



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

### H69 In the Name of the Dead: The Panamanian Truth Commission's Search for the "Disappeared"

*Loreto Suarez Silva, Director of Anthropology, Comision de la Verdad de Panama, Balboa, 27695-8107, Republic of Panama; Kathryn M. Jemmott, MA, University of Florida, C.A. Pound Human ID Laboratory, Gainesville, FL 32611; Ann H. Ross, PhD\*, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, North Carolina State University, Campus Box 8107, Raleigh, NC 27695-8107*

The goal of this presentation is to present the results of the skeletal analyses of the victims of human rights violations in Panama.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by exposing the forensic community to human rights investigation efforts in Panama.

Panama's democratic history came to an abrupt halt in 1968 after a coup d'etat toppled President Arnulfo Arias ten days and eleven hours after his administration began. This coup set in motion Panama's twentyone years of military dictatorships that began with General Omar Torrijos (1968-1981) and continued with General Manuel Noriega (1981-1989). Forced disappearances, tortures and arbitrary execution of its victims, characterized the military regimes of the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1999, several clandestine graves were discovered one of which later was identified as the remains of Heliodoro Portugal. His remains were positively identified via DNA on 21 August of 2000. Heliodoro Portugal had been identified as a leftist by the military junta and was last seen being forcibly pushed into a car on 14 May 1970. As a result of these findings, the Panamanian Truth Commission (La Comisión de la Verdad de Panamá) was formed on January 18, 2001 by Executive Order issued by the lady President Mireya Moscoso. The objective of the Truth Commission as written in the executive decree "is to contribute to the clarification of the truth regarding human rights violations fundamental to life, including the disappearances committed during the military regimes that governed Panama beginning in 1968..."

As of April 18, 2002, the Truth Commission has amassed enough information to recognize 110 persons assassinated and disappeared. However, these numbers have already increased considerably as new information is gathered, including the positive identification of Jerónimo Díaz Lopez in June 2003. Fifty percent of the victims were murdered or disappeared between 1968-1972, twenty percent between 1973-1983, twenty-eight percent between 1984-1989, and two percent with no known information.

Thirty-four excavation sites have presently been identified in the provinces of Panamá, Chiriquí, Veraguas, Coclé, Bocas del Toro and Colón. However, much of the resistance against the military regimes was felt in the province of Chiriquí. Skeletal identifications are extremely difficult because of various taphonomic processes (for example, soil acidity, insect activity and bacterial activity, roots, humidity, etc.), conditions that are not conducive to good skeletal preservation and therefore the remains sustain considerable postmortem damage. Interestingly, many of the skeletal elements recovered from the mainland were hand and foot bones that generally do not have a high rate of recovery. The recovery and identification efforts that have yielded the most positive results have been from the island of Coiba. In our efforts to locate the remains of Floyd Britton arrested in 1968 and who was sentenced to Coiba, others have been inadvertently identified who were not known to have perished there. The remains of Sergeant Sánchez Tenas who was killed in 1975 at the hands of another member of the military police and whose murder was covered-up by the military was identified via mtDNA analysis while testing the skeletal samples in hopes of finding Floyd. The identification of Jerónimo Díaz Lopez was made via dental comparison and traditional forensic anthropological techniques. Floyd Britton has yet to be identified. However, recovery and identification efforts will continue on Coiba as a result of these other identifications to search for others who are believed to be buried there.

**Forensic Anthropology, Human Rights, Panama**