

### The Inter-American Human Rights Digest Project

by Barbara Cochrane\*

On October 7, 1998, the Inter-American Human Rights Digest Project presented the first limited Spanish edition publication of the *Inter-American Human Rights Digest: The Case Law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (1980-1997)* and the complementary *Inter-American Human Rights Database*, the latter which is now available in English and Spanish on the Internet at <http://www.wcl.american.edu/pub/humright/digest>. This project began in March 1996, when the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law (the Center) at the Washington College of Law (WCL) launched the Inter-American Human Rights Digest Project with a two-year grant from the Ministry of Development Cooperation of the Netherlands (the grant was renewed in early 1998). The Digest Project was established by Dean Claudio Grossman, Professor Robert Goldman, attorneys Claudia Martin and Diego Rodríguez-Pinzón, and the Center's Executive Director, Robert Guitteau, to address the needs of the Inter-American System. Broadly stated, the project's objectives were to supply increased access to the case law of the Inter-American Commission and Court on Human Rights; clarify the human rights standards used before the Court and Commission; and train human rights advocates throughout the Americas to encourage easier access to the Inter-American System.

The completion and publication of the *Inter-American Human Rights Digest*, modeled after the *Digest of Strasbourg Case-Law*, is a significant step toward resolving many of the challenges confronting the Inter-American Commission and Court on Human Rights. The decisions of the Commission and the Court are criticized at times for being contradictory and inconsistent. Currently, attorneys representing alleged victims or defendant-states litigate cases before the Inter-American System with no clear legal standards on which to base their arguments. The *Inter-American Human Rights Digest*, once completed, will be the first publication to comprehensively classify the case law of both the Commission and Court, enabling litigants to easily refer to past cases for guidance. The *Digest's* goal is to improve the predictability and consistency of the decisions of the Commission and the Court, thereby increasing governments' confidence in these bodies and bolster-

ing the overall credibility and influence of the Inter-American System of human rights protection.

According to Co-Directors Claudia Martin and Diego Rodríguez-Pinzón, who are both WCL LL.M. alumni, the first limited edition, published in Spanish, will be made available to members of the Court and Commission, government officials who work with the Inter-American System, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and academic researchers interested in researching and writing about the Inter-American System. Currently, the Digest Project anticipates printing a final edition of the *Digest* in 1999, which it hopes to make available to the general public.

In addition to the first phase of researching and compiling Court and Commission decisions, the project foresees at least two additional phases: the dissemination of a set of standards and guidelines regarding human rights law in the Inter-American System, and the training of individuals within the human rights community in the Americas. During this second phase, it plans to collaborate with academic institutions working on international human rights in Argentina, Colombia, and Central America. A proposed seminar at WCL early next summer will provide training to law professors in these countries on how to use the *Digest*, promote the use of a moot court strategy to refine litigation strategies, and distribute supplemental materials.

Once training is provided to the aforementioned groups, the project will be well positioned to start its third phase. This will extend the reach of the training process to include local training for key actors in the human rights community. According to Martin, the willingness of the Dutch government, particularly the Netherlands Ministry of Development Cooperation and Professor Leo Zwaak of the Netherlands Institute of Human Rights, to support the goals of consistency and predictability of human rights law in another region of the world is encouraging.

In addition to its Dutch partners, the project also benefits from the input and feedback of its International Advisory Board, which encourages participation by international human rights experts. Currently, the Board has representatives from the Inter-American Commission and Court on Human Rights, the

Organization of American States, and non-governmental organizations who advise the Digest Project on the development and implementation of its activities. Most recently, the Advisory Board, as well as other human rights experts from the U.S. and abroad, attended a meeting at WCL on October 7, 1998, to provide feedback on the first publication of the Digest and the on-going work of the database. ☉

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