THE INTER-AMERICAN COURT OF HUMAN RIGHTS: THEORY AND PRACTICE, PRESENT AND FUTURE

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In Memory of Prof. Dr. Fried van Hoof,
for his dedication to human rights
It is a true honor to write the foreword to this important collective work commemorating the 35 years that the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (henceforth the “Inter-American Court”, or the “Court”) has been functioning. This enterprise was achieved with the participation of academics from different parts of the world who, with their reflections on diverse aspects of the Court’s jurisprudence and work, enhance and enrich the legal debate on this subject.

The Court currently exercises jurisdiction over approximately 500 million inhabitants; this is a direct consequence of the fact that 20 of the 34 countries that make up the Organization of American States (OAS) have accepted the Court’s jurisdiction. In the three and a half decades of its existence, the Inter-American Court has become both the last hope for the victims of human rights violations, and the institution that is most strongly setting the course and legal debate of human rights, on the American continent.

We can trace the first building blocks of the creation of a regional human rights court in the Americas to the Ninth International Conference of American States that took place in 1948, in Bogota, Colombia. This event saw the signing of the Charter of the Organization of the American States, a document that ushered in a new system of organization among the member States of the Inter-American System which, until then, had been organized under the auspices of the Pan-American Union.

The American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man was also adopted during this conference. Notably, the signing of this document predates the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by several months.

At this same conference, Resolution XXXI, titled “Inter-American Court to Protect the Rights of Man”, was also adopted. This document considered that “a judicial entity must guarantee the proper protection of rights since no right can be appropriately ensured without the backing of a competent court”. As a consequence of this, the Inter-American Judicial Committee was tasked with writing the Statute for the creation of an Inter-American Court. In 1949 the Judicial Committee released a report that indicated that “the absence of positive substantive law on the subject constituted an obstacle for the creation of the Court” and recommended drafting a Convention. The ideas outlined in these two documents would bear fruit 20 years later.
The American Convention on Human Rights was signed on 22 November 1969 in San Jose, Costa Rica. For the treaty to enter into force, it needed to be ratified by at least eleven States, a process that took nine years to complete, ultimately entering into force in 1978. The American Convention, in addition to establishing a catalogue of rights, regulated the mechanisms for the protection of these rights and the institutions tasked with their defense: the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Thus, the only Regional Court that currently exists in America came into being.

During the 1979 General Assembly of the OAS, the first seven judges of the Inter-American Court were elected, and on the third of September of the same year, the Court took up its current residence in San José, Costa Rica. The Court established its first Rules Of Procedure in August 1980.

When the Court was first established, it had no jurisdiction over any of the states that had ratified the Convention. This was due to Article 62 of the Convention, which required an additional voluntary act by the state party, in addition to the ratification of the Convention, in order for the Court to be competent to hear a case involving that state. Even though the Court had already been established and created, because no member state had as of yet accepted the Court’s jurisdiction, none was subject to it.

The first state to accept the Inter-American Court’s jurisdiction was Costa Rica in 1980. Later, Costa Rica was joined by three other states: Peru, Honduras, and Venezuela. During the next 10 years, various states gradually followed in their footsteps: Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Suriname, and Uruguay. This trend continued during the 1990s, with numerous countries accepting the Court’s jurisdiction, namely Chile, Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, El Salvador, Haiti, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, The Dominican Republic, and Trinidad and Tobago. However, the last state party to accept the Court’s jurisdiction was Barbados, in June of 2000; since then, no further OAS member state has granted jurisdiction to the Court. On the contrary, some states (as in the case of Trinidad and Tobago and, most recently, Venezuela) have chosen to denounce the American Convention on Human Rights and therefore to withdraw from the Court’s jurisdiction. It is of the utmost urgency that this situation be reversed.

Since the American Convention on Human Rights came into effect, the Inter-American corpus juris regarding the protection of human rights has been further enriched and strengthened. In 1988, the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the area of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights was adopted and in 1990, the Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights to Abolish the Death Penalty was signed. Subsequently, a series of conventions were adopted within the Inter-American system: the Inter-American Convention on Forced Disappearance of Persons (1994), the Inter-American Convention to Prevent and Punish Torture (1985), the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against...

In narrating the origin and development of the Inter-American Court in these preceding paragraphs, a question arises: what practices or procedures give the Court its distinct identity and character? To begin to answer this question we must first consider the functions of the Court. In addition to hearing contentious cases of human rights violations, the Court fulfills a significant advisory function. Under this advisory jurisdiction, it issues opinions on matters regarding the interpretation of the American Convention and other human rights treaties brought to its attention by other OAS bodies or member states. The Court can also order provisional measures, which can be precautionary or protective in nature. Moreover, this is a tribunal that meticulously oversees the compliance and implementation of its decisions. It does this by requesting status reports, holding special hearings, and issuing resolutions on the matter.

A characteristic element of this tribunal is that the Inter-American Court does not allow the individual (victim) to submit cases directly to the Court. It rather requires that the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an autonomous OAS organ, submit the case. However, once the case is before the Court, the victims can present their own arguments, claims and evidence (they can adopt a distinct and independent position, completely separate from that of the Commission). Therefore, there are three distinct parties that participate in the proceedings before the Court: the Inter-American Commission, the victim, and the state. A further characteristic of the Court is the presence and direct intervention of the judges in the proceedings: every case brought before it results in a public hearing (generally lasting two days), in which the testimonies of victims, witnesses and experts, along with the opening and closing arguments of the parties, are heard by the judges, who can then question the various participants. Regarding evidence, in certain recent cases the Court has begun to make “in situ” visits in order to better understand and assess the issues that they must resolve, and to do so with greater proximity.

