Impunity Watch: An Activity Report

Conflict and sources of conflicts are all around us. Where one party is the perpetrator of an outrage and the other party the victim, the seeds of conflict are sown. Once the outrage is perpetrated the victim retaliates. This retaliation normally takes the form of either direct retribution or by taking recourse to legal methods. Nation states are characterized by their important function, that of preventing such perpetration of outrages against the weaker citizens. There have been growing incidences all across the world of perpetration of such outrages without any fear of reprisal. The impunity with which such outrages are committed has led to a host of initiatives by civil society, and international bodies like the United Nations often report such incidents to the respective nations and demand requisite action for bringing perpetrators to justice to prevent similar acts of impunity. Impunity Watch is one such initiative and this paper is a report on the presentation by Veronica Krause, about Impunity Watch on 13th Feb, in 204 Maxwell Hall.

Impunity Watch is an initiative of David Crane, Professor of Practice at the Law College, SU, which aims at sharing information about sufferers with the rest of the world. Its only goal is to develop awareness about the various outrages happening with impunity around the world, which go largely unnoticed by us. It was explained that Impunity Watch would be a blog with two functions: 1. to publish articles and 2. to function as an
interactive blog. It plans to open for general public and will function in real time. Editorial control will be minimal and restricted to advertisements, offensive writing and factually wrong statements.

It aims to provide a rich mix of on the ground factual reporting of atrocities as well as academic articles on impunity crimes, thus sensitizing the readers about atrocities being perpetrated in the world. It strives to be a forum where human rights issues will be examined from both a grassroots as well as an academic perspective. It will publicize state or private actions that limit functions of people based on race, gender or class and hopes to prevent atrocities by this action. It was clarified that the purpose of Impunity Watch is to provide real time news and increase general awareness. It is NOT an action organization. It has an interactive goal to act as an outlet to disseminate information about impunity atrocities.

It was stated that the blog was especially relevant to Maxwell students in the analysis of conflicts. It was an opportunity for Maxwell students to analyze conflicts, be published on the online blog and thus inform the public. It was also stated that this blog might not be as relevant to law students who focus on law and do not always appreciate the policy implications.

In response to questions from the audience, it was stated that opposing points of view can be posted and if there is a clarification, an editor’s note can also be posted. The issue of anonymous posts was also discussed at length and it was established that fears of anonymous posts were unfounded because ICT could track down the location and IP address of the post. Questions were also asked about possible lawsuits based on the
content of messages and it was clarified that the blog gave equal opportunity for a response to be posted in real time. The audience was also of the view that opposing posts were actually a step towards conflict resolution and not new conflicts as opined by one member. It was also mentioned that accurate, unbiased and objective reporting for a real-time blog required in-depth knowledge of the specific region about the key political players, differences in beliefs between the majority and minority populations, and current developments. Impunity Watch would organize a series of trainings to attain this expertise.

Stressing upon the benefits from such an exercise, examples were given of the Children In Uganda, Prosecutors In Nuremberg, Rwanda, and World Support for Mandela in South Africa, where the flood of information on the ground realities gradually shaped world opinion and forced action in the respective fields. It was also stated that the blog would be publicized through word of mouth and through handouts in seminars and talks until its public launch in August 2007.

The event brought to my attention one of the many strategies and methods being used for conflict resolution. This initiative adopts a socio-psychological approach to conflict resolution and seeks to facilitate conflict resolution by building worldview and providing a platform for different frames on the conflict. The blog by publishing opposing views on a conflict would help in a factual construction of social reality and generate a healthy debate on what the conflict is about, how to transform it, and what would constitute successful resolution of the conflict. I also feel that allowing people to voice their real feelings will give an opportunity to study the different frames through
which people view conflicts and help in a broader understanding of “underlying structures of belief, perception, and appreciation.” (Schon and Rein, 1994)

In the class on conflict fundamentals, when a photograph related to a conflict was shown to us, each of us reacted in a different way and had a different terminology to describe the event. Thus we see that if a small group of thirty students could generate so many different frames, then discussing an issue in an open forum with people of different nationalities and cultures would certainly bring forth a vast range of perspectives and thus help us to understand those conflicts which we are not exposed to. This directly relates to one of the premises for the semester that “constructive conflict management begins with being able to see more than one perspective.” (Gerard)

