



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H54 The Role of Forensic Sciences in Humanitarian Operations: Lessons Learned by the International Committee of the Red Cross

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand how the implementation of forensic sciences, including forensic anthropology, in humanitarian operations often pose unique challenges that require innovative approaches to resolving and preventing the tragedy of persons missing as a result of armed conflict and major catastrophe. Experiences and lessons learned from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) will be used to highlight how some of the distinctive characteristics of forensic sciences can be applied to humanitarian investigations.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by preparing practitioners to adapt the application of their scientific skills to the unique challenges faced in broader humanitarian contexts.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is a Swiss-based international humanitarian organization founded in 1863, which provides protection and assistance worldwide for victims of armed conflicts, and other situations of violence and catastrophes, in a neutral, independent, and impartial way. The mandate of the ICRC stems from international humanitarian law (IHL), especially the four Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols. In 2003, the ICRC organized an International Conference on "The Missing and Their Families." This saw the adoption by the international community of a set of recommendations for preventing and resolving the tragedy of the missing. The recommendations are framed by international humanitarian law provisions, making them universally applicable. Many of these recommendations relate to forensic best practices for the management of human remains and the identification of the dead. In that same year, the ICRC acquired its own forensic capacity to help promote and implement those recommendations worldwide. The activities of the ICRC's Forensic Department are based on IHL provisions, and they center on families' *right to know* the fate of their missing loved ones and on State parties' obligations related to the proper and dignified management of the dead from armed conflicts.

The use of forensic sciences in humanitarian operations for resolving and preventing the missing from armed conflicts and major catastrophes pose a number of unique challenges for practitioners and concerned institutions involved in these investigations. Some of these factors include security, and logistical and resource constraints, which affect the work of forensic investigations. If the number of missing persons and unidentified remains is large, needs often exceed available resources for all stages of the process. As a result, existing structures often cannot cope with the large caseload, and cases are either not investigated appropriately or the process moves painfully slowly for the families. Even in contexts where international actors are able to provide assistance, it is difficult to maintain local and international support, including funds, if the process extends for years, or sometimes decades. Also in contexts affected by armed conflicts, the normal (i.e. peace-time) domestic legal and operational frameworks - which provide for the necessary checks and balances and for the smooth running of forensic investigations respectively - may be frail or absent. In addition, the political will and institutional commitment required to address the issue of missing persons is frequently limited. Families of missing persons as a result of armed conflicts and large catastrophes often experience unique legal, economic, and psycho-social needs, which forensic practitioners involved in those investigations should be aware of.

Many forensic investigations into the missing are long-term projects which require local capacity building and ownership of the process for ensuring their sustainability. This requires appropriate planning, resources, and specialists, including forensic archaeologists and anthropologists, who play a key role in investigations involving decomposed and skeletonized remains. These factors impact the efficiency and feasibility of the forensic recovery and identification process in humanitarian operations. To the concerned forensic practitioners, they pose particular dilemmas which may be rarely encountered in normal domestic settings.

The lessons learned by the ICRC's Forensic Department have confirmed the validity and usefulness of the recommendations from the International Conference on The Missing and their Families, for resolving some of the dilemmas faced by practitioners and for implementing forensic best practices in challenging contexts related to humanitarian operations.

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