The Court’s sessions take place at its principal seat in Costa Rica and elsewhere and, since 2005, it has begun to hold extraordinary sessions in various American states. The object of this exercise is to bring the Court closer to the various social segments and geographical regions in the continent. Even now, as I write this, one of these extraordinary sessions is about to take place in Colombia, where over 8000 people are registered to attend the public hearings.

Additionally, as of 2010, the Court provides free legal aid to people who do not have access to a lawyer. It also provides financial aid to those who do not have the resources to invest in the production and discovery of evidence (usually, this encompasses plane tickets and accommodation for victims, witnesses, and expert witnesses that testify before the Court).
From a purely numerical point of view, the Inter-American Court appears rather insignificant: in its 35th year of existence, ours is the International Court with the least financial resources worldwide; that receives, on average, less than 25 cases and produces a similar number of rulings annually; and is composed of judges that only meet twice a year. Yet, if you look closer, the true significance and impact of the Court's jurisprudence becomes apparent. A by-the-numbers approach masks the great influence of the Court's positions and legal opinions, which transcend the individual case: its jurisprudence is not only observed and closely followed by the high Courts of the region, but it also guides the design of laws and public policy within the states. It is clear that the Court has become an influential and effective institution within the American continent.

At the same time, the Court has become the guardian and repository of a significant number of the accounts of human rights abuse victims. Such individuals appear before the Court in order to bear witness to the horrors and ordeals that they or their loved ones have endured, to seek justice and restitution for past wrongs, and to ensure that such abuses never happen again.

Throughout this 35-year-long journey, the Inter-American Court has presided over a wide array of cases, issuing judgments that enrich the Inter-American system and provide comprehensive and authentic interpretations of the American Convention and the other human rights treaties that make up the corpus juris of international human rights law. Furthermore, the Court's decisions have created a distinct legal heritage and play an essential role in the direction and legal debate on the American continent in issues as varied as the enforced disappearance of persons, extrajudicial execution, massacres, impunity, capital punishment, personal integrity, personal liberty, military tribunals, amnesty laws, freedom of expression, free access to information, property rights, due process guarantees, rights of members of indigenous communities, gender, sexual orientation, discrimination, and rights of immigrants, children and prisoners, to name a few.

Of the many contributions that the Court's jurisprudence has made towards the effective defense and protection of human rights, the most significant may be the concept of full reparation ("reparación integral") and the non-repetition guarantee ("garantía de no repetición") which it has developed. These two concepts seek to repair the damage caused by taking the individual, collective and/or structural dimensions of the issue into account, depending on the circumstances. The particular non-repetition guarantee ("garantía de no repetición") ordered by the Court that requires a change in law, public policy, or common practices, aims to transform or dismantle the structural shortcoming that allowed or enabled the violation to occur so that such a situation does not repeat itself in the future, ensuring that the rights contained in the American Convention can be fully enjoyed and exercised. In addition to the impact that these kinds of measures can have on society as a whole, they also fulfill an important role: when these measures are properly implemented and the aforementioned structural defect
actually remedied, they work as a kind of “escape valve”, with fewer cases being brought before the Court.

Integral reparation and the guarantee of non-repetition have allowed hundreds of victims to not only receive financial compensation for their suffering, but also other forms of reparation: being apologized to, the construction of memorials, the naming of streets, schools, and public institutions in their honor, the return of land and property, and the achievement of justice. This concept has for example also caused the Chilean Constitution to undergo reforms to eliminate prior censorship as to films (replacing censorship with a ratings system); Peru’s amnesty laws were rendered null and void, allowing thousands of criminal cases to be reopened and human rights violators to be brought to justice (the same legal arguments were later applied in Argentina to nullify their “obediencia debida” and “punto final” amnesty laws); the creation of a law in Nicaragua that permitted the delimitation of indigenous property from private and state property, allowing dozens of communities to solve their disputes; the application of the death penalty in Guatemala has been avoided in dozens of cases because it is considered to go beyond what is permitted under the American Convention; and in Mexico, military jurisdiction has been replaced by civil jurisdiction for military officers in cases where human rights abuse is present.

The jurisdictional dialogue (“diálogo jurisprudencial”) currently taking place between the Inter-American Court and national courts is certainly worth mentioning, since it may be one of the most dynamic and rich developments in the region’s jurisprudence. This dialogue is horizontal and reciprocal in nature, and has encouraged the increasing use by national courts of the standards developed by the Inter-American Court, as well as the Court’s use of national jurisprudence in turn. This dynamic impacts the way that the law is understood and viewed within each state, and serves to further prevent human rights violations. Furthermore, this dynamic is not limited to the American Continent, since this dialogue is also taking place between the Inter-American Court and other International Courts, such as the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights and the International Criminal Court.

Taking all of the above into account, it becomes apparent that the legal and academic study of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights’ work is of fundamental importance. It is precisely with this object that this volume has been compiled, and in its ten chapters it invites the reader into this process of study and reflection. The great significance of this work makes it required reading for scholars of international human rights law, and especially for those studying the Inter-American system.

Finally, I wish to personally thank the editors of this collective work: Clara Burbano Herrera, Yves Haeck, and Oswaldo Ruiz, for having taken the initiative and having had the strength to assemble this group of academics to reflect upon the Inter-American Court of Human Rights’ 35-year-long journey. Academic
Foreword

endeavors such as this serve as valuable contributions to the Inter-American legal debate and help strengthen the Inter-American Court.

