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Alumni Profile

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ALUMNI PROFILE

Courtesy of the International Center for Transitional Justice



Juan E. Méndez, a human rights advocate, lawyer, and former political prisoner, has dedicated his long and distinguished career to the defense of human rights. He is the current President of the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), and a member of the boards of directors of the Center for Justice and International Law, Global Rights, and the Open Society Justice Initiative. Mr. Méndez also serves on the Board of Advisors of the Social Science Research Council's Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum, as well as on the advisory council of the American Bar Association's Center for Human Rights. Mr. Méndez received his LL.M. from American University Washington College of Law.

Mr. Méndez began his legal career representing political prisoners during Argentina's military dictatorship in the 1970s. The military junta responded to his efforts by arresting, torturing, and holding Mr. Méndez in administrative custody for over a year and a half. During this time, in which Mr. Méndez was separated from his wife and family, Amnesty International adopted him as a "prisoner of conscience," a term coined by the organization in the 1960s to describe anyone imprisoned because of their race, religion, color, language, sexual orientation, belief, or lifestyle, so long as they have not used violence. It is also used to refer to those who have been imprisoned or persecuted for the nonviolent expression of their conscientiously held beliefs. Despite the serious dangers involved in representing political prisoners, Mr. Méndez viewed provision of legal assistance to those individuals not only as a contribution but also as a duty.

After his release from detention in the late 1970s, Mr. Méndez moved to the United States. In 1982, the newly founded Human Rights Watch, at the time known as Helsinki Watch, asked Mr. Méndez to launch its Americas Program and open its Washington, D.C. office. For over 15 years, Mr. Méndez worked with Human Rights Watch, concentrating much of his efforts on human rights abuses in the Western hemisphere. In 1994 Mr. Méndez was appointed General Counsel of Human Rights Watch and assumed international duties, which included responsibility for the organization's litigation and standard-setting activities.

From 1996 to 1999, Mr. Méndez served as Executive Director of the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights in Costa Rica, where he had the opportunity to combine activism, advocacy, and teaching. The Inter-American Institute of Human Rights is an independent, international academic institution created in 1980 under an agreement between the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Republic of Costa Rica. The Inter-American Institute of Human Rights is an important center for teaching and academic research on human rights. It utilizes a multidisciplinary approach with specific emphasis on human rights issues in the Americas. Mr. Méndez has taught international human rights law at various other academic institutions, including the Georgetown Law Center and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He served as professor of law and director of the Center for Civil and Human Rights at the University of Notre Dame and teaches regularly at the Oxford Masters Program in International Human Rights Law.

From 2000 to 2003, Mr. Méndez was a member of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and in 2002 he served as president of the Commission. The IACHR is an autonomous entity of the Organization of American States, and along with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, it is one of several bodies that comprise the Inter-American Human Rights System. The IACHR's main task is to promote the observance and defense of human rights in the Americas by receiving, analyzing, and investigating individual petitions that allege specific human rights violations. The IACHR refers cases to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights for adjudication, issues recommendations to member states, and requests that member states adopt specific precautionary measures. In urgent cases, the IACHR may also request that states adopt provisional measures, even where a case has not yet been submitted to the Court. According to Mr. Méndez, states' reactions to being investigated vary, yet they are often willing to adopt the IACHR's recommendations. Member States take affirmative steps to prevent human rights violations and also effectively elevate their legitimacy within the Inter-American system. As a result, the IACHR has been successful in addressing human rights issues in the Americas. Mr. Méndez commends the extent to which the Inter-American system has evolved and progressed in recent decades, highlighting its ability to promote human rights in the region.

On April 7, 2004, in a speech commemorating the tenth anniversary of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan pledged to take actions to prevent such atrocities from reoccurring in the future. In July of that year, Mr. Méndez was appointed as the first UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, a role that he filled until March 31, 2007, in addition to his full-time position.

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