



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H57 Building Forensic Capabilities in Iraq

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of the current forensic capabilities in Iraq and of the various efforts to build and improve them since 2003.

The presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing a view of the challenges faced by forensic practitioners dealing with large numbers of missing persons and thousands of human remains still being recovered from mass graves in Iraq.

Since 2003, hundreds of mass graves have been located throughout Iraq. The Iraqi authorities have undertaken numerous steps to clarify the fate of missing persons, which have included the creation of specialized teams to manage information, collect data, and to recover and analyze human remains.

In relation to the clarification of the whereabouts of missing persons, the Iraqi authorities and the ICRC are involved in tripartite mechanisms related to two international conflicts (Iran-Iraq, Iraq-Kuwait). The development of forensic capacities has been supported since 2005, with resources and training provided to the national bodies involved in the management of information and identification of human remains.

The number of persons unaccounted for from the various conflicts that have plagued Iraq over the past few decades is estimated to be between one and two million. The Ministry of Human Rights is the national entity responsible for the collection and management of information and for the recovery of human remains from mass graves. They have one specialized archaeology team which carries out exhumations throughout the country. The Medico Legal Institute (MLI) of Baghdad, which depends on the Ministry of Health, is responsible for the analysis of human remains. Both bodies coordinate efforts for identification. The work load for these two national agencies is exceptionally large, ranging from one to several hundred sets of human remains per month.

With the support of several international organizations, including the ICRC, the MLI has continuously increased their capacity to deal with these cases and invested in the enhancement of their premises. Because of the large caseload, the MLI created a specialized forensic anthropology team and is in the process of developing a dedicated DNA laboratory to handle the samples taken from these remains and from relatives of missing persons who approach them. However, as happens in many other countries affected by international and internal conflicts, the Iraqi forensic services face many challenges these include: limited resources, few opportunities for high level education in forensic sciences, including forensic anthropology, lack of local standards for the analysis of skeletal remains, as well as no specific legislation regarding missing persons, data protection, large scale management of human remains and genetic databases.

The MLI and the Ministry of Human Rights in Iraq still face an enormous task which encompasses the development of their capacities, the establishment of standard procedures, the creation and continuous education of specialized teams, the creation of specialized laboratories and the creation of solid mechanisms to provide answers to the thousands of families that continue to approach them.

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