San José, Costa Rica, April 2015

Pablo Saavedra Alessandri
Registrar
Inter American Court of Human Rights
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CONTENTS

Foreword by Pablo Saavedra Alessandri. .................................................. vii

PART I. THE REASONING OF THE COURT

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Interpretive Method of External Referencing: Regional Consensus v. Universality
Marijke De Pauw ................................................................. 3

Abstract ................................................................................ 3
1. Introduction ........................................................................ 4
2. Interpreting the American Convention on Human Rights .......... 6
   2.1. Specific Rules on Treaty Interpretation ......................... 6
   2.2. The Court’s Methods of Interpretation .......................... 7
3. The Use of External Sources as an Interpretive Tool ............... 10
   3.1. Cross-References to Soft Law .................................. 11
   3.2. Cross-References to Non-Ratified Treaties ................... 13
   3.3. Convergence with International Humanitarian Law ......... 15
4. Legitimacy of Cross-Referencing ....................................... 16
   4.1. Use or Abuse of External Sources? ............................. 16
   4.2. References to Non-Binding External Instruments ............. 18
5. Universalism v. Regional Consensus .................................. 20
6. Conclusion .......................................................................... 23

An Overview of the Inter-American Court’s Evaluation of Evidence
Álvaro Paúl ................................................................. 25

Abstract ................................................................................ 25
1. Introduction ........................................................................ 25
2. Three Evidentiary Features of the Court ............................. 26
   2.1. Autonomy ....................................................... 26
   2.2. Informality .................................................... 28
   2.3. Active Role ................................................... 30
3. Freedom to Admit Evidence and its Exceptions .................. 32
   3.1. Flexible Admissibility Rules ................................. 32
   3.2. Two Mandatory Exclusionary Rules ......................... 34
4. Weighing Evidence According to Sana Crítica .................... 34
Contents

5. Burden of Proof ................................................................. 36
   5.1. General Issues .......................................................... 36
   5.2. *Actori Incumbit Probatio* – The Basic Rule ....................... 37
   5.3. Duty to Cooperate ...................................................... 37
   5.4. Possible Rationales for Shifting the Burden ......................... 38
   5.5. Exceptions to the General Rule ...................................... 39

6. Specific Presumptions Relied on by the Court .......................... 41
   6.1. Preliminary Issues ...................................................... 41
   6.2. Presumptions Based on the State’s Stance During Proceedings .. 41
       6.2.1. Does silence imply consent? ..................................... 41
       6.2.2. Presumption against the state refusing to provide evidence . 42
       6.2.3. Regarding the exhaustion of domestic remedies ............... 43
   6.3. Particular *Prima Facie* Violations .................................. 43
   6.4. Damages and Costs .................................................... 44
   6.5. Other Presumptions Applied by the Court .......................... 45

7. The Court’s Standards of Proof ........................................... 45
   7.1. Preliminary Issues ...................................................... 45
   7.2. Absence of a Unique Standard before the Court ................... 46
       7.2.1. Preliminary issues ............................................. 46
       7.2.2. Standard for proving widespread human rights violations .. 47
       7.2.3. The IActHR’s low standard of proof ........................... 48

8. Conclusions ................................................................. 49

Revision Procedures: Revisiting the Case of *Mapiripán Massacre* v. *Colombia*
Geneviève SÄUBERLI ............................................................... 51

Abstract ......................................................................... 51
1. Introduction ................................................................. 52
2. Revisions in Principle and Practice ..................................... 54
   2.1. The Principles of Finality, *Res Judicata* and the Administration
        of International Justice .............................................. 54
   2.2. Applications for Revisions before the IActHR ..................... 56
       2.2.1. The case of *Neira Alegría* v. *Peru* .......................... 57
       2.2.2. The case of *Genie Lacayo* v. *Nicaragua* ............... 57
       2.2.3. The case of *Juan Humberto Sánchez* v. *Honduras* .... 59
       2.2.4. The case of *Cantoral Huamani* and *García Santa Cruz* v. *Peru* .......................... 59
       2.2.5. The case of the *Massacre of Mapiripán* v. *Colombia* ..... 60
   2.3. The Power of Revision of the IActHR ............................. 61
3. Conditions for Revision and the *Mapiripán Massacre* ............... 62
4. Investigations in Cases of Gross Violations of Human Rights ......... 66
5. Conclusion ................................................................. 70
PART II. PROCEDURAL ASPECTS

Who Pays the Bill? Possibilities and Limitations of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights Legal Assistance Fund
Diana Contreras-Garduño, Kristin Xueqin Wu and Leo Zwaak ...... 75

Abstract .......................................................... 75
1. Introduction ...................................................... 76
2. The Operational Procedure of the Assistance Fund ............... 78
3. Legal Aid in International Human Rights Law .................... 81
   3.1. Legal Aid under the European Convention on Human Rights . 82
       3.1.1. Legal aid before the adoption of Protocol 11 ............... 83
       3.1.2. Legal aid after the adoption of Protocol 11 ................. 86
   3.2. Legal Aid under the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights ...................................................... 89
4. Legal Aid in International Criminal Law ............................ 91
   4.1. Legal Aid for the Indigent Suspect and the Accused .......... 91
   4.2. Legal Aid for Victims ......................................... 94
       4.2.1. Application process ...................................... 95
       4.2.2. Determination of means of the victims .................... 96
5. Implications ........................................................ 97
   5.1. Implication for the State ....................................... 97
   5.2. Implications for the Development of Human Rights Law ......... 97
   5.3. Implications for the Actors before the System ............... 99
6. Conclusions and Recommendations ................................ 100

