Game’s Afoot in Many Lands for Forensic Scientists Investigating Most-Extreme Human Rights Abuses

Friends disappear in the dark of the night, Some return home broken from brutality, But others just never come back, and I fear The answer lies deep in the earth or the sea.

Desaparecidos, desaparecidos, Thousands and thousands lost without trace; Where is my brother? My sister? My lover? Will the day come when I’ll see that dear face?

"Desaparecidos," words and music by Nancy White, from the album Seasons of Change by Priscilla Herdman, ©1983 Flying Fish Records, Inc

DEAD MEN may tell no tales, but their bones speak plenty to those who know the language.

When the bones are the remains of victims of state-sponsored murder, those trained in the techniques of forensic archeology, anthropology, and medicine can help them to bear witness against the government’s human rights abuses.

Desaparecidos, or “disappeared ones,” is the Latin American euphemism for persons who were kidnapped, murdered, and secretly disposed of so that there are no public martyrs or evidence of government involvement.

‘Dirty War’

While most notably practiced by the Argentine junta during its so-called Dirty War against “terrorists” between 1976 and 1983 (JAMA. 1989;261:1888-1889, 1930), the military of Guatemala is widely credited with introducing the practice beginning in the 1960s.

In January 1991, a civilian was elected to the Guatemalan presidency; however, human rights groups say that the military still runs much of the country and political killings continue. Recently, Guatemala has drawn condemnation for using death squads to attack the problem of street children, who survive by begging, stealing, and prostitution (Guatemala: Getting Away With Murder. New York, NY: Americas Watch and Physicians For Human Rights; 1991).

Although still plagued by death squads and political killings, Guatemala this summer is the site of a training course in the use of forensic science for the investigation of human rights abuses.

The principal purpose of the course, which is sponsored by the Science and Human Rights Program of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), is to establish a team of forensic anthropologists in Guatemala who will work to identify victims of death squads, many hundreds of whom are believed to be buried in clandestine graves throughout the country.

A second phase of the course will be held later this month to train approximately 75 additional participants in the use of forensic science for the investigation of human rights abuses.

Participants in the week-long series of lectures, laboratories, and workshops will include forensic doctors and representatives from major human rights groups in Guatemala, as well as representatives from the country’s Judicial Forensic Medicine Branch and investigating judges from Guatemala’s 22 provinces.

Training for Cooperation

According to the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program, these groups are being brought together for training to encourage greater cooperation between governmental and nongovernmental groups in future investigations of human rights abuses in Guatemala.

In addition to training the five candidates for the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Team, the AAAS will also provide them with a stipend to support their work for the first year and with funds to purchase field and laboratory equipment, says Janet Gruschow, MA, senior program associate for the AAAS Science and Human Rights Program.

The prospective team members are being trained by the renowned forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow, PhD, and Robert H. Kirchner, MD, deputy chief medical examiner for Cook County, Illinois, and by members of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team and the Chilean Forensic Anthropology Group, who also were trained by Snow.

The students will begin with approximately 2 weeks of field training, exhuming a mass grave believed to hold the remains of approximately 20 victims of Guatemalan death squads.

They will be taught forensic archeology and anthropology methods for examining and identifying skeletal remains and determining the manner and cause of death. Also, they will learn about the requirements of medicolegal investigations and the presentation of medicolegal evidence before a court.

In addition to instructions from Snow and Kirchner, they will receive lessons from specialists in forensic odontology, forensic radiology, and forensic pathology.

Experts in Bone Interrogation

Snow, who lives in Norman, Okla., is said to be the world’s leading expert in “osteobiography,” the art and science of reading a deceased person’s life story from his or her bones.

“Bones make good witnesses,” says Snow. “Although they speak softly, they never lie and they never forget.”

Before exhumation begins, as complete a case history as possible must be obtained for each disappeared person, including data on the victims’ antemortem physical features and medical history.

After careful exhumation of the skeletal remains from a grave using current archeological techniques, all bones and bone fragments are washed, numbered, and x-rayed. Radiograms often reveal important clues, such as healed fractures, bullet fragments, and evidence of other medical conditions that can help the team identify the victims.

Using a glue gun, team members reassemble fragmented skulls. Once together, the skulls from clandestine graves, more often than not, tell of death by execution, usually from a bullet from behind.

