



Physical Anthropology Section - 2012

H58 The Missing From the South Caucasus: Perspectives From the Georgian Context

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of the implementation of humanitarian forensic sciences in the post-Soviet Georgian context.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by discussing the challenges that are faced in forensic human identification projects and lessons learned regarding implementation of identification efforts in this region.

As a result of the conflict in 1992 and 1993 in Abkhazia, there are approximately 1,750 Georgians and 114 Abkhaz that remain unaccounted for. This conflict is unresolved, and it is a region where territory distinctions, the political environment and different levels of forensic capacity have made it difficult for the authorities to systematically address the issue of missing persons. As a result, families of the missing are left not knowing the fate of their missing loved ones.

While there have been several attempts in the past to implement identification efforts related to this conflict, there have been consistent obstacles to establishing a long-term, systematic identification process. However, in 2010 a new coordination mechanism was established, which included Abkhaz and Georgian representatives with the ICRC acting as the neutral intermediary. Under the auspice of this mechanism, some progress in determining the fate of missing persons from the 1990's has been made. A project has been initiated incorporating both the Georgian and Abkhaz forensic structures with the goal to exhume, analyze, and identify human remains following best practices, while adapting to the specific challenges of the context and increasing local capacity to address the different aspects of forensic human identification. This includes the collection and management of information such as antemortem, gravesite and postmortem data, as well as actively coaching local scientists in exhumation and analysis techniques.

Within this context there are significant trust issues between the parties that greatly influence the working modalities that are acceptable by all. While efforts can be time-consuming, confidence building between the parties is an important aspect of this project. In addition, the lack of local infrastructure has been a significant obstacle from the level of where to store and analyze human remains, to finding an acceptable location for genetic analysis. The set-up of the regular forensic facilities is not such that they can incorporate the additional workload and the needs for physical space associated with the identification process. On-going discussion and negotiation at different levels has been necessary in order to develop the infrastructure required by this project.

Data collection, from antemortem to postmortem and the management of this data have also presented many challenges. The context highlights the need for in-depth training of data collectors and close monitoring of the data that is collected. Furthermore, having experienced people coordinating the process and conducting quality control of the information throughout the identification efforts is fundamental to having reliable and usable data. While these have been new areas of work for many of the people involved in the project, the coaching approach has been successful in terms of building local capacity.

Working very closely with each set of authorities bi-laterally as well as within the coordination mechanism has been essential in order to tailor the project to the specific needs of each yet maintaining a process where the information that is gathered is consistent and the approaches systematic. Experience has shown that theoretical lectures alone are not sufficient to train local scientists in forensic archaeology and anthropology. Close working relationships, hands-on, tailored coaching, and the presence of a consistent team working on the issue with a multi-faceted approach have been essential to the process thus far.

Identification Project, Humanitarian, ICRC