

International Dialogue on Covering Immigration Concludes in Miami

THE second international media dialogue on covering immigration took place from May 7-9 this year in Miami Florida. The event, which was held in the conference suites of Epic hotel, had Covering Immigration; an International Media Dialogue as its main theme. Several topics were covered by all the speakers, some of which included: the economics of migration, culture and media coverage of immigration; the case of religion, balancing stories and integrating all voices, ethnic media in north America and Europe; comparative approach, etc. Participants came from around the world representing several ethnic media and other organisations involved in the improvement of media coverage of immigration issues.



One of the major aspects of the event in Miami Florida was the reporting opportunities which allowed participants to be hosted by diverse migrant communities and a chance to appreciate their rich cultural heritage at first hand. What the participants discovered during their trip is that, despite the plights of immigrants, there is an enormous entrepreneurial spirit amongst them that can be seen all around Miami. One of such opportunities, which this humble writer took part in, included a short trip to the Haitian restaurant Tap Tap and a further trip to little Havana in down town Miami only a few minutes' drive from Biscayne Boulevard Way. Our first stop was at the Tap Tap restaurant richly decorated by Haitian paintings and artworks on the wall. Our mission here was to sample authentic Haitian cuisine and hold a discussion with three advocates, whose work have helped tremendously to address some of the issues faced by immigrants in Florida. But before we could settle down for our meal, Steven Forrester one of the advocates, guided us through the history of the rich art and culture of Haitians so vividly depicted on the walls of the restaurant.



From Left: Steven Forrester, Clarel Cyriaque and Randy McGrorty

Once we settled down for our meal, the remaining advocates Randy McGrorty and Clarel Cyriaque, joined us for a fantastic Haitian meal and some discussions. Steven Forrester, immigrant policy advocate with the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti began by explaining how he and his organisation have been using the media to help in their fight for immigrant rights in Florida. He said that before the recent earthquake, Haitian immigration issues were largely ignored and numbers routinely exaggerated in order to fraudulently deport them even though their government would rather they stay, work and send

remittances home. "After the earthquake we started fighting to get TPS (Temporary Protected Status) for Haitians", said Steve. He added "but it's difficult to get government to do anything good for anyone like they did for Nicaraguans". Randy McGrorty, immigration Attorney agreed and said that "fear and cost has made it very difficult for them to apply for TPS, and the government count black faces up to 5 times to make up the numbers". Steven believes that the wrong perception about the number of Haitian migrants has made things really difficult. However, Mr Forrester added that despite some editors having confided in him that they don't like covering immigration too much because it doesn't do them any good; the press has been an ally in dramatising immigrants' stories. He said that Haitians are largely excluded from society and they have no prominent people to fight for them. "Miami Dade is over 50% foreign born, however largest political group there is Cuban", Steven said. As a result he said he has dedicated most of his time trying to get editors to write favourable editorials about Haitians' plight by dramatising some of their stories. "Influential media are very good at making you believe that you are being listened to", Steve said. He said he has been focusing more on trying to affect opinions "because there is some sympathy within the general population as Haitians have had a heck of a time while Cubans have been treated better". In his effort to help address the injustice faced by Haitians in Florida, Clarel Cyriaque, Attorney and advocate for Haitian rights, said that "there is paranoia about the need to control Haitian immigration, there is need to have independent press". He added that he is overwhelmed by the number of immigration cases relating to Haitians that he has to deal with on a daily basis. After stocking up on our energy supply on sumptuous Haitian cuisine, we proceeded to our next port of call, Little Havana. Here the contrast was as shocking as it was amazing. It was full of life and people, rich in culture and history and alive with entrepreneurial spirit. Little Havana was like a country within a country, a city within a city. One of the most dramatic moments was the speed at which the rain arrived almost as soon as we stepped out of our van, and disappeared at a speed faster than it had arrived. Once the rain subsided, which lasted only a few minutes, our guide Corinna Moebius showed us to the Miami Domino Club where hordes of men were busy enjoying the game. After a few hi's and hello's, we moved on to Fruiteria, a vegetable store that plays key role of local business providing job connections for other immigrants and also serves as cultural site for sharing and discussing local news. After sampling the local coffee and a chat with the shop owner and locals, we shifted our attention to Cuban Memorial Plaza, ignoring the rain, which was back once again threatening to ruin our day. This park demonstrates the sense of history and spirituality of Cuban exiles in Miami with the hero sculpture and spiritual tree as its centrepiece. They use this place as a key public space for petitions and advocacy. It is also used for spiritual sacrifice even though in exile, many still prefer to keep their spirituality under wraps. While confessing that she herself is a priestess, Corinna Moebius said "you can notice here that some of these people are priests by some of the things they are wearing but they are keeping very low profiles". After popping into a few other places where we were offered subsidised drinks and had chats with locals, we capped our day at the famous Cuban tobacco factory next to the Domino Club. Concluding our tour here in Little Havana, we dashed into our van before the rain has anything to say about it.

What our experience showed us was that the richness of the Haitian art displayed on the walls of Tap Tap restaurant, the vibrancy of Little Havana and the zest for life of its inhabitants demonstrate the resilience of the migrant community in Miami. It showed that despite the difficulties of migration that these people experience in their daily lives, they remain unbowed and unrepentant. Their hospitality so strongly embedded in their culture would persevere through all their tribulations. Surely this trip has left

a lasting impression on the conference participants that would serve to enhance the way they cover immigration issues and go a long way towards reshaping the way immigrants are perceived around the world.