



## Physical Anthropology Section – 2010

### H116 Forensic Anthropology in Colombia: Working Amidst Armed Conflict

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The goal of this presentation is to describe the current status of forensic anthropology in Colombia and its challenges. Forensic anthropology efforts are conducted amidst on-going armed conflict, as opposed to other Latin American countries.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing an overview of the obstacles posed by armed conflict in terms of forensic anthropology activities.

Since the twentieth century, Colombia has been going through an armed conflict among various players: leftist insurgents, rightist paramilitary groups, drug traffickers, and the government itself. The conflict has resulted in countless deaths, displacements, and missing persons. These cases need to be resolved in court and victim reparation is essential.

In 2005 the law offered benefits to illegal group members who were willing to surrender and provide useful information. It was required that illegally obtained assets had to be returned to contribute to the victim reparation process and perpetrators had to give up their criminal activities. This strategy resulted in the discovery of countless clandestine graves. Investigating and processing these graves required additional forensic teams and the strengthening of anthropology teams existing at government agencies. These teams are responsible for exhuming remains and collecting evidence to support identification processes and help establish the truth.

Forensic anthropology in Colombia is unique. Despite multiple legal, military, and diplomatic efforts, armed conflict is an on-going problem that forces anthropologists to continue working amidst conflict. As a result of the continuing state of conflict, forensic anthropology emerged as a government initiative.

Working amidst conflict creates some unique problems for the investigating forensic teams which may bring about legal and historical challenges in the future. Some of these problems include:

- 1 **Collection of Victim Information:** No precise information is available on the actual number of deaths or missing and displaced persons. These figures are constantly growing and there is no consensus between victim organizations and state agencies. Victims are reluctant to provide information because of their fear of retaliation from armed groups that are still operating in conflict areas. It is very difficult to locate civilians who may provide information about the death of their loved ones because most of them have been displaced by violence, live away from their place of origin, or their whole families have been exterminated.
- 2 **Exhumation of Clandestine Graves:** In many cases the parties to the conflict state that bodies of the victims were disposed of to avoid prosecution. Exhumations are frequently conducted in a very short time and there is the risk of missing essential evidence to help clarify the circumstances of the victims' death.
- 3 **Laboratory Analysis and Victim Identification:** Due to difficulty gathering antemortem information about missing persons frequently results in a lack of information to compare against the evidence obtained from the skeletal remains. This situation delays identification and creates a backlog of unresolved cases.

The above represents multiple challenges for Colombian forensic anthropologists. Fieldwork and laboratory protocols based on the country's reality must be developed and adapted. Further research is required to develop standards specific to the Colombian population. Additionally, the modus operandi of armed groups must be understood to interpret field and laboratory findings.

Colombia has a long way to go. Even though the country has received invaluable support from nations such as the United States, which have made significant financial and logistic contributions to victim search and identification processes, work teams still need training and laboratory and field standards need to be developed. Such advancements would not only help solve cases, but contribute to the construction of the country's historical memory. It would be the first step towards justice and reconciliation, which will ultimately lead to lasting peace.

#### Forensic Anthropology, Armed Conflict, Colombia