The Amicus Curiae in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (1982–2013)
Francisco J. Rivera Juaristi ......................................... 103

Abstract .......................................................... 103
1. Introduction ...................................................... 104
2. Amici Curiae ...................................................... 105
   2.1. Development of the Amici Curiae ............................. 106
   2.2. Role and Contribution of Amici Curiae before the IACtHR ...... 108
3. Normative Framework for Participation of Amici Curiae before the IACtHR ...................................................... 109
   3.1. The American Convention on Human Rights and the Court’s Statute ...................................................... 109
   3.2. The Court’s Rules of Procedure .................................. 110
   3.3. Jurisprudential Developments .................................... 114
   3.4. Criteria to Reject Amici Curiae Participation before the IACtHR’s Written Proceedings .................. 115
PART III. CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS

Defining the Scope of the Provisions Against the Use of Illegitimate Coerced Statements in the Inter-American System

Oswaldo R. RUIZ-CHIRIBOGA ........................................ 135

Abstract ............................................................... 135

1. Introduction ...................................................... 135

2. To Which Type of Proceedings are Articles 8(1), 8(2)(g), 8(3) ACHR and 10 IACPT Applicable? ........................................ 138

2.1. Article 8(1) ACHR ........................................... 139

2.2. Article 8(2) ACHR ........................................... 139

2.3. Article 8(3) ACHR ........................................... 142

2.4. Article 10 IACPT ........................................... 144

2.5. Intermediate Conclusion on the Types of Proceedings .......... 146

3. Who is the Right-Holder of Each Provision? ......................... 146

3.1. Article 8(1) ACHR ........................................... 146

3.2. Articles 8(2)(g) and 8(3) ACHR ............................... 148

3.3. Article 10 IACPT ........................................... 149

3.4. Intermediate Conclusion on the Right-Holders ................. 150

4. Is Article 10 IACPT Applicable only to Torture Cases or does It also Cover Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment? ......... 151

4.1. CIDT Statements in Legal Proceedings ........................... 152

4.2. Article 10 IACPT Applies only to Torture Evidence .......... 154

4.3. Intermediate Conclusion on the Scope of Article 10 IACPT .... 155

5. What Do the Expressions “Coercion” (Article 8(3) ACHR) and “Not to be Compelled” (Article 8(2)(g)) Cover? .......................... 156

6. What Do the Expressions “Admissible as Evidence” (Article 10 IACPT) and “Valid” (Article 8(3) ACHR) Mean? ........................ 161

7. What does the Expression “Verified” (Article 10 IACPT) Mean? .... 163

7.1. The Confessions Rendered by Messrs Cabrera and Montiel ...... 163
7.2. Who has to Verify that a Statement was Obtained through Torture or Other Forms of Illegitimate Coercion and When? .... 165
7.3. Who Bears the Burden of Proof? .............................. 167
8. Conclusion ..................................................................... 172

Medical Negligence and International Human Rights Adjudication.
Procedural Obligation in Medical Negligence Cases under the American Convention on Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights
Krešimir Kamber .......................................................... 175

Abstract ........................................................................ 175
1. Introduction .................................................................. 176
2. The Problem of Medical Negligence Adjudication ............ 178
3. Procedural Obligation in Medical Negligence Cases in the Case-Law of the ECHR .................................................... 183
4. Procedural Obligation in Medical Negligence Cases in the Case-Law of the IACtHR .................................................... 187
5. Conclusion ..................................................................... 190

Use of Force. Requirements, Limitations and Pending Challenges from the Perspective of the Jurisprudence of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights
Juana María Ibáñez Rivas ............................................... 193

Abstract ........................................................................ 193
1. Introduction .................................................................. 194
2. Legal-Normative Grounds and Factual Assumptions Relied upon by the Inter-American Court when Developing and Implementing Its Jurisprudence Regarding the Use of Force ............................. 195
  2.1. Legal-Normative Grounds Supporting the Development and Implementation of the Court’s Considerations Regarding the Use of Lethal Force ................................................................. 196
  2.2. Factual Assumptions upon Which the Inter-American Court has Developed and Applied the Standards on the Use of Lethal Force: A Review from the Perspective of the Proven Facts in the Emblematic Cases on the Issue ............................................. 199
    2.2.1. Breakdown of order in prisons .............................. 200
    2.2.2. Disturbances during states of emergency .............. 201
    2.2.3. Detentions, captures and break-ins ........................ 201
3. The State’s Obligations over Time for the Use of Lethal Force to Be in Accordance with the American Convention and when Its International Responsibility has Been Declared .................. 204
3.1. Fundamental Moments that Bind the State with Respect to the Use of Lethal Force ........................................... 204
   3.1.1. Preventive actions ...................................... 204
   3.1.2. Actions accompanying the events ........................ 206
   3.1.3. Actions subsequent to the events ......................... 208
3.2. Measures Taken Regarding the Use of Lethal Force by States Responsible for Its Use in Violation of the ACHR: The Challenge Posed by Reparations. ........................... 210
4. Conclusion ....................................................... 215

**Judicial Protection in States of Emergency. An Analysis of the Amplitude of Judicial Protection of Fundamental Rights During the Application of Derogations**

Aziz Tuffi Saliba and Tainá Garcia Maia ................................ 217

Abstract ............................................................... 217
1. Introduction ................................................................ 218
2. Suspension of Guarantees and Limitations on Human Rights .... 220
   2.1. Restrictions on the Interpretation of Provisions that Permit Limitations and Derogations. ................................. 220
   2.2. Definition of and Differences between Limitations and Derogations ......................................................... 222
       2.2.1. Limitations .................................................. 222
       2.2.2. Derogations .............................................. 227
   2.3. Margin of Appreciation Doctrine ................................ 232
4. Conclusion .......................................................... 237

