



November 23, 2010

## A Canadian lawyer in Liberia

By JEFF GRAY

From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

### *Retired Blakes partner helping war-torn nation urges others leaving Bay Street to do pro bono work overseas*

In February of 2007, Bay Street lawyer Jim Dube's plane touched down outside Monrovia, the devastated capital of Liberia. As part of an international pro-bono project, he was determined to help the new government - run by Africa's first female head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf - to rebuild the rule of law.

But the first sight of the scars left by years of civil war made him think twice.

"Initially, when I got off the plane the first time, it was a little bit of a heart-stopping moment ... 'Oh my God, what have I got myself into?'" Mr. Dube recalls thinking as he was driven to his hotel near the U.S. embassy.

"You look at the skyline, buildings have been destroyed that are just shells that are just standing there, to this day," he said. "You had a cemetery that was used by squatters that was just heaping with garbage. You had them opening up graves to use the coffins as a kind of shelter."

Mr. Dube, 67, recently returned from his latest five-week stint in the West African country. The retired partner with Blake Cassels & Graydon LLP, who used to represent major banks in insolvency cases, is now pursuing what some might say is an unusual retirement hobby, one that puts his legal skills to good use. "It certainly beats golf. And it certainly beats having too many drinks in the afternoon before dinner," he said.

He is also trying to persuade other Canadian lawyers nearing retirement to do the same. He works with a U.S.-based group called the International Senior Lawyers Project (ISLP), which sends volunteer lawyers to Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America on a variety of pro bono missions. Some help governments negotiate contracts with multinational companies; others assist local human-rights activists with legal claims.

Other Canadians are involved in the New York-based initiative - including some in the group's efforts in Haiti. But Mr. Dube and others feel the baby-boom bulge of retiring lawyers in Canada is an untapped resource of expertise that could be doing global good.

Mr. Dube, who retired from Blakes in 2009, is quick to point out that life as a temporary expat in Liberia isn't nearly as bad as one might think. The legal system is based on the U.S. model; the language is English. The food at his clean, Lebanese-run hotel is good, and he has a car and driver (and police escort) when he needs to go somewhere.

His work has covered a staggering range of legal issues, working with Minister of Foreign Affairs Olubanke King-Akerele, as well as the Justice Department. For example, he is working on reforms that would outlaw the brutal tribal justice practice of "sassywood," or trial by ordeal, in which suspected criminals are forced to drink toxic potions or suffer the application of a heated machete to their skin.

He has also filed memoranda on constitutional questions - including a challenge to the President's right to hold office - and advised on efforts to retrieve embassy property allegedly sold off or plundered by some of Liberia's former ambassadors abroad.

Last week, he gave a half-hour briefing to Ms. Sirleaf and key ministers on a possible lawsuit the country could face over a new passport-printing contract. "As a retired insolvency lawyer ... to be able to be in a cabinet room in a West African state and to have that amount of face time with a President who is listening to you and questioning you - it is a rush."

He also had a ringside seat to political machinations: Ms. Sirleaf recently put most of her cabinet on "administrative leave" in the runup to next year's elections. The announcement was yet another reminder of the growing pains Liberia faces as it rebuilds after decades of conflict.

Toronto lawyer Linda Robinson, a retired partner with Osler Harkin & Harcourt LLP who worked on mergers and acquisitions, is also bringing her expertise to Africa through the ISLP. She now spends several weeks a year teaching black lawyers in South Africa and other African countries the intricacies of commercial law. Many come to the course with little exposure to business, she said.

"A lot of these people didn't have a clue what a share was until we started talking to them," she said, adding that she hopes next year to teach courses to lawyers in troubled Zimbabwe for the first time.


Ms. Robinson says a Canadian version of the ISLP is needed to tap into the country's body of retired legal talent and collect charitable donations. She thinks one of Canada's established pro bono groups should help get it off the ground.

Mr. Dube, whose efforts won him and Blakes a Lexpert pro bono award this year, says any Canadian lawyer - not just those already equipped with experience on human-rights cases and the like - can make a difference halfway around the world.

"I am not a Clarence Darrow, I am not a John J. Robinette. I am a good Blakes partner who laboured in the vineyard for 42 years," Mr. Dubč said. "You can be a change agent. One person, or even an armada of lawyers, isn't going to turn a post-conflict state overnight into a success story. It's taken a generation to destroy Liberia, it's going to take a generation to rebuild Liberia. But it's got to start somewhere."

CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc

Reprinted from Globe and Mail, in the "The Law Page" section.

 © CTVglobemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.. All rights reserved. Licensed by Anonymous Member for 6 months on November 24, 2010 . You may forward this article or obtain additional permissions at the following iCopyright license record and renewal locator: <http://license.icopyright.net/3.8425-6803>. CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc and Globe and Mail logos are registered trademarks of CTVglobemedia Publishing, Inc . The iCopyright logo is a registered trademark of iCopyright, Inc.