



Vance News

September 2015

Vance Center Supports Efforts To Protect Syrian Women and Children Refugees

The recent images of a solitary Syrian boy washed up drowned on the coast of Turkey and the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees desperately trying to reach Europe at great risk to their lives, have brought home to viewers in Europe and in the Americas the tragedy of the Syrian refugee crisis.

But the crisis is not new. Aid groups estimate that, in the four years since the start of the war in Syria, more than half of the 22 million Syrian population have had to flee and either are internally displaced or have sought refuge abroad. The United Nations reports that 2.1 million Syrian refugees have registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, 1.9 million in Turkey and more than 24,000 in North Africa.

The myriad difficulties facing Syrian refugees include legal challenges women and children endure as a result of unregistered marriages and births. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, by the end of January 2014, 37,498 Syrian children had been born as refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey with urgent needs for legal assistance. Women in unregistered marriages have no protection or support if their husbands die or abandon or abuse them. Unregistered children cannot obtain services like schooling and healthcare.

A primary reason refugees do not register births and marriages is lack of awareness. Vance Center client, MADRE, is partnering with local NGOs to inform Syrian refugees in Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon of the importance of registering births and marriages officially with the governments of the countries to which they have fled.

With assistance from the Vance Center and the international law firm of White & Case, MADRE has published a brochure, in the accessible form of a comic strip, to educate refugees on the importance of birth and marriage registration and provide information on locally available resources. Available in English and Arabic, the brochure is being distributed widely to refugees in Iraq, Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Click to access the brochure in [English](#) / [Arabic](#)

Photo Cred: theguardian.com

Inter- American Court Adopts Vance Center's Arguments in Freedom of Expression Case

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights recently decided that the State of Venezuela violated the right to freedom of expression of shareholders and employees of a former Venezuelan television station when it refused to renew its license in retaliation for its

Vance News
September 2015

editorial line. The Court found that the Venezuelan government intentionally discriminated against Radio Caracas Television, the leading voice of the opposition, with the objective of influencing and silencing its views, as well as violating its rights to due process and access to justice.

In its decision, the Court adopted arguments presented by the Vance Center, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and the New York City Bar Association's Committee on Communications & Media Law as amici curiae, represented by Debevoise & Plimpton LLP. The Debevoise team was led by partner Jeremy Feigelson and associate Thomas H. Norgaard.



(Inter-American Court of Human Rights Venezuela)

The case began in May 2007 when then President Hugo Chávez refused to renew the broadcast license of RCTV and seized its equipment and other property. The Court found that the action evidenced the intent “to silence critics of the government.” It held that the refusal discriminated against RCTV based on its editorial line, was an abuse of power on the part of the government and violated shareholders’ right to freedom of expression, and the public’s right to access information freely.

The Court ordered Venezuela to reinstate the broadcast license through “an open, independent and transparent process” and to return the station’s equipment and facilities. The order also required Venezuela to take measures to guarantee that all future concession and renewals of broadcast licenses for radio and television take place through the same “open, independent and transparent process”.

Click [here](#) to access the decision (available only in Spanish).

Photo Cred: globovision.com



Vance News

September 2015

Vance Center Client Advances Anti-Hate Crime Legislation For LGBTI People in El Salvador

The Vance Center since 2013 has assisted the Salvadoran NGO Asistencia Legal Para La Diversidad Sexual (“ALDES”) to enhance protection of LGBTI Salvadorans. The Central American country of just over 6 million people has suffered more than 157 reported murders of gay men and transgender people since 1999, without any prosecutions. Many other LGBTI people are regularly physically, verbally, and/or psychologically assaulted, threatened and/or harassed. Victims rarely report these crimes, out of fear of retaliation and official inaction..

In 2013, ALDES asked the Vance Center to assist with promoting hate crime legislation in El Salvador, which would include homophobic violence. The Vance Center and the international law firm Covington & Burling researched hate crime legislation in other Latin American countries, as well as El Salvador’s international obligations to protect its LGBTI citizens, and made recommendations for proposed legislation in El Salvador. ALDES and the Salvadorian LGBTI community used this research in an advocacy strategy with members of the Salvadoran congress on a draft hate crime law.