**PART IV. ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL RIGHTS**

**Yakye Axa v. Paraguay: Upholding and Framing the Human Right to Water**

Scott McKENZIE ....................................................... 241

Abstract ............................................................... 241
1. Introduction ................................................................ 242
2. Paraguay Violates the Yakye Axa’s Rights ....................... 242
3. The Establishment and Contours of the Human Right to Water .................................................. 245
4. The Yakye Axa and the Human Right to Water ............... 251
5. Conclusion .......................................................... 257

xx

Intersentia
## Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights. The Inter-American Court at a Crossroads

Thomas Antkowiak ................................................ 259

### Abstract ........................................................................................................ 259

1. Introduction ..................................................................................................... 260
   1.1. The American Convention and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights: Background and Negotiating History ........................................... 260
   1.2. Protocol of San Salvador ......................................................................... 262
2. Scope of Protection of Article 26 ................................................................. 263
   2.1. Which Rights Protected? The OAS Charter and Its “Implicit” Rights ........................................................................................................ 263
   2.2. Progressive Development and Justiciability: The Judgments of the Inter-American Court ................................................................. 266
3. Protection of Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights by Other Means ........ 270
   3.1. Vida Digna and Conditions for a “Dignified Life” ................................. 270
   3.2. Rights to Traditional Lands .................................................................... 272
   3.3. Freedom of Association and Trade Unions ........................................... 273
   3.4. Rights to Pensions and Social Security through Judicial Protection and Property ............................................................ 274
   3.5. Social, Cultural, and Economic Remedies ............................................ 274
   3.6. Concerns with the Court’s Current Approach ...................................... 275
4. Conclusion ...................................................................................................... 276

## Impact of the Reparations Ordered by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and Contributions to the Justiciable Nature of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Manuel E. Ventura Robles .......................................................... 277

### Abstract ........................................................................................................ 277

1. Introduction ..................................................................................................... 278
2. Reparations in the Case Law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ........................................................................................................ 278
3. Impact of the Case Law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights .... 280
5. Conclusions .................................................................................................... 301
PART V. REPARATIONS AND PROVISIONAL MEASURES

Sacred Fire as Healing. Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Indigenous Peoples in the Inter-American Court’s Judgments
Gina DONOSO ................................................................. 307

Abstract ........................................................................ 307
1. Introduction .............................................................. 308
2. Rehabilitation and Cross-Cultural Reparation Processes .......... 310
   2.1. Embracing Challenges in Interdisciplinary Reparation Processes 312
      2.1.1. Legal shortcomings ........................................ 312
      2.1.2. Mental health and psychosocial limitations .......... 315
   2.2. Reparation as a Process .......................................... 318
   2.3. Potential Risks .................................................... 320
3. Psychosocial and Cross-Cultural Approaches in Collective Reparation Processes: The Inter-American Court of Human Rights ... 322
   3.1. Culture Versus Legal Systems ................................. 324
   3.2. Psychological Accompaniment for Compensation .......... 326
   3.3. Psychological Rehabilitation ................................... 327
   3.4. Expert Witnesses ............................................... 330
   3.5. Empowerment of Communities ................................ 332
   3.6. Community Participation and Leadership .................... 333
4. Conclusions ............................................................ 334

Punitive Damages and the Principle of Full Reparation in the Case Law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights
Agostina N. CICHERO and Sebastián A. GREEN MARTÍNEZ .............. 337

Abstract ........................................................................ 337
1. Introduction .............................................................. 338
3. Punitive Damages as a Rule of Domestic Legal Systems .......... 341
   3.2. Godínez Cruz v. Honduras (1989) .......................... 342
4. International Aggravated Responsibility and Punitive Damages Lato Sensu ......................................................... 344
The Inter-American Court of Human Rights and Its Role in Preventing Violations of Human Rights through Provisional Measures
Clara Burbano Herrera ........................................... 355

Abstract ............................................................... 355
1. Introduction ...................................................... 355
2. How have Provisional Measures Been Created and What is Their Legal Character? .................................................. 357
3. Requirements Which have to be Met Before Provisional Measures can be Adopted ................................................... 360
4. Factual Circumstances in Which Provisional Measures have been Adopted .......................................................... 362
5. Means Used by States to Comply with Provisional Measures .......... 363
6. Problems Regarding the Effectiveness of Provisional Measures ...... 365
   6.1. Implementation Versus Effectiveness .......................... 365
   6.2. Provisional Measures Versus Permanent Situations .......... 366
   6.3. Lack of Confidence in the Domestic Bodies of Protection ....... 367
   6.4. Lack of Political Will ......................................... 369
   6.5. Lack of Interest of the Political organ .......................... 371
7. Strategies Developed by the Court to Improve the Effectivity of Provisional Measures .............................................. 372
8. Some Conclusions ................................................. 374

PART VI. ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES AND AMNESTY LAWS

The Contribution of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and Other International Human Rights Bodies to the Struggle Against Enforced Disappearance
Gabriella Citroni ................................................... 379

Abstract ............................................................... 379
1. Introduction ...................................................... 380
2. The Prohibition of enforced disappearance and the obligation to Investigate and Punish Those Responsible as Jus Cogens .................. 381
3. Confronting trafficked individuals in an Integral Manner .......... 385
4. The Right to Juridical Personality and Enforced Disappearances .... 390
5. The Burden of Proof and Presumptions in Enforced Disappearance Cases Vis-à-vis the Right to Humane Treatment of the Direct Victim . 393
6. Measures of Reparation in Cases of Enforced Disappearance ........ 395
Building Truth and Moving Justice. The Inter-American Court and
the Forcible Disappearance of Children

