

Law student spends summer working for war crimes court

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Staff Writer

A summer internship in the Special Court for Sierra Leone—mandated to bring to justice war criminals in that country's decade long civil war—was the experience of a lifetime for a law student from Georgetown.

Alexandra Findlay, 21, in her fifth year of studying law/kinesiology at the University of Western Ontario, recently returned from the West African country where she spent three months interning in the court that was established jointly by the United Nations and the Government of Sierra Leone.

Findlay and interns from other countries worked in Trial Chamber 1.

Their job was to review evidence from the more than two-year long trial of suspected war criminals and compile and assimilate it into a format for judges to enable to make their decision.

As a result, partly due to her work, the judges reached a decision and two former leaders of Sierra Leone's Civil Defense Forces militia were convicted last month of war crimes committed during the civil war.

The Trial Chamber convicted

Moinina Fofana and Allieu Kondewa on four counts for murder, cruel treatment, pillage and collective punishments. Kondewa was convicted on an additional count for the recruitment of child combatants under the age of 15.

One of the Justice's had a separate and partially dissenting opinion and found both accused not guilty and acquitted them of all eight counts.

This was the first judgment handed down by Trial Chamber 1, which is also hearing evidence in the trial of three former members of the Revolutionary United Front.

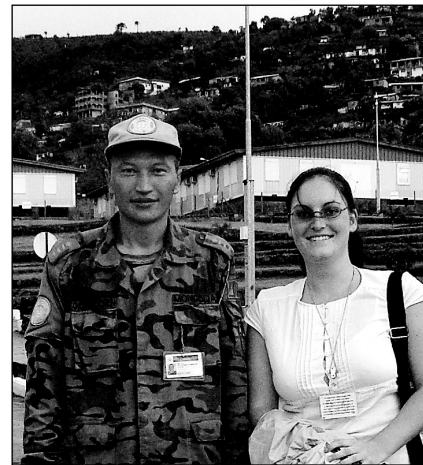
The case against a third accused, Sam Hinga Norman, didn't go forward after he died in February.

Findlay, a former Holy Cross and Bishop Reding student, was in the court when the judgment was read.

"I just felt it was a great accomplishment from all of us and it's something we worked very hard to do," said Findlay.

She is unable to speak about any details of the cases or which areas of evidence she was working on, but said she had to be very accurate and careful in her work that was often challenging.

"Some of these crimes had occurred more than 10 years ago and some of



Findlay met United Nations peacekeepers who were stationed in the country.

these people (who testified) do not have any education whatsoever and have never learned how to tell time. They have never learned years or days, so they might (have testified) this happened during the rainy season."

She said she worked hard to ensure that any decision the judge's reached was based on what was in the evidence.

"I tried very hard not to make a judgment on the accused."

Findlay is proud of the work the interns did.

"I just felt it was a great accomplishment from all of us. It's something we worked very hard to do."

It was an "incredible feeling of we've done this," she said.

"It's a piece of work, it's real, not an academic exercise in any way," she said.

While in Sierra Leone Findlay had the opportunity to see the country and get to know its people, whom she said were "very nice, very welcoming."

She rented a home in Freetown with three other court interns and living conditions were not what she was used to.

They only had electricity for about three hours a day, and had no hot water. Cooking at home was not that easy due to the lack of electricity and refrigeration so they found restaurants where the food was "safe" to eat.

She said Freetown is a "very vibrant city on the beach".

"It will be at some time in the future an excellent tourist location, but they just don't have the infrastructure right now to support it."

She and others from the court had the chance to visit Tongo Field, where there is a diamond mine, and even try their hand at mining. They actually found a diamond.

Findlay said the people there now have the chance to work for themselves, which is quite different from during the war.

"Whichever force occupied Tongo Field would force them to mine for them. These people now are extremely proud of what they do."

Findlay called the internship "an unbelievable experience" that allowed her to live in another country, get to know its people and culture and utilize her training in international law.

"It was an unbelievable experience for anybody. Getting to participate in writing a judgment is a rare experience in international law."



Law student Alexandra Findlay of Georgetown did a summer internship in Sierra Leone.

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