



Quaker Peace
& Social Witness

Journal letter from Geneva

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Dear Friends

It was less than three months ago that I was sitting in the reception area of Friends House in London ahead of the first day of my Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) induction program. It would be an understatement to write that the last three months have flown by. In this short time, I have been given opportunities I never dreamt I would get, met truly inspiring people and been to places I never thought I would be. While I couldn't possibly write about everything that has happened over the last three months, I hope to give you an insight into my work as QUNO's Human Rights and Refugees Programme Assistant.

Last December I graduated from Queen's University Belfast with a Master's Degree in Human Rights and Criminal Justice. A significant part of this course was dedicated towards learning about the international human rights framework and the set-up of the United Nations, including the Human Rights Council. So it was a

truly 'pinch yourself' moment to be sitting in the Palais de Nations on 11 September, taking notes as the High Commissioner for Human Rights delivered his statement before the Human Rights Council and a gathering of the world's journalists.

Over the following three weeks I became very familiar with the United Nations buildings. The Human Rights Council has three sessions every year and its most recent ran from the 11-29 September. At this session QUNO was closely monitoring resolutions concerning conscientious objection, the death penalty, the administration of justice and the rights of indigenous people. The resolutions on conscientious objection and the death penalty were the subject of tough negotiations between States, with the resolution on the death penalty requiring four rounds of informal consultations. However, each of these resolutions was ultimately passed by the Council and represent welcome developments in these areas.

During the course of the Human Rights Council I delivered a short oral statement

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on behalf of QUNO at a panel discussion on the impact of racial discrimination on women and girls. Our statement focused on how women and girls from minority backgrounds are adversely affected by discrimination within criminal justice systems around the world. The chair of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – one of the panellists at the session – responded to our statement by reaffirming the need for greater transparency within criminal justice systems. It was hugely rewarding to be able to bring this issue before the Council and speak on behalf of QUNO at such a platform.

One of the things I was keen to gain an understanding of at QUNO was how it conducts the quiet diplomacy I had often heard about. Within my first three months I have been able to see at first-hand how beneficial it is for diplomats and NGOs to meet in an informal, safe setting and talk to each other over a meal. The relaxed atmosphere that QUNO creates is a complete contrast to the formal meetings in a diplomats' schedule and the positive discussions we have facilitated so far illustrate the unique role QUNO has in Geneva.

QUNO's position among civil society was also evident at the Global Compact on Migration thematic consultation which took place in Geneva in October. The Global Compact on Migration is an international agreement currently being developed with the intention of better governing international migration. We believe one of the primary purposes of the Compact should be to better protect the rights of migrants, regardless of their migratory status. There have been six thematic

consultations carried out throughout 2017 and formal negotiations for the Compact are due to begin in 2018. During the last thematic consultation QUNO helped arrange an informal meeting with NGOs and the Special Representative of the Secretary General on International Migration, which provided a useful space for discussion. Prior to joining QUNO, I was working for a charity that helps refugees in Northern Ireland and so I am hugely grateful to be part of an organisation that is advocating for the human rights of migrants and refugees on the international stage.

My work has also included drafting suggested recommendations for the Universal Periodic Review. I also attended the European Bureau for Conscientious Objectors general assembly in Cyprus, in which I gave a short presentation on the latest developments at the United Nations regarding conscientious objection to military service. I also represented QUNO at a two-day Platform for Disaster Displacement workshop where I was able to highlight QUNO's work concerning the Global Compact on Migration during a discussion on this topic.

As someone who grew up in a Quaker family and has been involved in young Friends activities in Ireland Yearly Meeting for many years I feel privileged to be part of QUNO. Quaker values and beliefs are integral to its everyday functioning creating a harmonious working environment. It is a pleasure to be part of an organisation that greatly encourages my personal and professional development, while also valuing my input as a member of staff. The staff at QUNO have helped me settle into Geneva with

ease and I am looking forward to the rest of my year with great anticipation. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all of those who support QUNO's work.

In peace,
Stephen