

The MIDAS touch

La editor Ciaran O Proinntaigh reports from the weekend MIDAS conference in Southern Germany



TRADITIONAL: Local children welcome the delegates to the weekend conference

Bautzen, a Sorb town in south-east Germany celebrated 1,000 years of diversity a few years ago and at the weekend played host to a minority daily newspaper conference.

The MIDAS conference brought together newspapers from all over Europe, including La, The Andersonstown News' sister paper. One of the first sites the visitors is shown is the town's Cathedral, a unique site if ever there was one. This magnificent building is home to both the Catholic and the Protestant Cathedral, both under the one roof.

And this spirit of co-operation and respect for others was a keynote of the conference. At the moment there are 45 million people who speak a language which is not the official language of their country and 30 daily newspapers serve some of these groups.

The newly-elected President,

Toni Ebner, the editor of a German daily in the South Tyrol region of Italy, spoke of how important press freedom was for democracy and how vital it was that minorities are not prohibited from using their own language.

He was referring to the Spanish government's closure of the Basque daily, Egunkaria, the arrest and torture of a number of its workers and the continued refusal of it to allow Martxello Otamendi and Inaki Uribe to leave the Spanish state.

Martxello Otamendi, editor of the new Basque daily, Berria, was re-elected unanimously to the board and the board was given authority to find ways of helping to protect Inaki Uribe as he still faced unspecified charges from the government.

The Sorbian Question was also discussed and the editor of Serbske Nowiny, a Sorb daily, outlined

the precarious situation the language was in.

With some 60,000 speakers and only one half-hour programme on TV each month the need for action was paramount, he said.

Assimilation was occurring because people were being forced to move away from the area in search of work.

Worse still, the government was planning to close three of the five Sorb schools because of falling numbers.

"Why," he asked "did the government have to continually make cuts?"

"We have only one Sorb daily, one Sorb national theatre in the world."

There was some good news at the conference as well with the word from the Welsh daily, Y Byd, that it would commence publication in March next year.