

world news

Action in China

The lesbian contingent at the U.N. women's conference held a march, staged demonstrations and had their literature confiscated by Chinese authorities

by Rex Wockner

Hundreds of lesbians from 57 countries staged a march through the site of the Non-Governmental Organizations Forum on Women in Huairou, China, Sept. 5.

They were tailed by hundreds of reporters and by amused Chinese security agents, who did not interfere. Three days earlier, security officers confiscated Chinese-language literature from the Forum's lesbian tent.

Chanting in English, French, Spanish and Zulu, the marchers passed by regional tents before converging on a tent occupied by Arab and African Muslim women.

There they sang, danced, pounded drums and chanted "Lesbian rights are human rights" and "Liberté, égalité, homosexualité," a popular slogan among French lesbians and gay men.

Afaf Ahmed of the International Organization of Moslem Women responded: "They are sick... If they think this is the way for living, humanity will stop."

Co-organizer Rachel Rosenbloom called the march "an incredible advance for us."

"People have come to the [lesbian] tent and have seen us, but today everybody saw us," she said. "Everybody heard what we had to say."

More than 25,000 women attended the NGO Forum.

On Sept. 2, lesbian delegates had formed a security team to guard their tent after Chinese officials took away lesbian literature, said Julie Dorf of the San Francisco-based International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission.

"We will not be silent," Dorf told a packed press conference at the tent.

Bev Diski of South Africa's Gay and Lesbian Organization of Witwatersrand told reporters the Western lesbians were "networking with Chinese lesbians... to share information and strengthen the Chinese lesbian movement here."

Thai lesbian activist Arjana Suvarmananda added, "I can tell you lesbians are everywhere, including in China."

In fact, virtually nothing is known in the West of Chinese lesbians.

The lesbian NGO contingent presented its demands to the U.N. Fourth World Conference on Women, which ran through Sept. 15 in Beijing.

"We demand the right to determine one's sexual identity; the right to control one's own body, particularly in establishing intimate relationships; the right to choose if, when and with whom to bear or raise children; as fundamental components of

the human rights of all women, regardless of sexual orientation," the document read.

Eleven lesbian or gay and lesbian organizations were accredited for the main conference, where they intended to lobby for lesbian-affirmative language in the confab's final "Platform for Action." At press time, references to "sexual orientation" remained bracketed in drafts of the document, meaning some nations wanted to see the references removed. The governments of Norway, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, South Africa, Israel, Canada and Australia inserted the language.

On Saturday, Sept. 9, 30 lesbian activists staged a demonstration with signs and a banner proclaiming "Lesbian rights are human rights" at the main conference site. Bonnie Tinker, the executive director of Love Makes A

Family, based in Portland, Ore., had a sign ripped from her hands by a plain-clothes security guard and another guard confiscated a banner while Tinker and other demonstrators were holding it, according to an article in *The Oregonian*. The demonstration was effectively squashed by security guards.

The demonstrators were calling for the U.N.'s "Platform for Action" to include language protecting lesbians.

Another force at the NGO Forum was the U.S.-based Dyke TV.

"We're making an hour-long video... which we hope to distribute widely and at low cost," the crew said on their Internet World Wide Web site, which offered daily press releases.

Chinese media coverage of the lesbian invasion tended toward the sensational, focusing on the possibility of "topless" protests. Newspapers said security agents would throw sheets over dykes who disrobed.

"Newspapers in China and elsewhere focused on the lesbian issue in a negative way," said Rebeca Sevilla of Peru, the International Lesbian and Gay Association's delegate to the World Conference. "Lesbian information in Chinese was removed from the tent. The European/North American tent did not want to announce a lesbian workshop."

"But," Sevilla said, "the Cyprus tent invited all the lesbian caucus to join their party. And young Chinese volunteers were interviewed and said they knew from *The Hite Report* that homosexuality exists, that they had learned a lot from the lesbian tent, that lesbians are humans and that repression is not a solution."

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