

St. Petersburg Times

Human rights activist hired to work locally;

JON WILSON. St. Petersburg Times. St. Petersburg, Fla.: May 1, 2005. pg. 5

A veteran human rights activist with wide international experience has been named director of the Tampa Bay regional office of the National Conference for Community and Justice.

Belgium native Birgit Van Hout, 36, replaces Roy Kaplan, who retired in September.

Van Hout oversees the office's broad mission of promoting mutual respect among races, religions and cultures.

She brings a diverse background to the job. Her grandfather was American. Her family, with whom she traveled to Florida 21 years ago, has always had close ties with the United States, Van Hout said.

Eliecer Prieto, her husband, is Cuban. "He had been following me around the globe for five years. He figured it was his turn to follow the sun," Van Hout said.

They moved here in August, just in time to evacuate when Hurricane Charley threatened.

Van Hout, who speaks English, Spanish, French and Dutch, had been working as a freelance consultant for the European Union when the NCCJ position came open. Her most recent assignment was helping to monitor the elections in Palestine.

Van Hout began her career resettling refugees from around the world in Belgium. Balkans refugee reports inspired her to go to Bosnia-Herzegovina after the war to help set up a democratic process.

She later joined the United Nations peace-keeping mission in Guatemala to promote a multicultural society that would respect the rights and traditions of indigenous people.

In 1999, the United Nations asked her to help organize a referendum that would lead the people of East Timor to independence after 25 years of Indonesian occupation.

Evacuated from East Timor when violence erupted, Van Hout went on to evaluate human rights projects in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as a consultant for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Most recently, she worked for the United Nations' Human Rights Office in Geneva.

The NCCJ sets up workshops, seminars, diversity training and multicultural youth leadership. The organization works through government and business.

"I think the NCCJ can only be effective if we work in partnership with government and the corporate world," Van Hout said.

"There's no sense in setting up diversity training if it doesn't cause institutional change. We want to deepen this process," she said.

Van Hout has a law degree in addition to advanced degrees in international politics and human rights.