Another important point the blog would serve relates to developing a clear picture of the objective conditions of the conflict (Tidwell, 1998). The contribution of this kind of an initiative towards conflict resolution also finds support in Anatol Rapoports view that “no single framework of thought is adequate for dealing with such a complex class of phenomenon as human conflict” (Rapoport, 1960). Thus access to contrasting and conflicting opinions will provide the necessary catalyst for resolution of the conflict. As Tidwell says, “for conflict to be resolved, there must be opportunity to do so.” This blog will bring to notice the various crimes of impunity and thus provide an opportunity for the world to know about the conflict, analyze it and suggest ways of dealing with it. Crimes of impunity normally occur because the perpetrator does not fear any reprisal. In his value set, he is not committing a crime at all and possibly he has “dehumanized” his victims to such an extent that he may not consider it to be an atrocity at all. Tacit
approval from the society or the state at large also strengthens the feeling that he is not
doing anything wrong at all and consequently there is no feeling of guilt associated with
the act.

Blogs like Impunity Watch will be an important tool for mobilizing public
opinion against impunity atrocities and the amalgamation of different opinions and
perspectives will help to reframe the context of the atrocity in the minds of the
perpetrators as well as the victims. This reframing or the realization that these atrocities
are contrary to human values and that the victims are human beings too, will possibly
produce a feeling of guilt in the perpetrators and thus help in reducing further acts.

During the presentation a question was asked whether the blog would also
recommend action against the perpetrators of such atrocities and it was clarified that the
blog was not an action group and was merely a platform for publicizing and debating
impunity crimes. I felt that many amongst the audience were not happy with such a
passive response and probably would have appreciated the effort better if it had been
positioned as an action group. I feel that the Impunity Watch initiative adopts a
‘behavioral approach’ (Burton, 1990) to the problem of conflict resolution and aims to
build the conflict resolution skills of society as a whole rather than take up individual
conflicts to resolve which it has neither the capacity nor the power.

Following the presentation, I went to the website of the blog which is still in a
nascent stage and does not have much information at present. I read through an article "A
Gallows in Baghdad: International Justice in 2006" by Professor Crane on the SU web
site and I found that it did churn up my emotions. I had not thought much about the fate
of Saddam Hussein because probably it didn’t bother me, as it was not in my frame of reference. But reading through the article did bring up the disturbing thought that was Saddam the only dictator who deserved to be hanged or did he swing from the gallows because he lost power and the context had changed? It also raised the question of whether his hanging had resolved the Iraqi conflict or has it contributed to new conflicts. Professor Crane justified his hanging because he had been tried and found guilty as per Iraqi laws and that he was responsible for crimes of impunity against his own countrymen, be it the Shias or the Kurds and therefore got his just desserts. However Professor Crane was not happy with the indignity heaped on Saddam during his moment of death. It occurred to me that Professor Crane was looking at the episode from two frames of reference. From the perspective of a law abiding and educated citizen of a Democracy, he found it entirely acceptable that the perpetrator of genocide against his own countrymen deserved to die. At the same time, from the perspective of a civilized human being, he could not come to terms with the undignified manner of the execution. He has not been able to dehumanize Saddam enough to feel comfortable about the manner in which he died.

Professor Crane also mentioned that the “The world's superpower, the United States, has stepped away from its responsibility of conducting its military operations in accordance with international standards.” This also raises the question that who will counsel the USA? The answer is the American People. We can already feel the pressure being generated by the public against the wayward policies of the present administration through articles, debates and exchange of information on the net. As Louis Krieberg says, “knowing about conflicts helps provide insights about policies to manage and
transform intractable conflicts and that knowing about many possible options helps in creating ones that are likely to be appropriate.” (Kriesberg, 2005). I feel that the proliferation of platforms like Impunity Watch will serve to spread knowledge about conflicts and will possibly help those who have the capacity to resolve such conflicts, to reach an appropriate solution.

REFERENCES


