of the storm. From their time spent in Rakhine, the trio depicted the harsh realities of what Noyes stated as “probably the most serious humanitarian crisis at the moment”.

Their talks were accompanied by photographs by Noyes – displayed as a photo exhibition through the hallways of 2017 ISHHR venue – highlighting the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and around the world.

But while the photographs served as sombre reminders of the continued suffering of the Rohingya, they also provided a window into a community not often seen as anything but victims – something Noyes says he tried to dispel through his selection of imagery.

“The Rohingya are not just victims of a government-sponsored ethnic cleansing and genocide, they are also survivors, fighters, teachers, brothers and sisters like us with senses of humour, work ethics and respect for their families and communities,” Noyes said.

The panel also went on to reveal hopeful developments evolving within the Rohingya camp through the creation of community groups, and by embracing cultural leadership and self-expression, with the younger generation taking to social media as a platform for forging connections and fostering communication on their own terms.

A key example of how new media is shaping the Rohingya story was the screening of a short documentary film and interview with Ziaur Rahman, an activist from the Rohingya Muslims Community who is living in Kuala Lumpur, using his video blog “Meri Kahaani (My Story)” to document his journey and that of other urban refugees who have been granted asylum on foreign shores.

Rahman’s short film – *Selfie with the Prime Minister*, co-directed by first-time Malaysian filmmakers Nor Arlene Tan and Grace Cho Hee Won – also went on to open the 14th edition of Malaysia’s Freedom Film Festival, achieving the aim of eclipsing the familiar aspects of the Rohingya plight in favour

of attaching a human face to the humanitarian crisis and helping to override local negative perceptions of refugees.

Continuing with a focus on the next generation of Rohingya, Hinić’s related talk “The Rohingya people of Arakan” on day one of the conference agenda (28 September) went on to explore the notion of education as a protective factor, revealing that she found through her research and interaction with the community that while education “rarely protected them from hard labour, it [education] often served as a shield against depression and further traumatising”.

“Education could be the key in prevention and healing of trauma,” Hinić said, stressing that “what can and should be done for the Rohingya [is] allowing them access to education anywhere they are residing, and especially in host countries, which should serve as a good example and an act of good will that can go a long way”.

Indeed, by the close of the conference it was abundantly clear that much more can, and should be done to tackle global turmoil and conflict, mass people displacement and associated traumas; and that improvements must be made in responses to crises by international bodies, global media and health and human service providers across the board.

Yet, despite the long road ahead and the reality that there’s much more to do, it is important to note that the prevailing mood of the 2017 ISHHR event was

overwhelmingly positive.

Stimulated by four days of knowledge-sharing and networking, there was a strong sense that the hearts and minds of human rights defenders from around the world had been reinvigorated; and that the ISHHR event itself has become part of a very important step towards illuminating the guidelines for a brighter future – one where, hopefully, we can all make the world a better place. R

Find excerpts of the 2017 presentations, speaker interviews and event images on the official ISHHR media hub at www.ishhr.com/media-hub. Stay informed about the next ISHHR Conference in Medellín at www.ishhr.com.

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