



NGOs Call for Free Speech to be Restored at WTO Ministerial in UAE

February 26, 2024

(Abu Dhabi) NGOs filed formal complaints with World Trade Organization (WTO) officials and key Member nations on the first day of the WTO's 13th Ministerial Conference (MC13) in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, due to the unannounced and unprecedented removal of civil society's rights to freedom of speech and political expression at what is being billed as WTO's most "open, transparent and inclusive process" ever.

Previous WTO ministerials have allowed civil society participants to distribute information and analyses, take photos, display banners, and other forms of engagement, but Abu Dhabi's world trade summit has so far seen:

1. During the WTO Director General's plenary speech on "inclusion", Mr. K.V. Biju, a farmer leader from India and accredited NGO representative was in front of Room 9 and saw a journalist he knew and shared a letter with him from Indian farmers. He was grabbed by a security person, frisked, and taken to a room where he was held for close to two hours.
2. Deborah James, facilitator of civil society network Our World Is Not For Sale (OWINFS), was told by the Head of External Relations of the WTO that the Emirati security officials have said that banners and demonstrations are banned, and anyone leafleting will be subject to arrest. It is not clear what leafleting includes: distributing of articles, press releases, reports, flyers?
3. Security officials the previous day took away A3 posters without explanation. Also, people were stopped from handing out press releases.
4. On opening day, civil society groups were told that we could not take photos inside or outside of the building, when even the WTO's informational Powerpoint presentation says that filming and photography in public areas of the conference are allowed.
5. None of these restrictions were included in the WTO's informative Powerpoint presentation in advance.
6. At previous WTO activities, civil society groups have never been told what *not* to say and what *not* to do.
7. Civil society groups sent a letter (pasted below) to the Director General earlier today, calling on her to address these issues as a matter of urgency. We have yet to receive a response.

The current degree of repression of policy advocacy work has never happened before inside a WTO conference. It is the obligation of the WTO to ensure that the rules of the WTO regarding advocacy, free association and free speech are upheld in the venue of their meetings as part of basic transparency. It is the responsibility of the WTO to ensure that MC13 can be undertaken in a transparent and inclusive manner.

Fikerman Saragih, from The People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice (KIARA) said: "As a representative of 2.4 million fisherfolks and 3.9 million fisherwomen in Indonesia, I have come to MC13 to make their voices heard, but these unacceptable and unprecedented restrictions on peaceful activities by civil society organizations at MC13 have silenced us."

Professor Emeritus Jane Kelsey stated: "I have been to many WTO ministerials and have never encountered such a determination to silence critical voices. The WTO must and will be held accountable for its decision to hold the MC13 here without securing guarantees that independent civil society can be heard. It exposes the presence of 'inclusivity' for what it is - a public relations sham to gloss over the reality of power politics in the WTO, both inside and out."

Rodolfo Lahoy from IBON International, said: "Economic rights cannot be fulfilled without the active voices of civil society and social movements. Any rhetoric of development or sustainability the WTO is fundamentally incoherent and impossible if civil society voices, especially from the South, cannot even raise the concerns and narratives of their peoples and constituencies. No development for us, without us."

Victor Menotti, from Demand Climate Justice, said: "The UAE hosted UNFCCC's COP28 only three months ago and so is very, very familiar with the international standards of civil society participation, freedom of speech and political expression established at global summits for rule-making, yet Abu Dhabi appears to be paranoid about any critical analyses of proposed WTO decisions that will impact million of peoples lives beyond its borders."

Civil society calls on WTO members to insist that civic spaces be respected, and that we are allowed to perform civil society's roles and pursue its modalities of engagement, including being able to have peaceful demonstrations, display banners, and give out flyers and information to delegates and press.

We similarly call on the WTO to insist with the host government that the rules of the WTO regarding advocacy, free association and free speech are upheld in the venue of their meetings. This is the responsibility of the WTO to ensure that this meeting can be undertaken in a transparent and inclusive manner.

The "Our World Is Not For Sale" (OWINFS) is a network of organizations and social movements worldwide fighting the current model of corporate globalization embodied in global trading system. OWINFS is committed to a sustainable, socially just, democratic and accountable multilateral trading system. www.ourworldisnotforsale.net #



26 February, 2024

Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala
Director General
World Trade Organization

Dear Dr. Ngozi:

We are civil society representatives accredited to attend the World Trade Organization's 13th Ministerial Conference writing with serious concerns about our ability to effectively participate in this process.

At other international governance organizations, NGO observers are welcomed into deliberations and permitted to make interventions on the record. The WTO has long fallen short in this regard, but the silencing we have experienced thus far in Abu Dhabi is shocking even by the low bar the WTO has set.

On 25 February, several accredited NGO representatives entered the ADNEC building to distribute information to delegates outside the Investment Facilitation event. But immediately after being permitted through security, they were stopped and searched by local police. Their papers were taken away, they were detained and then escorted off the premises. A separate group distributing a press release was similarly asked to leave.

Another colleague was prevented from entering the conference due to a traditional piece of clothing that was rejected as politically sensitive and potentially affecting the security of the conference, even though the official invitation sent to participants invites them to wear their national dress.

Even before the ministerial, two colleagues from Nigeria were denied visas without explanation.

On 26 February, NGOs were not permitted to attend the opening ceremony. It seems that reporters were held in the restricted area and thus unable to attend our scheduled press event. The imposition of restricted areas has also prevented us from meeting with reporters in the press area and using WTO facilities usually available, such as photocopiers.

We are representatives of people's movements, small-scale farmers, fisherfolk, union leaders. We have traveled here from Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belgium, Bolivia, Gambia, Germany, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Spain, Uganda, and Zimbabwe to speak on behalf of millions of people at this meeting of the world's largest economic rule-making institution. The communities that will be affected by WTO decisions must be permitted to participate in this process. The

WTO talks of inclusivity, yet what we have seen to date suggests our voices will be silenced throughout this ministerial. We expect you, as the Director-General, to ensure there is space for critical voices to be heard in the ministerial itself.

This continues a concerning pattern of suppression on free speech at WTO ministerial conferences. You will be aware of the damage that was caused to the WTO's credibility when dozens of registered NGOs had their visas rescinded, and others were turned away at the airport at the MC11 in Buenos Aires. At MC12, registered NGOs were harassed by Geneva police and WTO security for simply wearing t-shirts with peaceful messages.

There is a risk that the situation at MC13 will be even more controversial and damaging to the organization's credibility and to your credibility as the Director-General unless this matter is addressed and resolved now.

Moreover, it is totally unacceptable for the WTO and UAE to invite people to this conference without any clear guidelines of what is going to be permissible. That not only wastes our time and money, but more importantly puts people at significant risk of violating rules they are not forewarned of, with potentially serious personal consequences. While we appreciate that you will be briefing civil society, that is of course not sufficient access and does not address the barriers to participation. The outcomes of MC13 can only address the issues of concern to civil society if we are enabled to engage effectively.

It is the organization's responsibility in allocating this ministerial to Abu Dhabi to ensure that participants' rights will be respected. We call on you to address these issues as a matter of urgency.

Signed,

Deborah James
Facilitator, Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS) global network
on behalf of our members
www.ourworldisnotforsale.net