The Salvadoran Legislative Assembly recently approved an amendment to the Penal Code which would increase imprisonment to up to 60 years for murder and threats motivated by hate, including on the basis of sexual orientation. The amendment passed with 77 votes out of a total of 84 and no vote against. To take effect, the amendment still requires the President’s signature, but observers note that strong political support for the measure makes a veto unlikely.

“This is a step forward for our people, for those who have been excluded and discriminated against in our country; we are repaying our debt to this vulnerable population” declared one member of the Salvadoran Legislative Assembly who voted in favor of the reform.

For the director of ALDES, Ana Montano, *“This is a huge victory for the LGBTI community of El Salvador. We now need to make sure that hate crimes against the LGBTI community are investigated by the authorities. ALDES and its supporters will continue to monitor the situation to make sure that this new reform to the Penal Code is applied and that perpetrators of hate crimes are brought to justice”.*

The Vance Center continues to work with ALDES, recently starting a project to train private Salvadoran lawyers on pro bono representation of LGBTI people.

Vance News
September 2015

Vance Center Co-Sponsors Expert Group on Cuba



The Vance Center, along with co-sponsors Global Americans, Center for International Policy, Shearman & Sterling and the Law Office of Robert Muse, recently convened an expert roundtable to consider improving U.S. regulation of financial transactions related to Cuba. Participants agreed to collaborate on specific policy recommendations to the Obama Administration.

The roundtable conversation focused on existing regulations that may require reconsideration in light of the U.S. initiative to open economic relations with Cuba, starting with President Obama's December 17, 2014 executive order. Participants identified as an example the on-going prohibition on using U.S. dollars in third-party transactions related to Cuba. Since most international companies conduct transactions in dollars, many struggle to find international financing for any deals involving Cuba. The restrictions have also hampered the implementation of President Obama's stated objective of extending U.S. financial services to Cuba. Participants called for the U.S. to make clear that financial transactions involving Cuba should not raise a red flag.

Vance Center Committee Vice-Chair and Shearman & Sterling partner Antonia Stolper and Center for International Policy's Cuba project director Elizabeth Newhouse, opened the roundtable, which Global Americans founder Christopher Sabatini moderated. Other speakers included Robert Muse, from the Law Office of Robert Muse, Danforth Newcomb, Of Counsel at Shearman & Sterling, Daniel Walt, partner at Squire Patton Boggs, and Seth Wyngowski, from the office of the Coordinator for Cuban Affairs, U.S. Department of State.

The participants also compared U.S. sanctions on Cuba with those on Vietnam, Libya, Sudan, and Russia, explaining that the Cuba sanctions are less workable because they were imposed so many years ago. Speakers also downplayed the prospect of increased U.S. tourism in Cuba in the absence of specific regulations.



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Vance News

September 2015

Update: after the roundtable, the Obama Administration issued new regulations on the U.S. sanctions against Cuba although they did not deal with the issues discussed at the roundtable.

Photo Cred: telegraph.co.uk

Vance Center Vice Chair Wins Latin American Award

The Vance Center congratulates Committee Vice-Chair Antonia Stolper for her recent award for "Outstanding Contributions to the Legal Profession" given by Chambers & Partners. See [here](#) for her remarks in accepting the award.



(Antonia Stolper accepting award)

Photo Cred: ChamLatAmAwards

Vance Center Thanks Departing Human Rights Fellow Gustavo Alvira



CYRUS R. **VANCE CENTER**
FOR INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE

Vance News
September 2015



The Vance Center thanks and offers best wishes to Gustavo Alvira, who served as a law school summer intern in 2014, and more recently as a human rights fellow. Mr. Alvira, a Tulane Law School graduate, provided key support to the Vance Center's Human Rights and Access to Justice Program, directed by Ms. Marie- Claude Jean-Baptiste. His research focused primarily on the ongoing peace process in Colombia, his native country, as well as LGBT rights in Latin America and prisoners' rights in Venezuela and Jamaica.