

Media Advisory

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Davos: Credibility of meeting threatened by policing, say NGOs

Sixteen nongovernmental organisations, including Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Oxfam, have today written to the President of Switzerland to express concern at the Swiss authorities' response to protests at Davos. The meeting of the World Economic Forum has been marred by the arrest and intimidation of people engaging in peaceful demonstrations.

The signatories to the letter accuse the Swiss authorities of transforming the ski resort of Davos into a "fortress" and of curtailing "the right of assembly and free speech." The organisations state that the "credibility of the Davos meeting is threatened if debate is stifled." The letter cites specific examples where representatives of nongovernmental organisations were prevented from peacefully expressing their opinions.

The text of the letter reads as follows:

Dear President Leuenberger

We are writing on behalf of a wide constituency of international NGOs taking part in the World Economic Forum 2001, among whom we have consulted and on whose behalf we are mandated to address you.

The civil society participants in the World Economic Forum are deeply concerned about the manner in which the Swiss government has treated individuals and organizations which have sought to express their concerns peacefully on the streets of Davos.

Unfortunately, the actions of the Swiss authorities have transformed Davos into a "fortress". In the process, the right of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression - guaranteed both by the Swiss Constitution and international standards - has been severely restricted.

Even people seeking to attend or participate in an NGO seminar hosted by "Public Eye on Davos" were arrested. For instance, NGOs present in Davos report that several people handing out brochures about this seminar to passersby on Davos streets were detained. A researcher who was travelling to Davos to speak at the NGO seminar was taken off the train by police during a car-by-car check of all trains travelling towards Davos. Adam Ma'anit was stopped by police on the morning of Friday 26 January while on his way to a forum, organized by nongovernmental organizations taking place in Davos parallel to the World Economic Forum. He was stopped at a train station in Landquart by security forces where he was searched, questioned and photographed before being taken back to the border at Basel.

The Swiss authorities have a responsibility to ensure the safety and security of participants in the Forum who have come to Davos in the spirit of open dialogue and discussion. However, it is also the duty of the authorities to ensure the right of protestors to peacefully exercise the rights of freedom of expression and assembly.

The Swiss authorities, by simply banning demonstrations in Davos during the World Economic Forum, have set an ominous precedent for future world gatherings. Given Switzerland's reputation for democracy and inclusive, participatory governance, certainly the Swiss authorities would not seek to play such a role.

Thus, we call on the Swiss government to review its policing strategy for the World Economic Forum this year and to develop a new strategy that ensures the right to freedom of expression and peaceful demonstration in future years.

The credibility of the Davos meeting is threatened if debate is stifled.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW web : <http://www.amnesty.org>

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