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UP FRONT



Ty Belknap from the *Signpost* interviews John Washburn, convener of the American NGO Coalition for the International Criminal Court.

COALITION CONTINUES TO PUSH FOR INTERNATIONAL COURT

—Ty Belknap

On October 18 New Mexico celebrated United Nations Day at the UNM Student Center Ballroom with a speech by John Washburn, convener of the American NGO Coalition for the International Criminal Court. The ICC holds individuals accountable for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The coalition was convened to arouse public opinion for full United States support for the ICC through education, information, and promotion.

The Placitas Mountain Band provided entertainment. Guitarist Roger Schense, cofounder of the New Mexico coalition for the ICC, arranged for a Signpost interview with Washburn and deputy convener Wasana Punyasena over breakfast at Abuelita's Restaurant in Bernalillo. Washburn said that the hometown meeting with the hometown newspaper was consistent with his organization's grassroots effort to overcome Washington's opposition to the ICC. He said that the government is failing to represent the 76 percent of Americans that polls show are in favor of the court, and that "nothing has greater credibility than the local paper. I want to be right in there with the news about the barbecue and the Rotary Club."

The ICC is a major issue in the upcoming election. During the presidential debates, George Bush said, "I made a decision not to join the ICC in The Hague, which is where our troops would be brought to ... brought in front of a judge, an unaccounted judge. That was unpopular ... you don't want to join the ICC just because it's popular in certain capitals in Europe." Bush criticized John Kerry's willingness to submit to a "global test" for foreign-policy decision making.

According to the AMICC's Web site, Kerry has also not supported the ICC treaty because he feels that it does not sufficiently protect U.S. troops from opposing political agendas. Nevertheless, he has said that he "will not continue the obsessive and self-defeating campaign President Bush has waged against the ICC. All he's done is to alienate our closest allies and diminish his own authority in the world."

Back at Abuelita's, Punyasena said that the Bush Administration not only opposes the court, but has actively tried to undermine its authority by threatening to withhold foreign aid to its allies unless they agree to bilateral immunity agreements that would exempt U.S. personnel from prosecution.

Even though the ICC prosecutes only individuals from countries that are unable or unwilling to deal with domestically, the extreme right wing resists any higher authority that might interfere with the U.S. role as a superpower.

Washburn said that even if Bush is reelected, the coalition will continue its efforts. He emphasized that the ICC is independent of the United Nations. "One hundred thirty-six countries have signed the treaty. Ninety-six countries have ratified it. All of our closest allies are members of the ICC," he pointed out. "There is a great deal of public support for a permanent international judicial institution that would try heinous crimes that are condemned by all governments, religions, cultures, and peoples. This is an issue that has the potential to cross the polarization that splits the country along partisan lines. Politicians are only as brave as they have to be, but public opinion could force a change."

The Placitas Mountain Band was a big hit at the United Nations Day event, according to banjoist Gary Libman who said the band was the perfect backdrop for an hour of mingling with Mayor Martin Chavez, John Washburn, Wasana Punyasena, NM District Attorney Kari Brandenburg, and the City Honorary Chair for UN Day. He describes the event:

"The program began with a reading of the State Proclamation signed by Governor Bill Richardson in support of the ICC by Roger Schense, stand-in for the State Honorary Chair, Dr. William Pratt of Bosque Farms. The main speaker for the evening, Mr. Washburn, delivered a clear introduction on the International Criminal Court, the first cases being investigated, the relationship between the Bush Administration and the Court, and the impact the Court will have on the state of the world. The audience was a particularly active one with many questions for Mr. Washburn on a wide range of issues dealing with the Court. The evening was a great opportunity for attendees to access local and national officials on important personal concerns."

The ICC gives the world community a way to deal with the international tyrants and criminals that have murdered and victimized millions of people and continue to do so today.

For more information, visit www.amicc.org. For questions about the New Mexico Alliance, call Roger or Mary Schense at 298-4544.