United States Supreme Court to Again Consider the Alien Tort Statute

Today, the United States Supreme Court granted certiorari in the case of Kiobel v. Royal Dutch Petroleum to consider the following questions: (1) Whether the issue of corporate civil tort liability under the Alien Tort Statute, 28 U.S.C. § 1350, is a merits question or instead an issue of subject matter jurisdiction; and (2) whether corporations are immune from tort liability for violations of the law of nations such as torture, extrajudicial executions or genocide or may instead be sued in the same manner as any other private party defendant under the ATS for such egregious violations. In addition to Kiobel, the Court also granted cert. in Mahamad v. Rajoub to consider whether whether the Torture Victim Protection Act of 1991 permits actions against defendants that are not natural persons.

In *Kiobel*, 12 Nigerian nationals claimed human rights violations by oil companies, alleging that the oil companies enlisted the Nigerian government to use its armed forces to suppress resistance to oil exploration in the Niger Delta. In *Mohamad*, the family of a U.S. citizen claimed torture by officers of the Palestianian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization. The cases present the question whether the ATS and the TVPA apply to entities other than natural persons–corporiations in *Kiobel* and other organizations in *Mohamad*.

What makes the *Kiobel* grant interesting, besides it being only the second time the US Supreme Court will hear an ATS case, is that the Court granted the case without soliciting the views of the United States. Given that cases raised under the ATS implicate in many cases foreign policy concerns of the Executive Branch, the considered views of the Executive would have advanced the Court's consideration of the case, even at the cert. stage. Whether the Solicitor General will file a brief *amius curiae* and request oral argument time will tell one a great deal about how the Obama Administration responds to the tensions created in ATS cases–at best, the ATS seeks to support human rights throughout the world and, at worst, imposes United States legal views on acts or omissions occurring within the sovereign territory of another country.

For international law scholars, the current Supreme Court term just became a great deal more interesting!

Twenty Years' Work by GEDIP

A new book gathering 20 years of work by the European Group for Private International Law has just been published. Building European Private International Law. Twenty Years' Work by GEDIP was edited by Marc Fallon, Patrick Kinsch and Christian Kohler.

> *During the last 20 years, private international law has been significantly transformed in Europe. Since its creation in 1991, the European Group for Private International Law (EGPIL, also commonly known as GEDIP) sustained this evolution. Composed of specialists in private international law who are also interested in European law, the GEDIP focuses on the interaction between these two fields of research. The work of the GEDIP focuses on international instruments of various nature – in particular, those of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, and the European Convention for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The issues covered by the annual meetings are chosen and analyzed in an independent way without a mandate from European or international institutions. The aim is to foster progress of knowledge by using an issue-by-issue method. This working method allowed the GEDIP to develop new tools which turned out to sustain the preparation of several European acts in civil and commercial matters – namely, the Regulations Brussels II, Rome I, Rome II, and Rome III, as well as possibly the forthcoming regulation on succession or the revision of the Brussels I Regulation. GEDIP documents reflect the evolving debate on private international law in Europe for 20 years. Their publication into a monograph at the occasion of the GEDIP's 20th anniversary aims to improve their dissemination and is accompanied by a detailed index to facilitate their consultation.*

The full table of content is available here. More details are available here.

ECHR Finds Immunity Violates Right to Access to Court

We should have reported earlier about this interesting judgment of the European Court of Human Rights of June 29th, 2011 (*Sabeh El Leil v. France*), where the Great Chamber of the Court ruled that France violated Article 6 of the European Convention by failing to give access to a court to an ex-employee of the Koweiti embassy in Paris suing his employer after it had dismissed him in 2000.

The ECHR had already ruled a year before in *Cudak v. Lithuania* that while sovereign immunities coud justify limiting the right to access to courts, preventing employees of embassies from suing their employers was a disproportionate limitation to their right when they were neither diplomatic or consular staff, nor nationals of the foreign states, and when they were not performing functions relating to the sovereignty of the foreign state.

