

## Back to Africa

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Some lawyers take on a case as a pro bono project. Joseph Bell assumed a greater task. For the past two years, the 67-year-old **Hogan & Hartson LLP** partner has been helping Liberia recover from 23 years of civil strife.

Last January, Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf contacted the International Senior Lawyers Project for help renegotiating agreements entered into by the U.N.-administered interim regime that governed Liberia between the 2003 peace accord and her election in December 2005. Bell sits on the board of the ISLP, which was founded in 2000 to involve lawyers in pro bono projects, especially those involving human rights and equitable development. He took on the project with Robert Hillman, a University of California, Davis, law professor, and Louis Wells, a Harvard Business School professor who specializes in negotiations between foreign investors and national governments. Raju Kaul, a U.S.-trained and based Liberian lawyer and former in-house counsel at **Oracle Corp.** is also advising the president's office and, Bell says, "has been crucial in bridging legal issues and Liberian concerns."

Two commercial relationships were particularly important. In 2005, **ArcelorMittal** agreed to a contract with the interim government that allowed the world's largest steel company to mine iron ore, but Liberia hadn't been able to afford lawyers who could match ArcelorMittal's counsel at **Cleary Gottlieb Steen & Hamilton LLP** in Paris. Johnson-Sirleaf insisted on redoing the contract. She also wanted to re-examine the contract under which **Firestone Natural Rubber Co. LLC** runs a 118,000-acre rubber plantation, a 100-year lease granted in 1926. With 6,000 to 8,000 workers, the plantation, the largest private enterprise in Liberia, produces 140 million tons of rubber annually.

Bell, Hillman and Wells analyzed both agreements, and the government tackled the ArcelorMittal deal first. Hillman and Joel Herold, a partner at **Cravath, Swaine & Moore LLP** in New York, represented Liberia in talks with ArcelorMittal, which concluded late last year. They then turned to the Firestone agreement. Bell has logged more than 1,300 hours on his work for Liberia, most on the Firestone project. With talks ongoing, Bell would not discuss them, though he says Firestone's counsel is Gerald Padmore, who while working in Liberia's Ministry of Finance in 1976 teamed with Johnson-Sirleaf to craft a favorable deal with the U.S. company. A Yale University and Harvard Law School grad, Padmore moved to the U.S. in 1980, the year the upheaval began in Liberia, and is a partner at Denver's **Cox Padmore Skolnik & Shakarchy LLP**.

Bell earned an M.A. in economics from Harvard in 1965 and a law degree from Yale three years later. While at Harvard, he spent summers working on fiscal policy at the Treasury Department, and after graduating from Yale he worked under George Schultz on the Cabinet Task Force on Oil Import Control.

Pro bono projects offered Bell an outlet for policy interests. In 1979 he assisted Joseph P. Kennedy II in founding Boston-based **Citizens Energy Corp.**, which began as an effort to supply heating oil to elderly and poor Massachusetts families at below-market rates. He was the company's outside general counsel until 1989, when he spent a year as pro bono counsel to the Polish Ministry of Finance. In 2004 Bell advised the Democratic Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe after the West African country realized it was sitting on as much as 4 billion barrels of oil.

Such work has challenges that most corporate lawyers don't encounter. On his first trip to Monrovia with Hillman and Wells last spring, Bell says, a boiler blew up in Wells' hotel, and water dripped on Bell as he worked on his computer.

Still, Bell says, he loves pro bono work. "Because these agreements are of great importance to the governments involved in funding and promoting their development, you feel good if you can be helpful, and the issues are quite complex as one tries to help the government to find the balance between

investors' needs and those of the country. Although they're individual agreements, they often raise basic questions of tax and mining that are inherently important and, at least for me, interesting."

Bell has also gotten other lawyers involved. Michael Cheroutes, of counsel in Hogan's Denver office, is helping the Liberians review the Liberian International Ship & Corporate Registry. Hogan healthcare and antitrust partner Robert Leibenluft is teaming with John Ketels of **Clifford Chance LLP** to help Liberia organize the Office of General Counsel for the Ministry of Health and help set up its legal and regulatory structure. Clifford Chance is also helping maintain a blog on the trial of Charles G. Taylor, the former Liberian president being tried for war crimes in the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Liberia isn't Bell's only project. He and Robert Conrad, a tax economist at the Duke Center for International Development, have analyzed a proposed stability of investment pact covering the Oyu Tolgoi site in Mongolia, a copper and gold mine that could generate as much as 15% of the country's GNP. "Both private and government transactions can be challenging," he says, "but it's a lot more compelling to work on a matter that may make a difference to a country and the people living there."