Jeffrey Davis and Micaela Perez Ferrero

Abstract

1. Introduction
2. A Comprehensive View of Post-Conflict Justice
3. Truth
4. The Vindication of Testifying
5. The Inter-American Court Promotes Accountability
   5.1. Emblematic cases
   5.2. Violations of human rights law
   5.3. Dismantling Mechanisms of Impunity
6. Remedies
7. Conclusion

The Move towards a Victim-Centred Concept of Criminal Law and
the “Criminalization” of Inter-American Human Rights Law.
A Case of Human Rights Law Devouring Itself?

Frédéric Mégret and Jean-Paul S. Calderón

Abstract

1. Introduction
2. The IACtHR and the “criminalization” of Inter-American Human Rights Law: Foundations
   2.1. The right to an effective remedy, reparations and prosecutions
   2.2. Supervising domestic criminal law
   2.3. Characterizing certain human rights violations as crimes of the state
3. The challenge of mechanisms traditionally moderating criminal repression
   3.1. The exclusion of amnesty laws
   3.2. Skepticism about prescription
   3.3. Cavalier attitude towards Non Bis In Idem
4. Victim-centredness in Criminal Law: Liberal or Illiberal?

Amnesty Laws in the Case-Law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights

Patricio Galella

Abstract
1. Introduction ...................................................... 443
2. Amnesty Laws in International Law .......................... 444
3. Amnesty Laws and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ...... 447
4. Conclusion ....................................................... 455

Rights Cast into Oblivion? Amnesties in the Case-Law of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights
Nikolas Kyriakou .................................................. 457

Abstract ............................................................... 457
1. Introduction ...................................................... 457
2. Amnesties: The Current Academic Debate .......................... 461
3. International Practice and Jurisprudence on Amnesties .............. 464
3.1. Human Rights Committee .................................... 464
3.2. Inter-American Human Rights System ........................ 467
4. Conclusion ....................................................... 473

PART VII. GROUPS IN VULNERABILITY

Jurisprudence in a Political Vortex. The Right of Indigenous Peoples to Give or Withhold Consent to Investment and Development Projects – The Implementation of Saramaka v. Suriname
Monica Yriart ..................................................... 477

Abstract ............................................................... 477
1. The Indigenous Right to Consent and the Right to Collective Territory 478
1.1. Expanding on Saramaka v. Suriname: The UNDRIP Mandate for All Agencies of the United Nations, Including the Organization of the American States (OAS) ........................ 483
1.2. A New “Consent” Case Enters the Inter-American System ...... 485
1.3. The Principle of Indigenous Consent: Policy or Politics for the Organization of American States ................................. 486
1.4. Conclusion to Part 1 ......................................... 488
2. The Constitutional Court of Colombia, the Supreme Court of Peru and the Attorney General of Argentina ................................. 489
3. The Legal Value of the Jurisprudence of the IACHR and Saramaka v. Suriname in the Constitutional Orders of Colombia, Peru and Argentina ............................................... 493
3.1. The Juridical Status and Effect of Inter-American Jurisprudence in Peru ................................................................. 494
3.2. The Juridical Status and Effect of Inter-American Jurisprudence in Argentina ................................................................. 495
3.3. The Juridical Status and Effect of Inter-American Jurisprudence in Colombia .......................................................... 495
3.4. Conclusion to Part 3 ..................................................... 496

4. Saramaka v. Suriname and the Right to Consent in Colombia ..... 497
   4.1. The President of the Republic, the Council of Ministers, the Armed Forces and the Colombian Constitutional Court: An Inter-play of Powers regarding the Holding in Saramaka v. Suriname ........................................................................ 497
   4.2. The Adoption of Saramaka v. Suriname by the Constitutional Court of Colombia .......................................................... 499
   4.3. The Operation of the Right to Consent in Formal Prior Consultation Proceedings .......................................................... 501
   4.4. The “Paralysis” in Prior Consultations: Structural Problems and Problems of Legal Definition ........................................... 502
   4.5. The Exploitation of Indigenous Territories and Peoples in Colombia .................................................................................. 504
   4.6. Conclusion with Respect to Part 4: Colombia ...................... 505

5. Saramaka v. Suriname and the Right to Consent in Peru ........ 507
   5.1. Saramaka is Hard Law Facing the Opposition of All the Constituted Powers of Peru but One ........................................... 507
   5.2. The Law on Prior consultation and Its Regulations: An Interpretation to Achieve Constitutionality and Conventionality 510
   5.3. The Position of the Constitutional Tribunal of Peru .............. 513
       5.3.1. Rejecting the saving interpretation .................................. 513
       5.3.2. Protecting indigenous territories from mass commercial titling by the Executive Branch to implement the Peru-USA Free Trade Agreement ........................................... 514
       5.3.3. Rejecting Saramaka v. Suriname: “There is no indigenous veto” ................................................................................. 514
   5.4. The Position of the Permanent Constitutional and Social Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice .......................... 516
   5.5. Conclusion with Respect to Part 5: Peru .............................. 518