In *Sabeh El Leil*, the French Courts had mentioned that the employee had "additional responsabilities" which might have meant that he was involved in acts of government authority of Koweit. The European court finds that the French courts failed to explain how it had been satisfied that this was indeed the case, as the French judgements had only asserted so, and had not mentioned any evidence to that effect.

Here are extracts of the Press Release of the Court:

> ***An accountant, fired from an embassy in Paris, could not contest his dismissal,in breach of the Convention***
>
> ***Principal facts***
>
> *The applicant, Farouk Sabeh El Leil, is a French national. He was employed as an accountant in the Kuwaiti embassy in Paris (the Embassy) as of 25 August 1980 and for an indefinite duration. He was promoted to head accountant in 1985.*

In March 2000, the Embassy terminated Mr Sabeh El Leil's contract on economic grounds, citing in particular the restructuring of all Embassy's departments. Mr Sabeh El Leil appealed before the Paris Employment Tribunal, which awarded him, in a November 2000 judgment, damages equivalent to 82,224.60 Euros (EUR). Disagreeing with the amount of the award, Mr Sabeh El Leil appealed. The Paris Court of Appeals set aside the judgment awarding compensation. In particular, it found Mr Sabeh El Leil's claim inadmissible because the State of Kuwait enjoyed jurisdictional immunity on the basis of which it was not subject to court actions against it in France.

Complaints, procedure and composition of the Court

Mr Sabeh El Leil complained that he had been deprived of his right of access to a court in violation of Article 6 § 1 of the Convention, as a result of the French courts' finding that his employer enjoyed jurisdictional immunity.

The application was lodged with the European Court of Human Rights on 23 September 2005 and declared admissible on 21 October 2008. On 9 December 2008, the Court's Chamber relinquished jurisdiction in favour of the Grand Chamber, neither of the parties having objected.

Decision of the Court

Access to a court (Article 6 § 1)

Referring to its previous case-law, the Court noted that Mr Sabeh El Leil had also requested compensation for dismissal without genuine or serious cause and that his duties in the embassy could not justify restrictions on his access to a court based on objective grounds in the State's interest. Article 6 § 1 was thus applicable in his case.

The Court then observed that the concept of State immunity stemmed from international law which aimed a promoting good relations between States through respect of the other State's sovereignty. However, the application of absolute State immunity had been clearly weakened for a number of years, in particular with the adoption of the 2004 UN Convention on Jurisdictional Immunities of States and their Property. That convention had created a significant exception in respect of State immunity through the introduction of the principle that immunity did not apply to employment contracts between

States and staff of its diplomatic missions abroad, except in a limited number of situations to which the case of Mr Sabeh El Leil did not belong. The applicant, who had not been a diplomatic or consular agent of Kuwait, nor a national of that State, had not been covered by any of the exceptions enumerated in the 2004 Convention. In particular, he had not been employed to officially act on behalf of the State of Kuwait, and it had not been established that there was any risk of interference with the security interests of the State of Kuwait.

The Court further noted that, while France had not yet ratified the Convention on Jurisdictional Immunities of States and their Property, it had signed that convention in 2007 and ratification was pending before the French Parliament. In addition, the Court emphasised that the 2004 Convention was part of customary law, and as such it applied even to countries which had not ratified it, including France.

On the other hand, Mr Sabeh El Leil had been hired and worked as an accountant until his dismissal in 2000 on economic grounds. Two documents issued concerning him, an official note of 1985 promoting him to head accountant and a certificate of 2000, only referred to him as an accountant, without mentioning any other role or function that might have been assigned to him. While the domestic courts had referred to certain additional responsibilities that Mr Sabeh El Leil had supposedly assumed, they had not specified why they had found that, through those activities, he was officially acting on behalf of the State of Kuwait.

The Court concluded that the French courts had dismissed the complaint of Mr Sabeh El Leil without giving relevant and sufficient reasons, thus impairing the very essence of his right of access to a court, in violation of Article 6 § 1.

