



Law

Magna Carta visit celebrates work of Peace Brigades International



Mark Cunningham, QC: PBI's purpose is to protect human rights defenders

Mark Cunningham, QC
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PBI seeks to fill the gap between first-world assumptions about human rights and the reality in many third-world countries

Sitting in a packed and airless schoolroom in Bucamaranga, Colombia, listening, hushed and humbled, to a father, my age, describing how paramilitaries murdered and dismembered his wife, with a chainsaw, because of her human rights campaigning.

Squatting in an immaculate tin shack in Mathare (a slum in Nairobi, home to 500,000 people, the same as the population of Sheffield) as three girls paint a picture of utter lawlessness, endemic corruption and routine police brutality, but bubble with enthusiasm about the changes they are striving to make to their human rights environment.

Talking to a judge in a magnificent courtroom in Bogota: he sits under a charred crucifix, a relic of the 1985 guerrilla siege that left 11 out of 25 Supreme Court judges dead. Being shaken down for a bribe (which was not paid) at a police road-block in Kenya so as to make a seat-belt offence disappear, and being eyeballed the next day by the chief of police of Nairobi who insisted, indignantly, that there was no police corruption.

These episodes are not part of everyday practice for a Chancery silk cocooned in Lincoln's Inn. Nor can they be easily imagined by the vast majority of UK lawyers and judges, for whom the notion that membership of their profession could itself put them in mortal danger is one that is completely alien.

It is this gap between first-world assumptions about the universality and inviolability of human rights, and the reality on the ground in many third-world countries, that Peace Brigades International (PBI: peacebrigades.org.uk) seeks to fill.

PBI is an international NGO, founded in 1981. Its purpose is to protect human rights defenders. Its pioneering strategy is that of protective accompaniment; this involves volunteers visibly accompanying, and thereby protecting human rights defenders who are threatened by, and without such accompaniment would be subjected to, physical violence and intimidation. PBI is non-partisan and non-political. It has branches in 11 countries in Europe, as well as in the US, Canada and Australia. The UK branch currently runs volunteer projects in Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Kenya and Nepal.

PBI is self-financing and has to raise funds to meet the costs of its projects. It has many friends. These include the Alliance for Lawyers at Risk ("the Alliance"), founded in 2010, and comprised of many of the UK's most prominent lawyers and law firms, united in their support for the work done by PBI. One of these is Linklaters, who have generously donated a reception and private viewing of the Magna Carta exhibition at the British Library.

The reception, which is taking place on April 16, is being addressed by Sir Henry (formerly lord justice) Brooke, a patron of PBI and president of the Alliance, Lord Scott of Foscote, who himself led a PBI delegation to Kenya in 2014, and Mandira Sharma, a very brave Nepalese human rights lawyer, present in England to give evidence at the Old Bailey in the trial against Kumar Lama, a Nepalese officer charged with torture.

The symbolic significance of the work of PBI being celebrated in the physical presence of Magna Carta is compelling and inescapable.

Mark Cunningham, QC, is at Maitland Chambers

0 comments



 **Mark Cunningham**

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