

## Program in International Human Rights Law Indiana University School of Law - Indianapolis

530 WEST NEW YORK STREET ● ROOM 206 ● INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46202 U.S.A.  
TELEPHONE: (317) 278-2359 ● FAX: (317) 278-7563 ● EMAIL: GEDWARDS@INDIANA.EDU  
WEB: [HTTP://WWW.INDYLAW.INDIANA.EDU/PROGRAMS/HUMANRIGHTS/CONTENTS.HTM](http://WWW.INDYLAW.INDIANA.EDU/PROGRAMS/HUMANRIGHTS/CONTENTS.HTM)



## A Global Grasp Indiana University's International Connections

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations general assembly in response to the world's increasing disdain for basic human rights. Although UN countries agreed to the articles contained in the declaration, many of them have been remiss in adhering to its principles. For this reason, persons educated in the field of international human rights law assume the responsibility of monitoring nations in violation of the declaration, attempting to curtail human rights abuses.

At Indiana University School of Law at Indianapolis, the Program in International Human Rights Law is directed by George Edwards, law professor, who founded the program in 1997. Edwards brings to the program a great deal of personal experience in the field of international human rights law. He has lectured at universities worldwide and regularly meets with and advises the UN Human Rights Committee. Edwards believes his overseas encounters provide students with information often not relayed in the media, which reinforces their interest in interning through his program.

"I have been thrilled with the reception that has been given by the students to the *Program in International Human Rights Law*," Edwards said.

In addition, Edwards' international reputation has focused attention on the PIHRL.

"This school and this program are now literally on the map," said Edwards, adding that he has received numerous e-mails and phone calls from organizations around the world requesting interns from IU-I's program.

This demand far exceeds the number of students participating in the program, and Edwards feels he can now be more "choosy" in selecting overseas study programs for his students.

In 1997, the program placed two interns in foreign study programs and placed twice that number in the summer of 1998 in four separate locales — the United Nations in New York City; Sydney, Australia; Capetown, South Africa; and Hong Kong. The students do not receive pay for their work but can earn law school credit.

"I believe that the field is blossoming as individuals around the world are becoming more aware that there is such a thing as international human rights law," Edwards adds, "and that body of law applies to them as individuals irrespective of where they are, which corner of the world

they might find themselves living in, and who they might be.

"Not only are the individuals more aware and becoming assertive of their rights," he continued, "but advocacy groups on behalf of these people have become more pronounced, more visible, more active, more vocal."

Accordingly, one could assume there will be a greater need for persons trained in this field in the future.

"Persons who are trained in international human rights law have many avenues available to them," Edwards said. "Within the UN system, there are numerous bodies that are constituted to oversee the implementation of various human rights treaties that are signed by many countries.

"Also, there are bodies that are charged with identifying human rights violations and human rights problem areas and taking steps to cure them," he continued.

Professionals in this field can work in non-governmental organization sectors such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, organizations which take steps to ensure that basic human rights aren't violated.

### Special visitor

PIHRL along with the International Law Society, sponsored a Sept. 29 visit from Linda Rabben, Brazil coordinator for Amnesty International. Rabben has a degree in anthropology, but is deeply involved in the area of international human rights.

Rabben traveled to England as a graduate student, where she met some Brazilian students who described to her the condition of life in Brazil. Rabben decided to go to Brazil to conduct anthropological research and stayed for two years.

Brazil, a country of 160 million people, is a den of social, political, and economic instability and is "the world champion in terms of maldistribution of wealth," Rabben said.

She added that there is "a tradition of repression" in Brazil which stems from the country's history — Brazil was the last country in the Western world to abolish slavery, and many of the people in power still behave as if impoverished people are slaves.

For example, Rabben reported that a Brazilian citizen with a university degree, if convicted of a crime, may serve their sentence at home whereas poor people are often jailed and tortured for minor offenses. "Torture in police stations is just about routine," she added.

Additionally, there have been several instances in which Brazilian police have gunned down groups of people, in-

cluding “street children.” The reason for this barbaric treatment is not entirely evident, but Rabben said the Brazilian police, who are underpaid, often accept assignments as “hired guns” — exterminating undesirable citizens.

Rabben advised that the major problem in Brazil is an attitude of impunity — that agents of the government know it is unlikely they will be punished for human rights violations. But the presence of Amnesty International threatens to abolish that attitude. Amnesty International’s mission is to serve as a watchdog, ensuring that countries such as Brazil are held accountable for their actions. Often, the organization threatens to request that the World Bank, largely funded by the United States, cut off aid to the offending country, while asking members to write letters to responsible parties, requesting that they cease offensive actions.

These tactics are highly effective, but Rabben said, “I think we have to be realistic about how much impact we can actually have.

“The hallmark of Amnesty’s work is to take on individual cases,” she continued, adding that she is “content with just focusing on individual lives” in an effort to make a difference. While Amnesty International continues to make a difference internationally, they rely on people like Edwards and his students to help fulfill their mission.



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By Jenny Montgomery  
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