Just satisfaction (Article 41)

The Court held, by sixteen votes to one, that France was to pay Mr Sabeh El Leil 60,000 euros (EUR) in respect of all kind of damage and EUR 16,768 for costs and expenses.

Conference on Party Autonomy in the Conflict of Laws

On 26 September 2011, the Center for Transnational Litigation and Commercial Law at New York University Law School will host a talk by Professor Jürgen Basedow, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Comparative and International Private Law and Professor of Law at the University of Hamburg, on "A Theory of Party Autonomy in the Conflict of Laws".

> *A century ago, authors on both sides of the Atlantic would reject the parties' ability to choose the law applicable to a contract. Such choice was considered to be a legislative act reserved to the state. The private persons were perceived as being governed by the law, not as determining the governing law. A hundred years later party autonomy is almost generally acknowledged as the primary method of finding the law applicable to a contract. And it is progressively recognized in further areas of the law, too: for torts, matrimonial property regimes, divorce, maintenance etc. Yet, the theoretical foundation for this fundamental change remains elusive. How is it then possible to convince the lawmakers of those countries that have not yet implemented party autonomy? A theory of party autonomy has to explain the consistency of our own law in order to convince others. Departing from a comparative survey over party autonomy in modern legislation, Professor Basedow will deal with the main objections against the freedom to elect the applicable law. He will then outline a theoretical approach that is essentially based on the origin of state and law as described by the political philosophy of the Enlightenment and that is reflected by the modern developments of human rights.*

The event will take place at NYU Law School in Room 214, Furman Hall 900, 245 Sullivan Street, New York, NY 10012, 6.15-8.00 pm.

H/T: Déborah Lipszyc

Knop, Michaels and Riles on Feminism, Culture and the Conflict of Laws

Karen Knop (University of Toronto), Ralf Michaels (Duke) and Annelise Riles (Cornell) have posted From Multiculturalism to Technique: Feminism, Culture and the Conflict of Laws Style on SSRN. The abstract reads:

> *The German chancellor, the French president and the British prime minister have each grabbed world headlines with pronouncements that their state's policy of multiculturalism has failed. As so often, domestic debates about multiculturalism, as well as foreign policy debates about human rights in non-Western countries, revolve around the treatment of women. Yet there is also a widely noted brain drain from feminism. Feminists are no longer even certain how to frame, let alone resolve, the issues raised by veiling, polygamy and other cultural practices oppressive to women by Western standards. Feminism has become perplexed by the very concept of "culture." This impasse is detrimental both to women's equality and to concerns for cultural autonomy.*
>
> *We propose shifting gears. Our approach draws on what, at first glance, would seem to be an unpromising legal paradigm for feminism – the highly technical field of conflict of laws. Using the non-intuitive hypothetical of a dispute in California between a Japanese father and daughter over a transfer of shares, we demonstrate the contribution that conflicts can make. Whereas Western feminists are often criticized for dwelling on "exotic" cultural practices to the neglect of other important issues affecting the lives of women in those communities or states, our choice of hypothetical not only joins the correctives, but also shows how economic issues, in fact, take us back to the same impasse. Even mundane issues of corporate law prove to be dazzlingly indeterminate and complex in their feminist and cultural dimensions.*
>
> *What makes conflict of laws a better way to recognize and do justice to the*

different dimensions of our hypothetical, surprisingly, is viewing conflicts as technique. More generally, conflicts can offer a new approach to the feminism/culture debate – if we treat its technicalities not as mere means to an end but as an intellectual style. Trading the big picture typical of public law for the specificity and constraints of technical form provides a promising style of capturing, revealing and ultimately taking a stand on the complexities confronting feminists as multiculturalism is challenged here and abroad.

The paper is forthcoming is the *Stanford Law Review*.

