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# Human rights advocate featured at Prairie Talks

September 13, 2013

Chris Bieri - Tribune Editor , Pierce County Tribune

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When Kristi Rendahl met Bjrn Engesland at a restaurant in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Hertzegovia in 2011, she immediately knew he'd be a great speaker for her fledgling Prairie Talks series.

Engesland is the Secretary General of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, a human rights organization based in Oslo.

Two weeks after the initial meeting, Rendahl invited him to speak at the series and he immediately accepted.

"I thought he'd be a great speaker for Prairie Talks because of his work on democracy and human rights around the world, his legal training, and of course because North Dakota is home to many people of Norwegian heritage, my family among them," Rendahl said.

Engesland said his talk will focus on his work with the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and human rights issues around the world.

"The main focus will be on describing the work of the Norwegian Helsinki Committee dealing with human rights challenges in former Soviet Union; Russia, Belarus, Central Asia and the Caucasus," he said. "I will try to present the challenges with authoritarian capitalist countries (Russia, Kazakhstan, China..), try to present Norway`s role in promoting human rights and democracy, describe our reactions to the so called Breivik case (the killings that took place in and outside Oslo, on July, 22 2011) and try to look at similarities and differences in the attitude towards Human Rights and International law between Norway and the U.S."

The use of chemical weapons in Syria has been a major news story in past weeks, and one Engesland said his group is trying to help find a solution.

"As a human rights organization the Norwegian Helsinki Committee is deeply concerned about the widespread atrocities being committed in Syria," Engesland said. "With more than 100,000 people killed during the two last years, the conflict is one of the worst challenges we face internationally. The lack of agreement within the UN Security Council on how to approach the conflict is a clear indication on the worsening international climate. We do follow closely the recent attempts to find a way to avoid the use of military force."

Engesland, who studied to be a lawyer at the University of Olso, is excited to get in touch with North Dakota's Norwegian population.

"This will be Bjrn's first time visiting North Dakota and he's looking forward to visiting a state with such deep Norwegian roots," Rendahl said. "His only two stops will be New York City and North Dakota. Prairie Talks is very grateful for his willingness to visit. Thanks also to Rugby's Sons of Norway Lodge for serving treats and coffee following the event, to Bismarck State College's Embracing Diversity Team for co-sponsoring the event, and to the North Dakota Humanities Council for partial support of the program."

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