



Physical Anthropology Section – 2011

H49 Dismemberment: Cause of Death in the Colombian Armed Conflict

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The goal of this presentation is to illustrate major findings in the recovery and analysis of victims, where dismemberment is a cause of death within the context of the armed conflict in Colombia.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing useful analytical information and contributes to the correct interpretation of forensic analyses in cases of dismemberment and/or in the examination of remains within the context of the Colombian conflict.

Dismemberment has been described in the literature as a rare method used by a perpetrator to attempt to conceal a body and/or prevent identification of the decedent. To the contrary, in the country of Colombia, dismemberment is a common technique used by illegal armed groups to dispose of their victims.

The Colombian Justice and Peace Law of 2005 was enacted to bring an end to the ongoing armed conflict between the paramilitary groups and the government through providing incentives for members to lay down their arms and surrender. This law requires that demilitarized members confess to all their illegal activities publicly in a court of law. Known as “free versions,” they reveal dismemberment as a widespread and recurrent form of murder. Some offenders have confessed to their actual participation in dismemberment while victims are still alive, while others claim to have witnessed these actions. In addition, artistic therapies as part of social programs meant to rehabilitate former paramilitary members have resulted in artwork illustrating dismemberment scenes. Family members of victims additionally report firsthand knowledge that their loved one was dismembered, as bodies are often left for family members to inter as a warning. Therefore, its use can also be symbolic, being used as an attempt to send a message to certain individuals and/or communities.

To date, over 2,000 clandestine graves have been exhumed in Colombia. These graves are usually rounded, small, and shallow, and bodies are found disarticulated, commingled, and incomplete. Laboratory analyses of some of these remains indicate that they exhibit evidence of multiple linear, sharp-edged cut marks, which primarily affect the distal and proximal ends of the upper and lower limb bones and cervical vertebrae. Other findings include blindfolds and gags covering both eyes and mouth, as well as ligatures on ankles and wrists.

The determination of cause of death of these individuals is a challenge because often no other injuries due to gunshots or other mechanisms are found that could explain the cause of death. Frequently the only injuries found are cut marks indicating dismemberment. Given this evidence and the lack of evidence of other trauma coupled with witness accounts, dismemberment and the vast exsanguination associated with it is then indicated as the cause of death.

It is important to note that the determination of dismemberment as the cause of death must be carefully supported with detailed descriptions of field and laboratory findings, analyzed within the context of the information available from investigators and witnesses.

Accurately determining the cause of death of victims is crucial because it provides answers for grieving family members and helps to repair the rift that the Colombian armed conflict has caused over the past 60 years. This information and reports will be used in current and future prosecutions and ultimately will help a country uncover the truth behind the illegal acts that have occurred. **Dismemberment, Armed Conflict in Colombia, Cause of Death**