Long Life ATS

American ATS is far from being dead: that's true both from the standpoint of academics and practitioners. Only two days ago, on Tuesday, Gilles announced a new article on the Statute. Less than a month after a paper of my own called "Responsabilidad civil y derechos humanos en EEUU: el fin del ATS?" was published, I learned about a new title from O. Murray, D. Kinley and C. Pitts: "Exaggerated Rumours of the Death of an Alien Tort? Corporations, Human Rights and the Remarkable Case of Kiobel" (Melbourne Journal of International Law, vol. 52). The summary reads as follows:

Over the past 15 years or so, we have become accustomed to assuming that corporations are proper subjects of litigation for alleged infringements of the 'law of nations' under the Alien Tort Statute ('ATS'). But, in a dramatic reversal of this line of reasoning, the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in Kiobel v Royal Dutch Petroleum ('Kiobel'),2 has dismissed this assumption and concluded that corporations cannot be sued under the ATS. This article explores the Court's reasoning and the ramifications of the decision, highlighting the ways in which the Kiobel judgment departs from both Supreme Court and Second Circuit precedent. The authors take to task the critical failure of the majority in Kiobel to distinguish between the requirements of legal responsibility at international law and that which is necessary to invoke ATS jurisdiction in the US District Courts. In the context of the maturing

> *debates over the human rights responsibilities of corporations, the authors point to the political as well as legal policy implications of Kiobel and underscore the reasons why the case has already attracted such intense interest and will continue to excite attention as a US Supreme Court challenge looms.*

And these are the main issues addressed:

.- the source of law for causes of action under the ATS (does the ATS create a statutory cause of action, does it grant jurisdiction to federal courts to recognise federal common law causes of action, or does the ATS only permit the recognition of causes of action that exist in international law?); and
.- the debate regarding secondary liability: critics to the adoption by the Second Circuit of international law as the source of law for determining the rules on secondary liability under the ATS, and the conclusion of the majority in Kiobel (there is no norm of corporate liability in customary international law, and therefore there can be no liability of corporations under the ATS).

Kiobel has also been delt with in Spain by professor Zamora Cabot (University of Castellón), an ATS expert: see here his last paper, which will soon be published in English.

As for the judiciary: a petition for writ of certiorari was filed on June, 2011, to review the Kiobel judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, entered on September 17, 2010.

I would conclude that the ATS has a “mala salud de hierro” (prognosis: ill, but still a long way to go).

Issue 2011.1 Nederlands Internationaal Privaatrecht

The first issue of 2011 of the Dutch journal on Private International Law, *Nederlands Internationaal Privaatrecht*, which was published in April of this year (apologies for the late posting), was a special issue on Human Rights and Private International Law.

It includes the following interesting contributions:

Laurens Kiestra, Article 1 ECHR and private international law, p. 3-7. The conclusion reads:

In this paper, the role of Article 1 ECHR, which defines the scope of the instrument, with regard to private international law has been discussed. When a court of one of the Contracting Parties either applies a foreign law or recognizes a foreign judgment originating from a third State, there is no reason not to apply the ECHR to such cases. Even though such a third State has never signed the ECHR, it would ultimately be the court of one of the Contracting Parties whose application of a foreign law or recognition of a foreign judgment violating one of the rights guaranteed in the ECHR that would breach the ECHR. This follows from the Court's case law concerning the extraterritorial effects of the ECHR which has been confirmed by the little case law that specifically deals with private international law. Even in circumstances in which there is only a negligible connection with the Contracting Party, the situation does not change appreciably. Such situations still come within the jurisdiction of the Contracting Party and the ECHR is thus applicable to such cases. This does not mean that there cannot be any consideration of specific private international law issues, but only that such concerns should be dealt with within the system of the ECHR. Therefore, one could question whether the public policy exception resulting in the non-application of the ECHR, because of the relative character of the exception, is permissible in light of Article 1 ECHR.