   6.1. Argentina’s Indigenous Peoples and the Exploitation of Natural Resources ................................................................. 520
   6.2. The Absence of Law on Prior consultation and Consent in Argentina .................................................................................. 521
   6.3. The Absence of Indigenous Human Rights Law in Argentina: The Legal History and the Social and Institutional Manifestations ................................................................................. 522
       6.3.2. Mass legal evictions of indigenous communities .............. 524
6.3.3. In lieu of legislating to implement international and constitutional indigenous rights, Argentina seeks to privatize the public law status of indigenous peoples and territories .............................................. 526

6.3.4. The Supreme Court of Justice denies constitutional jurisdiction to indigenous rights cases and declines to write on the subject of the law of indigenous human rights. 528

6.3.5. Thirty-three Kolla and Atakama communities demand the right to grant or deny consent to large-scale mining of lithium .............................................. 530

6.3.6. Facing Inter-American review, the Supreme Court of Justice and the Attorney General of the Argentine Nation rehabilitate the quality of indigenous rights jurisprudence. 532

6.3.7. A new Attorney General applies the indigenous rights of Inter-American jurisprudence .............................................. 533

6.4. Conclusion with Respect to Part 6: Argentina ............... 534

6.5. Postscript on Argentina: Significant New Developments .... 537

6.5.1. The regulation of indigenous peoples and territories is removed from the new Civil and Commercial Code in response to nationwide protests: new legislation promised. 537

6.5.2. Facing Inter-American review and a New Attorney General, will the Supreme Court of Justice rehabilitate the quality of indigenous rights jurisprudence? ............ 539

7. Conclusion ................................................................. 540

Juvenile Criminal Justice before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Aims and Limitations of the Imprisonment of Children
Valeska David and Julie Fraser ........................................ 547

Abstract ................................................................. 547

1. Introduction ........................................................... 548

2. Special Character of Juvenile Justice ............................ 549

3. Comparative Analysis of International, Regional and National Practices regarding Juvenile Justice and Imprisonment .............................................. 551

3.1. International Human Rights Standards for Juvenile Justice . 552

3.2. European Practices regarding Sentencing and Juvenile Justice . 554

3.3. Practices regarding Sentencing and Juvenile Justice Across the Americas ................................................................. 558

4. Evolution of Juvenile Justice by the IACtHR .................. 560

5. The IACtHR Decision in Mendoza: Prohibiting Life Imprisonment for Juveniles? ................................................................. 564

5.1. The Right to Liberty and the Review of Custodial Measures .... 565

Intersentia xxvii
5.2. The Aim of Re-socialisation: Proportionality in Regard to the Purpose of Criminal Sentences ............................ 566
5.3. The Prohibition of Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment and the Proportionality of the Punishment ............... 566
6. Juveniles’ Culpability, the Aim of Reintegration and the Special Protection of Children ............................................. 568
7. Conclusions: Towards the Human Rights Prohibition on Life Imprisonment for Juveniles ........................................ 571

The Case of the Kichwa Peoples of the Sarayaku v. Ecuador. Constructing a Right to Consultation and to Cultural Identity?
Geneviève SÄUBERLI ................................................. 573

Abstract ........................................................................ 573
1. Introduction .............................................................. 574
2. Facts of the Case ..................................................... 575
3. The Collective Right to Property .................................... 576
4. The Right to Consultation .......................................... 578
5. The Right to Cultural Identity ...................................... 582
6. Practical Application ............................................... 586
   6.1. Legal Implications ........................................... 586
   6.2. Consultation Procedures ..................................... 587
7. Conclusion ............................................................. 591

The Treatment of Irregular Migrants in the Inter-American Human Rights and European Union Case-Law. Two Parallel Lines may even Meet
Salvatore Fabio NICOLOSI ............................................. 593

Abstract ........................................................................ 593
1. Irregular Migrants Between Need for Protection and Criminalisation. 594
2. The Treatment of Irregular Migrants in the Case Law of the Inter-American Court ................................................ 597
   2.1. Setting the Background: The Advisory Opinion on the Conditions and Rights of Undocumented Migrants ........... 597
   2.2. The Case of Vélez Loor v. Panama and the Increased Protection of Migrant Rights ................................................. 598
      2.2.1. Factual background ....................................... 599
      2.2.2. Migrants’ vulnerability and abusive detention ........ 600
      2.2.3. Adjudging migrant rights violations ................. 601
3. The Influential Impact of the Ruling in Vélez Loor v. Panama Outside the Inter-American System ............................... 604
   3.1. Vélez Loor v. Panama: An Anticipation of the EU Court of Justice’s Ruling in Hassen El Dridi? ............................ 605
3.2. The EU Court of Justice’s Further Clarifications on the Criminalisation of Irregular Migration in Its Subsequent Case Law ................................................................. 609

4. Different Approaches, Same Guarantees to Irregular Migrants’ Rights in the Judicial Discourse? ........................................... 611

Elena Falletti ............................................................... 613

Abstract ........................................................................ 613
1. Introduction ............................................................. 613
2. The European Court of Human Rights Case Law about Sexual Orientation and Discrimination ............................................. 615
   2.1. Non-Discrimination ........................................... 615
   2.2. Best Interest of the Child .................................... 617
   2.3. Family Life .................................................... 618
3. The Case Decided by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights: Atala Riffo and Daughters v. Chile .................................. 619
4. The Proceeding in Front of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ............................................................ 620
5. The Influence of the ECtHR in the Atala Riffo v. Chile Case .......... 623
6. Specific Measures Ordered by the IACtHR in the Enforcement of Its Decision .......................................................... 625
7. Conclusions ............................................................ 627

What a ‘Private Life’ Means for Women
Ciara O’Connell .......................................................... 629

