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## HRLA REPORT – REPRIEVE PLACEMENT

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I feel very fortunate to have spent July to September 2017 on a placement at the international human rights NGO, Reprieve. To this end, I was awarded the Human Rights Lawyers Association (HRLA) Bursary Award and the Peter Duffy Memorial Award. I am immensely grateful to the HRLA for this support.

I am asked to write a short report about my time at Reprieve. This report will (i) provide a short introduction to Reprieve, (ii) highlight the main types of work I did, and (iii) outline three key lessons I have taken from this experience, particularly in relation to my career at the Bar ahead.

### **A. REPRIEVE**

Reprieve is an international human rights NGO based in London, with a second office in New York, and focuses on two main areas of work: the death penalty, and abuses in counter-terrorism. Widely regarded for its death penalty work, Reprieve has been successful in halting imminent executions as well as achieving systemic change through legal and public advocacy. Reprieve's second area of work, abuses in counter-terrorism, consists of litigation and advocacy on 'secret prisons', including Guantanamo Bay, and the use of drone strikes outside of armed conflict. Again, renowned for its work in challenging abuses in counter-terrorism, Reprieve has – by way of example – secured freedom for more than 80 Guantanamo detainees.

I feel privileged to have worked in the Assassinations Team, who currently cover a particularly pertinent area of work given Trump's manifold increase in the use of armed drones for the purpose of targeted killings. Amongst other things, the Assassinations Team investigates drone strikes in Yemen and other States not currently engaged in armed conflict with the US, brings legal challenges to unlawful killings, campaigns to raise awareness of the US drone programme, influences policy through advocacy efforts, and exposes as well as contests potential complicity by the UK and other European States.

### **B. WORK**

I was exposed to an incredible range of work, including hands-on investigation of drone strikes, input into advocacy and campaigns, client conferences, and more traditional legal work based on research, analysis and application of the law. I will use this section to give some examples of the main types of work I did, taking in turn (a) legal work, then (b) investigative/ case work.

#### **I. Legal Work**

I was responsible for research and analysis on significant areas of law relating to the use of drones outside of armed conflict. For example, under the right to life, States are required to create systems of transparency and accountability in the event of potential violations. This is used by Reprieve – through both advocacy and litigation – as a basis to require the US and potentially complicit States to create transparency and accountability structures where armed drones are used, as their use inherently risks endangering the right to life.

Another contemporary area of legal research which featured in my work was the concept of imminence in self-defence under the law on the use of force. The UK and Australia have recently come out in favour of a more expansive concept of imminence, which would allow for the use of force against other States in a wider set of circumstances than has thus far been accepted in international law. This is directly related to when drone strikes can and cannot be used.

My work on this, and the law more generally, went to a variety of purposes, from advocacy aimed at political figures and institutions to indicate the danger of a more expansive definition of imminence, to ongoing litigation in the UK, US, and Germany concerning the use of armed drones. Taking one example close to home, it is clear that the UK shares intelligence with the US to assist in drone strikes, at least as far as Yemen is concerned. Arguably, the UK thus bears related transparency and accountability responsibilities under human rights law, like publishing related guidance.

I greatly enjoyed this work, as it allowed me to draw on my academic background in international and human rights law – in particular, my learning on the BCL – to assist in achieving practical, meaningful results. I also had the opportunity to assist in drafting submissions in international and domestic human rights law related processes, and used comparative law methodology to outline other potential submissions. Another intellectually stimulating aspect of my legal work was drafting legal research memos for internal and external use – for example, I undertook research for an amicus brief which was then used in a recent application for leave to appeal to the US Supreme Court.

## **II. Investigations and Case Work**

In terms of investigation, Reprieve's work is often reactive. Ongoing drone strikes in Yemen would therefore regularly form part of my daily work. I assisted in calls with on-the-ground investigators where drone strikes had just occurred, and assessed media coverage in various languages.

The results of these investigations went to a variety of purposes, and were often used to help victims of drone strikes gain some kind of redress, whether through public advocacy, litigation further down the line, or a chance to share their story in a published report. For example, Reprieve recently published a report detailing two instances of US drone strikes – which were followed by raids – in Yemeni villages early last year. The report highlights Trump's five-fold increase in the use of drone strikes and the destruction this has caused, as well as the lack of precision, accountability and transparency structures surrounding the US drone programme. A parallel UK report highlights the dangers of UK complicity in the drone programme.

My investigation work also involved fact-based analysis, mostly based on reports highlighting failures in drone technology, as well as literature on Yemen's political and historical background, which was relevant to the Assassination Team's listing challenges. I also attended events and hearings, like the APPG on Drones Inquiry to hear evidence on the use of drones.

In terms of case work, Reprieve has specific clients, whether family members of victims of drone strikes or potential targets who are likely to be on the US Kill List. Indeed, Reprieve is currently challenging the targeting of two journalists through litigation in US courts, alleging they are on a Kill List and have therefore – amongst other things – been denied their due process rights. I had the privilege of working on cases and issues of this significant nature, which included conferences with the clients, an analysis of facts and compiling briefs or summaries for further action. I was surrounded by a team of inspiring and incredible human rights advocates who trusted my abilities and even assigned me my own cases.

### **C. LESSONS LEARNT**

Working at Reprieve was a humbling experience. I learnt a great deal, and perhaps most importantly, that it is not only right to act to uphold the human rights of the most vulnerable, but it is entirely possible to achieve real, substantive change as a result of these efforts. The people at Reprieve achieved significant results, saved lives, and progressed towards systemic change with every passing day. My first lesson learnt was therefore to be hopeful, and that courageous human rights advocacy can and does achieve real results for real people.

I also bettered many soft skills – from research, to drafting, time-management, and conference skills – and increased my substantive knowledge. Moreover, I learnt how NGOs operate on an intimate level, which is important to me as I hope to work closely with legal action charities in the future. Furthermore, I learnt to recognise, more than ever before, that as important as the law is, it is only one component in the larger machinery of social tools used to protect and promote human rights. Public advocacy is also important, as are other disciplines and approaches. These set of skills and considerations form my second lesson learnt at Reprieve.

The third main lesson I gained from my time at Reprieve was a sense of perspective. That is, having spent my summer confronted with severe abuses of human rights, it is hard not to appreciate how important human rights law really is. This has given me a renewed passion and drive to work in the field, knowing that I can perhaps one day contribute to a more just and fair society.

### **D. CONCLUSION**

Growing up in a disadvantaged household, I had often seen how human rights law can be used – by otherwise powerless individuals – to challenge authority and assert one’s basic rights and dignity. I have chosen to pursue a career at the Bar due to this capacity for empowerment in the law, and the possibility that I could one day use it to assist those most vulnerable. Working at Reprieve has reinforced this passion, equipped me with important skills and knowledge, and a strong sense of perspective, which I will find invaluable going forward.

I thank the HRLA once more for making this opportunity a reality. Working at Reprieve has been an incredibly important stage in my career, and certainly in my life.

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