



Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

H66 The Need for Holistic Investigations of Human Rights Violations: An Example From Peru

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The goal of this presentation is to discuss a context based approach to a forensic investigation of human rights violations. The case example from Peru illustrates a comprehensive investigation by a team of forensic anthropologists which was carried out with limited access to resources, facilities, and technology.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by showing an alternate approach to the highly specialized and compartmentalized investigations done in North America and Europe.

This approach has been used in Peru where resources and political will are limited. Exhumations are frequently carried out in remote settings; technology and facilities both in the field and the lab are limited to the most basic equipment. Experts are often trained in the field rather than in academic settings and are required to fulfill multiple investigative roles rather than specialize in one area. These challenges require a different approach than the highly specialized, compartmentalized investigations done in North America and Europe; thus, forensic anthropologists in Peru have developed a creative approach relevant to the situations in which they work.

A case study is presented based on an investigation carried out in early 2008 by the Equipo Peruano de Antropologia Forense (EPAF). The site is located in a remote part of the Andean highlands of Peru; in 1984 during the internal conflict (1980-2000), over 100 peasants who had been displaced by the terrorists were relocated by the military. They were later killed and buried in a mass grave.

Anthropologists began the investigation with the collection of antemortem data from the friends and relatives of the victims. Antemortem data includes physical descriptions of the victims, the clothes that they were last seen in, any personal effects they possessed, details of their life such as accidents and injuries that may be reflected in the skeletal remains, and details of their disappearance or execution. The information was collected using standardized forms including drawings, images, and color charts. DNA samples were also collected from family members. Interviews with family members were carried out in their native language, Quechua. The data is stored in EPAF's Forensic Anthropology Database which allows for complex searches and protects the identities of the informants.

The goals of the fieldwork were not simply to recover the human remains and evidence; but to reconstruct the most probable scenario. The remains were exhumed using traditional archaeological techniques, commingled bodies were separated in the field before recovery, and skeletal remains were recovered within the clothing when possible. The area surrounding the grave was searched for evidence and to identify possible access routes. Bullets and casings were flagged in the field and were identified as belonging to two types of military issue weapons. The angle of ejection of casings from a similar weapon was tested in both single shot and burst and the results were extrapolated to the evidence found at the site to identify the locations of the shooters and reconstruct the scenario.

Laboratory work included analysis of skeletal remains to develop a biological profile. Trauma analysis was complemented by macroscopic examination of the clothing in order to ascertain the most probable cause of death. Gunshot wounds and sharp force trauma frequently penetrate the clothing; thus, proposed trajectories may be substantiated. Bullets and casing were also found within the clothing. In some cases, pseudotrauma in the bones was confirmed by the lack of evidence in the clothing; conversely, possible injuries were identified in clothing when skeletal remains were incomplete. Detailed descriptions and photos of the clothing were also made for identification purposes.

After laboratory analysis was completed, the antemortem and postmortem profiles were compared to establish putative identifications. These identifications will be confirmed through DNA whenever possible, but frequently immediate family members are not available to provide reference samples. In this case, entire families were killed and DNA may identify relatives among the victims. Exhibitions of victims' clothing and personal effects for recognition by family members may also confirm putative identity.

The holistic approach employed by EPAF has resulted in identifications in multiple cases from the internal conflict in Peru. Once identified, the remains can be repatriated to family members, an important step in the reconciliation process. The recent sentence against the Colina group operatives in the La Cantuta case was a hallmark in Peruvian history as it was the first conviction for human rights violations based on forensic evidence. These achievements indicate that forensic anthropology can succeed in spite of limited resources to funds, specialized expertise, facilities and technology. Further, forensic investigations do not always need to be conducted by highly specialized academics; context based expertise often provides a more comprehensive perspective.

Human Rights Violations, Forensic Anthropology, Peru