

Students try to solve the perils of global migration

Contra Costa Times, *Matt O'Brien*

March 14, 2009 - SAN FRANCISCO — Ivan Martinez of Oakland has it all figured out.

Standing before a panel of enthused but skeptical adults, the 13-year-old and six of his friends on Saturday introduced the world to Fair Education for All, a new organization that in 20 years' time will have stamped out the traumas of global migration.

Well-trained teachers, he said, will be dispatched to the most troubled corners of the Earth to teach children the skills they need to make a good living close to home.

Any questions?

"Tell us more about FEFA," said Anne Peskoe, a lawyer with the Oakland-based International Institute of the Bay Area. "Is it real? Is it funded?"

The boy grinned nervously.

"Well, we made it up."

The challenges caused by millions of people moving from one region and nation to another have befuddled heads of state and countless bureaucrats across the globe. But Martinez and almost 500 other Bay Area students tried their best to come up with solutions Saturday at the World Affairs Challenge, an academic competition held at San Francisco State.

Judges took notes as Martinez and his fellow middle-schoolers from Roots International Academy in Oakland performed an elaborate and humorous skit that spanned 40 years in the past and future and stretched from a Mexican classroom to a United Nations convention. The team of seven headed home to Oakland on Saturday night with the top prize for "best formal presentation" and second place for most creative.

Lobsan Barrera, 13, said his teammates met with each other and two teachers after school almost every day last week to nail their presentation down. For three months before that, they prepared by researching education problems in four other countries, using the Internet and their own personal accounts.

Goka Bere said she shared with teammates what schools are like in Bori, Nigeria, one of the regions on which the group focused. She used to attend those schools before moving to Oakland in 2005.

"They didn't have supplies or places to sit," the 12-year-old said. "Here, you have teachers who know what they are talking about, supplies and a place to sit."

Human migration was this year's theme for the seventh annual conference organized by San Francisco-based World Savvy, a nonprofit group whose mission is to engage youths in world affairs.

As the Roots middle school students wrapped up their first of two formal presentations, high school senior Shaona Bandyopadhyay grilled two rival United States senators — actually fellow teenagers Mario Bruno and Tina Xu — in a simulated talk show in another room.

The topic chosen by the students at Fremont's Kennedy High School was a more obscure one addressing H-2B visas, which the U.S. gives annually to foreign laborers entering the country for temporary, low-skill work.

The group's conclusion was that the program should be scrapped because it is easy for companies to mistreat visiting workers while taking jobs away from Americans.

Bandyopadhyay said she suggested classmates focus on the program after perusing Sepia Mutiny, a blog about South Asian affairs that linked her to an article in the Los Angeles Times. The article, she said, was about employers exploiting Indian laborers brought to Southern states to do post-hurricane construction work.

"A lot of the major news publications didn't really cover it," Bandyopadhyay said. "People were so close to slavery here in the United States, so recently. We just felt there was a lack of transparency. It definitely needs more oversight."

Students from Oakland's College Track after-school program, most of whom are immigrants or the children of immigrants, decided to choose a topic they knew almost nothing about: child soldiers and the impact of refugee crises on African youth.

"A lot of students here have come from Mexico, Vietnam and China," said team leader Jacky Chan, 17, a student at Oakland Technical High School. "But at the same time, they don't know much about immigration. ... It's complicated."

Reach Matt O'Brien at 925-977-8463 or mattobrien@bayareanewsgroup.com.