

Working in the Human Rights Capital of the World

Linda Gyorki, Castan Centre Global Intern, Human Rights First, New York

By Linda Gyorki

“People of good will who are interested in fairness, the rule of law and the protection of individual rights exist in all walks of our society. Someone has to act as a catalyst and help to move the agenda forward. I think that’s the role Human Rights First plays”.

*General Joseph P. Hoar,
Commander in Chief, Central Command*

Prior to my departure to New York, I read a statement by Mike Posner, Executive Director of Human Rights First, in which he said that “we’re determined to make a difference, not just to make a point.” From the moment you step in the door of the Human Rights First offices in Midtown New York, this statement becomes a reality. The organisation is constantly abuzz with people debating concepts, ideas and tactics to ensure human rights abuses worldwide are rectified. Human Rights First has a diverse range of programs, including Asylum; Human Rights Defenders; International Justice; Torture and U.S. Law and Security. Importantly, the organisation is determined to engage with people and organisations across a broad political and ideological spectrum in order to ensure concrete and lasting results. The staff (and the interns) work tirelessly in creating innovative ways to bring about positive results and to ensure change.

For three months, I interned in the International Law Department of Human Rights First under the supervision of Gabor Rona, International Legal Director and formerly legal advisor at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. I was continually given fascinating and challenging projects which required me to research both international and domestic law. My main task was to research and write Human Rights First’s submission to the United Nations Human Rights Committee on the extra-territorial application of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In order to prove that the ICCPR has extraterritorial scope, I was required to analyse the travaux préparatoires leading up to the creation of the ICCPR; and to research international and domestic jurisprudence. The research was not only exciting because I was given the opportunity to work independently on such an important document; but also because I was able to delve into the issue and craft my own argument which was later presented before the Human Rights Commit-

tee of the United Nations.

I also wrote a note arguing that the use of torture or other cruel and inhumane treatment is illegal in the ‘War on Terror’. In this note, I researched the legal frameworks applicable to the detention of individuals in the ‘War on Terror’. I analysed the proper scope of application of international humanitarian law; international human rights law; domestic and criminal law. Other projects included research into the extraterritorial application of the Convention Against Torture; the negotiation of the Comprehensive Convention on Terrorism; the application of the crimes of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity to sexual violence in Darfur; the Alien Tort Claims Act; and the legality of detaining asylum seekers. The research tasks varied enormously and always raised several issues and challenges.

This internship not only gave me the unique opportunity to learn about the inner workings of a human rights organisation; it also allowed me to immerse myself completely in the world of human rights. I placed myself on every possible e-mailing list within the organisation. This meant that my inbox was constantly bombarded with articles relating to the most recent human rights abuses throughout the world and discussions between human rights advocates as to solutions. Moreover, each day I was alerted to the seminars, talks and debates relating to human rights around New York City and almost each night, after work, I would attend such a talk.

I heard Juan Mendez, the United Nations Special Advisor to the Secretary General on the Prevention of Genocide, discuss the conflict in Colombia. At the New York City Bar Association, I heard Counsel for detainees in Guantanamo Bay discuss indefinite detention. Expert academics debated suicide terrorism at the New York University School of Law and Physicians for Human Rights argued that silence is fuelling the genocide in Darfur.

Thanks to the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law and the Monash Law School, I was given an opportunity to expand my knowledge of human rights law far beyond what I had expected. I was able to spend my Summer holiday attempting to bring about positive change and rectify human rights abuses worldwide. Martin Luther King Jr stated that “our lives begin to end the day we become silent about the things that matter.” My internship at Human Rights First taught me the skills required to ensure that those rendered silent are given a voice.



Linda with fellow Castan Centre Global Intern Sophia Kagan at the Statue of Liberty (an appropriate site visit for human rights interns)