Abstract ........................................................................ 629
1. Introduction ............................................................. 629
2. Right to Privacy and Right to Private Life ................................ 630
   2.1. The Right to Privacy, Generally .............................. 631
   2.2. The Right to Privacy for Women ............................. 633
3. Women in the Private Sphere ........................................ 635
   3.1. Feminist Legal Theory and the Private Sphere ............. 636
   3.2. Women in the Private Sphere: Looking Closer ............. 637
4. What a Private Life Means for Women, now .......................... 639
   4.1. Artavia Murillo et al. v. Costa Rica .......................... 639
5. Conclusion ............................................................... 643
PART VIII. THE COURT AND NATIONAL JUDGES AND TRIBUNALS

Chronicle of a Fashionable Theory in Latin America.
Decoding the Doctrinal Discourse on Conventionality Control
Laurence Burgorgue-Larsen ....................................... 647

Abstract ............................................................... 647
1. Introduction ...................................................... 648
2. Chronicle of a Birth Foretold..................................... 649
   2.1. The Judicial Waltz in Three-Quarter Time ............... 649
   2.2. Construction of a “Theory” of Conventionality Control .. 653
   2.3. A Diversified Implementation............................... 661
3. Chronicle of a Controversial Doctrinal Analysis ............. 663
   3.1. Benevolent Doctrine or the “Open Constitutionalism” School... 664
      3.1.1. Enthusiastic authors .................................... 665
      3.1.2. Circumspect authors .................................... 669
   3.2. Critical Doctrine .......................................... 671
      3.2.1. The sociological school ................................. 672
      3.2.2. The liberal school ..................................... 673
4. Conclusion ................................................................ 676

The Radilla-Pacheco v. Mexico Case. A Paradigmatic Shift Towards
Conventionality Control in Mexico
Eric Tardif ......................................................... 677

Abstract ............................................................... 677
1. Introduction ...................................................... 677
2. Facts of the case and decision of the Inter-American Court .... 678
3. The context: A Profound constitutional reform on human rights ... 680
4. The posture adopted by Mexico with regard to the Radilla Judgment. 685
5. Consequence: Conventionality Control in Mexico .................. 688
6. Conclusions and epilogue .......................................... 691

The Latin American Judicial Dialogue. A Two-Way Street Towards
Effective Protection
Paola Andrea Acosta Alvarado .................................... 693

Abstract ............................................................... 693
1. Introduction ...................................................... 693
2. What is Inter-Judicial Dialogue? .................................. 695
3. The factors allowing dialogue ..................................... 697
   3.1. The legal context ............................................. 697
   3.2. The normative frame ....................................... 698
3.3. The Judicial Tools ............................................ 704
4. The Results of Dialogue ............................................ 706
5. Conclusions ....................................................... 708

PART IX. INTERACTION BETWEEN THE INTER-AMERICAN COURT AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL COURTS

The Inter-American Court and the International Criminal Court. Transjudicial Communication, Boundaries and Opportunities
Rosmerlin Estupiñan-Silva ......................................... 715

Abstract ............................................................... 715
1. Introduction ...................................................... 716
2. The Transjudicial Communication Boundaries ................. 718
   2.1. The Conventional Framework ................................. 719
   2.1.1. The flexible framework of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ............................................ 719
   2.1.2. The tighter borders of the International Criminal Court ............................................ 720
   2.2. The Monologue in Principles and Context ................. 722
   2.2.1. Common principles under construction ............... 722
   2.2.2. From contexts of human rights violations to international crimes ............................................ 724
   2.3. Dialogue Through Fundamental Rights in Proceedings ..... 729
   2.3.1. Fundamental rights of the accused ....................... 730
   2.3.2. Fundamental rights of victims ........................... 733
3. Conclusion ....................................................... 736

Inter-American Court of Human Rights and European Court of Human Rights. From Observation to Interaction on Human Rights
Cristiana Domínguez ............................................... 739

Abstract ............................................................... 739
1. Introduction ...................................................... 740
2. Inter-American Court of Human Rights ........................ 741
   2.1. Quantitative Aspects ......................................... 741
   2.2. Legal Aspects ................................................ 742
3. European Court of Human Rights ................................ 745
   3.1. Quantitative Aspects ......................................... 745
   3.2. Legal Aspects ................................................ 746
4. Conclusions ....................................................... 749
Annex 1 ................................................................ 750
Annex 2 ................................................................ 753
Annex 3 ................................................................ 762
The Inter-American Court of Human Rights’ Positive Obligations Doctrine. Between Unidirectional Influence and Judicial Dialogue
Martín Nicolás Montoya Céspedes

Abstract

1. Introduction

2. The IACtHR’s Positive Obligations Doctrine
   2.1. Transversal Positive Obligations
       2.1.1. Investigation, punishment and reparation for human rights violations
       2.1.2. The rights of the child
       2.1.3. The conventionality control
   2.2. Specific Positive Obligations
       2.2.1. Intrinsic human rights
       2.2.2. Rights of individuals in society

3. From Unidirectional Influence to Judicial Dialogue on Positive Obligations?

4. Concluding Remarks

PART X. REFORMING THE INTER-AMERICAN SYSTEM

Strengthening or Straining the Inter-American System on Human Rights
Claudia Martín and Diego Rodríguez-Pinzón

Abstract

1. Introduction


3. The Results

4. The ‘Coup d’état’ in the Inter-American System: A Failed One (for now)

5. The Struggle for Its Autonomy: The Adoption of Amendments to Its Regulations, Its Strategic Plan and Other Practices

6. General Appraisal of the Process of Reflection

About the Editors

About the Contributors

xxxii