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Alumnus Profile: Courtney O'Connor

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South Africa, continued from previous page

A sixth challenge is to broaden our sights. We South Africans tend to suffer from tunnel vision. In our determination to deal with apartheid, we have trained our eyes to ignore human rights issues in other parts of the globe. We owe a major debt to people all over the world, who have worked with us in fighting for human rights in South Africa. Many people have committed their time, energy, and money to South Africa. Now the time has come to start repaying that debt. The best place to start is our own region, Southern Africa. In many ways, the countries of Southern Africa have paid heavily for South Africa's sins. Some of them have been devastated by South Africa's military and its surrogates. If the struggle for human rights in South Africa should teach us anything, it is that human rights is a truly international

issue. We South Africans should start giving back, and first to the countries in our region. Human rights groups should lead the way. We must commit some of our own time, energy and resources to the struggle for human rights in the region.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, a Constitution provides only limited protection for human rights. The real protection lies in the hearts and minds of ordinary people. When they see the need to hold government and other powerful institutions to human rights standards, the Constitution and its human rights promises are secured. The central task of South African human rights groups is therefore to make human rights real for all South Africans. 🌐

**Geoff Budlender is National Director of the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), South Africa's first and largest public interest law center, founded in 1979. Since 1991, he has chaired or been a member of numerous governmental committees on issues relating to land restitution, compensation, and development. Beginning in May 1996, he will take up the post of Director-General of the South African Department of Land Affairs. Other areas of his legal practice include influx control, citizenship, consumer law, and social welfare benefits.*

Mr. Budlender is also a member of the International Advisory Board for the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at the Washington College of Law (WCL).

More information regarding the LRC may be obtained by contacting Ann Satchwill, Director of the South Africa Legal Services & Legal Education Project (SAL-SLEP), at the offices of Wilmer, Cutler & Pickering, Washington, DC.

ALUMNUS PROFILE

Alumnus Works to Improve Status of Refugees

by Stephen Jacques

Courtney O'Connor, currently a consultant in public international law for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has enjoyed a rich, rewarding career since receiving her J.D. from WCL in 1986. She received a fellowship with the International Human Rights Law Group while at WCL, and then after graduating, worked as a Staff Attorney for the Law Group and as a consultant to various NGOs regarding human rights and constitutional law issues. O'Connor then moved on to the UNHCR, where she encountered "the personal challenge of doing 'hands-on' human rights protection."

As the only American working as a UNHCR protection officer in El Salvador from 1988 to 1990, O'Connor assisted in repatriating Salvadoran refugees and determining the refugee status of Nicaraguan asylum seekers in a politically charged atmosphere. "The situation was very intense," she noted. "It was the cutting edge of UNHCR's protection work in the country of origin. It was very hard to go in there and be utterly neutral. If I had taken sides, however, I would have lost my legitimacy and my effectiveness."

After gaining experience in the field, O'Connor was transferred in 1990 to UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, where she served as a legal advisor in the Division of International Protection. She advised on various protection issues including refugee status determination and the particular protection problems faced by uprooted women and children. She broke up her time in headquarters by serving from 1991 to 1992 as Legal Advisor to the Director of Human Rights in the first UN peace-keeping mission ever to have a human rights component — the UN Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL). After returning to Geneva, O'Connor prepared the High Commissioner's first comprehensive policy on the protection of uprooted persons against sexual violence, which was adopted by UNHCR's Executive Committee (of States) and has served as the basis of that organization's work on this issue since 1993.

She has recently been consulting on two UNHCR projects, the first of which followed up on her earlier work by evaluating UNHCR's project for survivors of sexual violence in Kenya and making recommendations for its future

related efforts elsewhere. She is currently drafting for UNHCR a reference and case book on advanced issues in refugee status determination which, *inter alia*, updates many of the legal questions addressed in UNHCR's 1979 Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status. The book will place refugee law into the broader context of international human rights and humanitarian law.

While the book and other work consulting in public international law and policy will consume much of the rest of the upcoming year for O'Connor, she is eager to emerge from behind the word processor and return to field work. Reflecting on her time with UNHCR in El Salvador, she said, "Every day I went to work, my identity was challenged — as a member of the UN, as a protection officer, as an American, and most importantly, as a human being." Despite working under often unnerving, precarious conditions, O'Connor looks back fondly on her time with UNHCR in the field, "It was a turning point for me. It provided me with one of the richest experiences of my life." 🌐