

▼ BETWEEN THE LINES

A grassroots mirror for APEC

BARBARA DUFFIELD is not the stuff of headlines. Polite and soft-spoken, she carefully pulls apart a large blueberry muffin, wrapping half in a napkin for later.

She seems like any other woman in the waterside bistro full of coffee drinkers. But she is the only one talking about the lack of democratic rights in Indonesia.

As Duffield describes what defines a "civil society," my mind wanders for a few seconds. I am remembering a university student I met in Yogyakarta almost 13 years ago. He was reluctant to

talk about his government for fear of spies and never did tell me his full name.

Indonesia's President Suharto and 17 other world leaders are meeting in Vancouver this week to talk about business and trade. They are the stuff of headlines.

Canada will spend \$48 million hosting dinners, receptions and private meetings. Another \$15 million is being spent on security. To understand the scale of this chin-wag by the sea, the U.S. delegation has booked the entire Waterfront Centre Hotel, all 489 rooms.

Yes, indeed. The Asia Pacific Eco-

conomic Cooperation forum has hit Vancouver. We're supposed to pay attention because these people control govern-

ments and influence economies. Their decisions carry weight. But truth be known, most regular folk will skip past the newscasts other than to maybe catch a glimpse of a Clinton or Chretien, like they would for any other celebrity.

Duffield doesn't draw attention as easily but she'll also be in Vancouver this week.

She is among dozens of Vancouver Island residents attending a parallel conference of non-profit groups and "people's organizations" from around the Asia Pacific.

The People's Summit on APEC is examining policy alternatives to APEC's trade liberalization. They want to ensure people's rights, the working poor and the environment are not trampled in the name of profit.

It's probably the biggest gathering of seriously earnest people ever in Vancouver. Pick an area — labor, the environment, human rights, youth, poverty, aboriginals, the status of women, education. They're all represented. And unlike APEC, which has only one public session, the summit is wide open.

One of the forums, on labor rights in Indonesia, was organized by Duffield.

Like most activists, Duffield has a personal connection with her concern. Duffield worked in Jakarta from 1989 to 1993 for the Indonesian government's Ministry of Population and Environment. The Canada-funded project gave technical and administrative support for pollution-control initiatives.

What Duffield came away with was a pained conscience about the obscene gap between the elite and workers, the grinding poverty, the lack of freedoms, the illegal imprisonment of government critics, and waste of international aid money on ill-conceived projects.

"It challenges your whole belief system," says Duffield, a member of the Indonesia-Canada Alliance.

"It's a responsibility for the average Canadian to know about this and pressure business and government to take more responsibility."

One the same day as Duffield's forum, a Victoria-based group is co-hosting a full-day of debate on sustainable development.

The B.C. Council for International Co-operation will bring together 250 people to strategize about five areas: agriculture, fisheries, cities, forestry and mining.

Recommendations from the Sustainability Forum, and other summit sessions, will be forwarded to the official APEC forum and governments.

But I hold little hope for their impact. Until a broad section of citizens, not just special interest groups, sit up and take notice, little will change.

We've become a society of easy labels, short headlines and quick hits. Media coverage has concentrated on APEC itself, and little of policy alternatives except the predictable image of sign-carrying protesters. It's easier for us to understand APEC's effect on local traffic congestion than the global economy.

No one has all the answers. But we must seriously assess all reasonable strategies. And that means paying attention.

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