

## SEMESTER AT SEA: Exploring the UN in Switzerland

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Georgetown — *The following article was submitted by Meghan Harney, a Georgetown resident participating in the Semester at Sea program.*

Back in July, I applied to a special field program that takes Semester at Sea students to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. In August I found out that I was accepted along with 17 other students to be apart of this once in a lifetime opportunity. Before we reached our port in Belgium, we met a few times to go over what we would be doing and how the trip would go.

When we got to the United Nations, employees took our pictures and printed out ID badges that allowed us to get into Human Rights Meeting. This was a unique experience because in order to enter the meeting, we had to be accredited guests of a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO). Each organization can only accredit 15 people at a time, so with the help of two NGOs, we were all able to get into the 24th session of the Human Rights Council.

When I walked into the meeting, there were assigned seats for each country indicated by a sign with the country's name. Each country is allowed to have one speaking delegate and an alternative delegate to sit directly behind them. I learned that the signs are in alphabetical order, but each meeting they start with a new letter of the alphabet so that different countries have the opportunity to sit in the front. Each seat is equipped with a microphone for speaking and an earpiece for listening to translators. The six languages that are translated are Russian, French, Arabic, English, Spanish, and Mandarin.

In the front of the room, the president of the council and other leaders sit at a table to run the meeting.

They are in control of who has the floor and are in charge of the agenda. On the agenda, ten countries had five minutes to discuss how their country contributes to the protection of Human Rights. Among the countries that we listened to were Ireland, Malaysia, Australia, Algeria, Albania, Spain, Qatar, Romania, Maldives, Rwanda. There was also time for Nongovernmental Organizations to express their concerns about specific Human Rights violations.

At the session, I was very impressed by the representative from Ireland. She was the first person to have the floor and spoke very clearly about her country's actions involving human rights. Not only was her speech impressive, but she used language that was simple to understand. I was also amazed that she was able to finish reading with five seconds to spare. She completely blew me away with how well she was able to represent her country.

After the meeting, we took an official tour of the United Nations. When we walked into the first conference room, our tour guide explained the UN logo. The image is a picture of the world from the top with the North Pole in the center. The lack of a single country in the middle symbolizes that there is no one country that is more important than another.

Later in the day we had a side event where our 18 Semester at Sea students and some other student representatives from NGOs discussed different issues involving Human Rights.

Seven students were asked to speak about their topics and I learned a lot about human rights violations and areas for improvement throughout the world. I was very impressed with all of the student speakers because they were very well spoken and had many accomplishments. Overall, we all felt fortunate to be the first students to ever be able to have our voices heard at the United Nations.

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