

HIGH AND HOPES AND MODEST EXPECTATIONS AT THE G20 FINANCE MEETINGS IN WASHINGTON

FEATURED CAMPAIGN VOICES



IN THIS FORUM, LEADING UNMC
STAFF DEBATE ISSUES ABOUT THE MDGs

On Friday afternoon it became clear that leaders from the world's most wealthy and powerful countries had descended upon Washington as traffic snarled to a standstill on the roads near the White House and the National Building Museum, the site of the summit. Hundreds of DC Metro police were joined by secret service police to direct the flow of traffic and people in a mild, December rain.

For those tracking the financial summit, which brought leaders from the 20 richest and emerging economies, the international financial institutions and the United Nations to Washington, DC this weekend, hopes were high, but expectations modest. Most agreed that the outcome would likely be a commitment to prop up the crumbling international financial architecture and keep the G20 process going. While much of the posturing, statements and substance happened inside the summit on Saturday morning, several other groups vied for attention along the perimeter of the summit and across town in a park near the World Bank. The most vocal of protestors chanted for Tibetan independence. They were joined down the street by the Falun Gong Movement. Later in the day a handful of Answer (an anti-war group) protestors carried neon yellow signs that read: "Money for people's needs, not bankers' greed" and "Money for jobs, not for war and occupation."

Global Justice Action staged a people's summit that included a rally, march and teach-in to discuss alternatives to the unequal global economic system. With just a hundred people, these events were quite modest in size when compared to the thousands mobilized for recent protests against the IMF, World Bank and WTO. Organizers pointed to the fact that they had less than three weeks to plan, that the rally in DC was just one of 40 events scheduled around the world, and that they were committed to creating long-term structural solutions to this crisis.

More than 1,000 journalists were accredited for the summit, though only a handful were allowed inside the security perimeter. Most stayed at the Department of State press center while others ventured out into the street to talk with protestors and get "color" for their stories. They didn't seem that impressed with the small numbers and diverse messages of the protestors. We spent some time talking about the Millennium Campaign's proposal to the G20 leaders, urging them to bailout the world's poor and fulfill aid commitments. Because 85 percent of the world's economy is represented at the G20 meeting, we felt it was our duty to speak for the 15 percent who have been marginalized and are so adversely affected by the financial crisis. Though most journalists were familiar with the campaign and sympathetic to our efforts, they all asked how we expected world leaders to pay for it. I generally responded by saying that trillions of dollars had been found to rescue the American and European markets, so it is less a question of resources than political will. Furthermore I said that the Titanic is sinking and we are urging world leaders to provide life vests for those who are without boats or other safety nets. For them it will soon become a question of life or death.

By mid-afternoon after one last photo op with President Bush, world leaders departed to their embassies and the local hotels to announce the communiqué and give closing statements. Among other things, the statement said they agreed to improve international monitoring of markets and rules about how companies value their assets. They endorsed an early warning system and called for a creation of "supervisory colleges" of financial regulators to better detect risky investing and other potential problems.

At the same time, debilitating poverty persists: more than 1.4 billion people barely survive on \$1.25 a day, 50 million people die each day of preventable causes, and half the population of the developing world lacks access to decent sanitation. Even before the financial crisis hit, developed countries were cutting back on their foreign-aid commitments, with few on target to meet the agreed figure of 0.7% of gross national income.

The communiqué did mention the impact of the current crisis on developing countries, particularly the most vulnerable and reaffirmed the importance of the MDGs and reiterated the development principles from Monterrey. The G20 leaders reaffirmed development assistance commitments and committed to reach an agreement on the modalities by the end of this year to complete the Doha Round at the WTO. Still there was little concrete planning on how they intended to meet the basic needs of the majority of the world's population, who did not cause any of this, but are starting to face the consequences of the financial crisis, on top of the existing food, fuel and climate