Michael Stürner, Extraterritorial application of the ECHR via private international law? A comment from a German perspective, p. 8-12. The conclusion reads:

In Article 1 the ECHR binds Contracting States to the observance of its provisions. Authorities of each such State must duly respect and foster Convention rights, implying that the entire legal order of that State must comply with Convention standards. Consequently, the ECHR influences private international law along with other branches of such legal systems. Its rules and provisions must equally avoid contradicting Convention rights. Within such legal orders, the ECHR applies to national and transnational cases alike. As soon as there is jurisdictional competence in the Contracting State's courts, a judge acts as part of the State organs bound by the Convention. The operation of choice-of-law rules as applied by national courts and the ensuing results must be in accordance with Convention standards, just as much as the operation of any other national law of such State. If the consequence of the application of foreign law is a violation of the Convention, the forum judge has to see to it that this violation is avoided or corrected. This can be achieved via the public policy exception which is, in its turn, heavily influenced, inter alia, by ECHR standards. However, such an alteration of the resulting application of foreign law referred to through the rules of private international law does not in itself entail an extraterritorial application of the ECHR. There is, as concluded above, no obligation upon a State under public international law to install or apply choice-of-law rules at all; thus there can be no violation of generally accepted principles of international law through a State's application of a public policy exception emerging from its own legal system, including (in the case of the ECHR) its own obligations assumed under public international law.

Ioanna Thoma, The ECHR and the *ordre public* exception in private international law, p. 13-18. Here is an abstract from the introduction:

The purpose of this paper is to crystallize whether the ECHR claims an autonomous and direct application superseding the theoretical premises and technical construction of the conflicts rule itself or whether there is an intertwining interplay between the Convention's ordre public européen and the ordre public exception clause as understood in private international law. First, some examples from domestic case law will demonstrate the methodological approach taken vis-à-vis the interaction between the ECHR and the exception clause of ordre public). Second, further examples from the case law of the ECHR will highlight the position taken by the ECtHR on this question. On the basis of this bottom up and top-down approach our observations and conclusions will be

presented.

Patrick Kinsch, Choice-of-law rules and the prohibition of discrimination under the ECHR, p. 19-24. The abstract included on SSRN reads:

This article deals with the relevance, or irrelevance, of the principle of non-discrimination to that part of private international law that deals with choice of law. Non-discrimination potentially goes to the very core of conflict of laws rules as they are traditionally conceived – that, at least, is the idea at the basis of several academic schools of thought. The empirical reality of case law (of the European Court of Human Rights, or the equally authoritative pronouncements of national courts on similar provisions in national constitutions) is to a large extent different. And it is possible to adopt a compromise solution: the general principle of equality before the law may be tolerant towards multilateral conflict rules, but the position will be different where specific rules of non-discrimination are at stake, or where the rules of private international law concerned have a substantive content.

Antisuit Injunctions and International Law

Those interested in antisuit injunctions and/or corporations accountability for human rights violations should not miss Roger Alford's post on a Second Circuit *amicus brief* addressing the propriety of antisuit injunctions under international law. The *amicus brief* addresses an appeal of Judge Kaplan of the Southern District of New York's preliminary injunction enjoining Ecuadorians and their lawyers from enforcing the $18 billion Ecuadorian judgment (the so called "Lago Agrio" judgment), concluding that their was a substantial likelihood that Chevron would prevail in its argument that the judgment was procured by fraud.

Italian Society of International Law's XVI Annual Meeting (Catania, 23-24 June 2011)

The **Italian Society of International Law** (Società Italiana di Diritto Internazionale – SIDI) will open today its **XVI Annual Meeting at the University of Catania** (23-24 June 2011). The conference is devoted to **"Protection of Human Rights and International Law"** ("La tutela dei diritti umani e il diritto internazionale").

In the morning of Friday, 24 June, the meeting will be structured in three parallel sessions, respectively dealing with the topic in a public international law, private international law and international economic law perspective (see the complete programme here). Here's the programme of the PIL session:

Morning session (Friday 24 June 2011, 9:30) – Private International Law and Human Rights

Chair and introductory remarks: *Angelo Davì* (Univ. of Rome "Sapienza")

