



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2009

### H68 Forensic Findings on Illegal Burials in Colombia

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The goals of this presentation are to: (1) present significant forensic findings on illegal burials secondary to the armed conflict in Colombia, (2) describe the types of illegal burials specific to different illegal groups involved in the armed conflict in Colombia, and (3) to analyze illegal burials in a sociocultural context.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by explaining the analysis performed on illegal burials by forensic experts under the context of the armed conflict in Colombia, and the sociocultural characteristics of the population that allowed the detection of forensic evidence on the victims of illegal groups.

The armed conflict in Colombia started over 50 years ago involving several illegal groups, including left-wing guerrillas (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC; National Liberation Army, ELN) and right-wing paramilitaries (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AUC). Over 30,000 people have disappeared over the last two decades secondary to the action of these illegal groups. For that reason, forensic experts in Colombia are challenged with unusual findings in illegal burials, including countless types of death, funerary rituals, and entombments. This presentation has the objective to show and describe some of the more important findings revealing several sociocultural traditions on illegal burials, including religious beliefs and magical thoughts. In addition, illegal burials have revealed that specific groups adopt different criminal methods and techniques (apparently during their basic induction to the armed group) including anatomic disarticulation of the bodies recovered in different geographical places from Colombia.

Several findings on illegal burials are important for the forensic experts in Colombia: When a member of the guerrilla group dies, the funerary ritual depends on their rank inside the organization, taking into account their religious and magical beliefs, and commonly emphasizing eternal life and revenge.

There are reports of illegal groups collecting anatomic parts (usually bones) of kidnapped people who died in captivity. Their objective is to collect money from the victim's family in exchange for information of the exact place of inhumation. These anatomic elements

and the information given by the family are very key elements in the preliminary identification of exhumed remains.

Human bodies belonging to important members of the illegal group are often covered using five layers of different materials to ensure a longer preservation period. This practice has also been documented in cases of illegal burials of important persons in the society. Additionally, materials like bullets, ropes, handcuffs, knives, clothes, liquor bottles, syringes, gauzes, and bandages are frequently found in the site of burial. These elements are very important to determine the circumstances of death.

Analyses of illegal burials by forensic experts are critical in determining the illegal groups involved in the crime and the identification of the disappeared persons. Proper knowledge of the groups participating in the armed conflict, as well as the diverse sociocultural patterns of the population living in Colombia, are important elements in the forensic field.

Colombian forensic experts are working hard to return the remains of missing persons to their families and are collecting evidence for criminal justice. Forensic sciences are essential to investigating the truth about the violent crimes in Colombia.

**Colombia, Illegal Burials, Armed**

**Conflict**