
A47 **The Afghan Forensic Science Organization: A Model for Local Capacity Building for Mass Grave Documentation and Preservation in Afghanistan**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of the goals and objectives of the Afghan Forensic Science Organization (AFSO) and their work in Afghanistan, a country in which more than 30 years of armed conflict has produced countless victims who are listed as missing. Since the United States intervention in October 2001, which liberated the country from Taliban rule, there has not been an effective transitional justice effort tied to the country's developing judicial system.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the importance of long-term dedication to building local capacity in forensic investigations and the role an independent non-governmental organization can play in such settings. The difficulties encountered in this project and the steps taken in an attempt to overcome them will also be presented.

Since 1997, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has dedicated itself to creating, supporting, and enhancing a transitional justice strategy in Afghanistan, a society that has suffered decades of continual armed conflict as well as innumerable tragedies inextricably intertwined with conflicts of such duration and intensity. PHR conducted its first forensic work in Afghanistan in 1997 under the auspices of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, documenting a mass grave found on the outskirts of Sheberghan in the northern part of the country. Since then, PHR has forensically documented numerous mass grave sites in Afghanistan.

In October 2009, with the support of the United States Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, PHR initiated a three-and-a-half-year project, "Securing Afghanistan's Past." The AFSO, a new independent organization, was founded as an outcome of the training carried out under this grant. This organization was formed in 2011 by members of the Afghan National Police (ANP), the Afghan National Police Academy (ANPA), the Legal Medicine Department (LMD), the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), and various civil society organizations as a result of a 2010 six-week training course by PHR covering evidence and crime scene documentation and forensic anthropology.

Throughout Afghanistan's decades of conflict, Afghan scientists and scholars have been isolated from modern education and the academic world. International donors and the government of Afghanistan should, therefore, identify and prioritize funding for the increased development of Afghanistan's higher education system, particularly for those who must necessarily play a role in its forensic future, such as judges, prosecutors, attorneys, scientists, and medical professionals.

The AFSO provides a non-governmental, independent organization which can assist in the development of a national forensic capacity. Despite the immense scale of the disappeared-persons issue in Afghanistan, there has been little to no official acknowledgment of disappearances that have occurred throughout the conflict, nor any real effort to find the missing and disappeared or to hold alleged perpetrators accountable. The right of families to know the truth surrounding the fate of a missing family member is an essential part of any developing judicial system. AFSO and its work represent the first small steps on the path to reconciliation and transitional justice.

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