- *Patrick Kinsch* (Univ. du Luxembourg – Secrétaire du GEDIP): Droits de l'homme et reconnaissance internationale des situations juridiques personnelles et familiales;
- *Cristina Campiglio* (Univ. of Pavia): Identità culturale, diritti umani e diritto internazionale privato;
- *Francesco Salerno* (Univ. of Ferrara): Competenza giurisdizionale, riconoscimento delle decisioni e diritto all'equo processo;
- *Nadina Foggetti* (Univ. of Bari): Riconoscibilità del matrimonio islamico temporaneo (Mut'a) e tutela dei diritti umani;
- *Fabrizio Marongiu Buonaiuti* (Univ. of Rome "Sapienza"), La tutela del diritto di accesso alla giustizia e della parità delle armi tra i litiganti nella proposta di revisione del regolamento n. 44/2001.

The **concluding session** of the meeting, in the afternoon of Friday, 24 June (16:00), will host a **round table on "International Courts and International Protection of Human Rights"**, chaired by *Luigi Condorelli* (Univ. of Florence), with *Flavia Lattanzi* (ICTY), *Paolo Mengozzi* (ECJ), *Tullio Treves* (ITLOS) and *Abdulqawi Yusuf* (ICJ).

New Alien Tort Statute Case At The United States Supreme Court: Kiobel, et al., v Royal Dutch Petroleum Petition Filed

In *Kiobel, et al., v Royal Dutch Petroleum, et al.*, lawyers for 12 individuals seeking to hold major oil companies legally responsible for human rights abuses in Nigeria in the 1990s have asked the Supreme Court to overturn a federal appeals court's ruling that corporations are immune to such claims in U.S. courts. The law at issue is the Alien Tort Statute, a law that dates from the first Congress in 1789 but has grown in importance after a wave of lawsuits over the past three decades — lawsuits that were originally aimed at individuals, and then began targeting corporations in 1997. Prior coverage of the ATS has appeared on this site here and here, and discussions of this very case have appeared here, here, here, here and here. As Lyle Denniston at the SCOTUSBlog puts it, "[t]he new petition raises what may be the hottest international law issue now affecting business firms," and is "[i]n essence, the . . . ultimate test of what Congress meant when . . . it gave U.S. courts the authority to hear claims by foreign nationals that they were harmed by violations of international law."

Last September, the Second Circuit Court became the first federal court to rule that ATS does not apply at all to corporations, but only to individuals. The panel split 2-1, and the en banc Court divided 5-5 in refusing to reconsider the panel result. The Petitioners at the Supreme Court now seek to challenge that result

and argue that "[c]orporate tort liability was part of the common law landscape in 1789 and is firmly entrenched in all legal systems today. The notion that corporations might be excluded from liability for their complicity in egregious human rights violations is an extraordinary and radical concept."

The *Kiobel* petition puts two questions before the Justices. The first issue is jurisdictional, and questions whether the Circuit Court should have reached the issue of corporate immunity at all. Indeed, neither side had raised the issue of whether ATS applied to corporations in the district court; that question was accordingly not decided by the district judge, and was not an issue sent up to the Circuit Court. The Circuit Court panel majority, without deciding any of the issues actually sent up on appeal, acted *sua sponte* to conclude that it had no jurisdiction to decide the case because the ATS did not apply to corporations. The petition suggests that the Justices should summarily overturn the Circuit Court on this basic procedural point and remand the case for further proceedings.

The second question is the merits question: whether corporations are immune from tort liability for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other human rights abuses perhaps even amounting to genocide, or whether they are liable as any private individual would be under ATS. On that point, there is a direct conflict between rulings of the Second Circuit and the Eleventh Circuit, and the issue is currently under review in the D.C., Seventh and Ninth Circuits as well. "Today," the petition says, "corporations may be sued under the ATS for their complicity in egregious international human rights violations in Miami or Atlanta, but not in New York or Hartford. This is contrary to the congressional intent that the ATS ensure uniform interpretation of international law in federal courts in cases involving violations of the law of nations."

The corporate defendants will have a chance to oppose the petition before the Justices act on it, and it is also possible that the Justices may seek the views of the federal government. No action on the petition will come until the Court's next Term, starting in October.