From the shape of the pelvic opening and skull features, the team can determine the victim’s gender. Approximate
age at time of death can be determined in the young by such features as the teeth, the fusion of the sutures of the skull, and the joining of the epiphyses and diaphyses of the long bones.

For people more than 36 years of age, clues to age can be found in the thinning of bones, joint wear, and the build-up of bony growths known as osteophytes on the vertebrae and other bones.

Left- or right-handedness can usually be established by finding greater bevelling along the ridge of bone that surrounds the glenoid cavity of one of the scapula and by finding which arm bones are longer.

From markings on the preauricular groove of the pelvis of a female, it can be determined if she had been nulliparous or had carried a fetus to term.

Such work both in the field and in the laboratory is dirty and grueling. Speaking of death squads, Snow says, “You’ve got to fight these bastards one way or another. They may have the guns. But with shovels, brushes, and trowels as our weapons, we can beat them by bringing to light the evidence of their atrocities.”

At the AAAS annual meeting in New York, NY, in 1984, Snow was part of a panel that discussed the use of forensic science in the investigation of human rights abuses.

**Game Afoot for Medical Sleuths**

Referring to his favorite fictional hero, Sherlock Holmes, Snow said, “Quick, Watson! The game’s afoot!” and challenged his fellow forensic scientists to “go after the biggest game of all.”

Of all forms of murder, he says, “none is more monstrous than that committed by a state against its own citizens. And of all murder victims, those of the state are the most helpless and vulnerable since the very entity to which they have entrusted their lives and safety becomes their killer...

“The [worst] mass murders of our time have accounted for no more than a few hundred victims. In contrast, states that have chosen to murder their own citizens can usually count their victims by the carload lot. As for motive, the state has no peers, for it kills its victim for a careless word, a fleeting thought, or even a poem.”

The AAAS sent Snow to Argentina in 1984 to help the new civilian government recruit and train archaeologists and medical professionals in the forensic skills needed for exhuming the secret graves that were believed to hold the remains of hundreds of disappeared persons.

Unable to find professionals who wanted the dirty and possibly dangerous job, Snow was talking into training a group of university medical, archeology, and anthropology students, who went on to establish the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team.

The Buenos Aires-based team now has six full-time members who cover the anthropological and medical fields, and four part-time members, including a lawyer, a secretary, and two computer experts, says Luis Fondebrider, one of the founding members.

Team members conduct forensic investigations upon the request of courts or the victims’ relatives, he says. They are able to provide their services without charge thanks to grants from the Ford Foundation, the World Council of Churches, the Mitterand Foundation, the Reebok Human Rights Foundation, the Merck Foundation, and the J. Roderick MacArthur Foundation.

“Disappearance is a perpetual torture for the families of the victims,” says Alejandro Inchaurregui, one of the six full-time members of the Argentine team. “They believe their loved ones may still be alive somewhere.”

But they almost never are.

Victims of the Dirty War were kidnapped, usually at night by armed men, and taken to a secret detention center where they were tortured and eventually executed. Their bodies were disposed of by dumping at sea, by dowsing with gasoline in ditches and cremating, or by secret burial in unmarked graves.

**No Names**

Most of the tortured and slain were taken to municipal morgues where police surgeons dutifully recorded the deaths as they were told, registering the bodies as “NN” for ningún nombre or “no name.” They were then buried in unmarked graves, often piled together like sardines in a can.

Argentina, the “land of silver,” has anything but a sterling reputation in human rights. The nation went from the fying pan of Juan Perón’s dictatorship—he modeled himself after Mussolini and freely imprisoned or banished his opponents—to the gasoline of the military junta that disposed of many of the estimated 10,000 men, women, and children who disappeared during the 8-year-long Dirty War.

“In a country the size of the United States,” says Snow, “this would amount to about 77,000 disappearances—20,000 more than the 57,000 who were killed in Vietnam over a similar period.”

In March 1976, the Argentine military staged a coup and appointed General Jorge Rafael Videla as president. Almost immediately military and police death squads began to operate from a labyrinth of 360 secret detention centers to make the country safe from “terrorists.”

But “a terrorist,” explained President General Videla at a press conference in 1977, “is not just someone with a gun or bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilization.”

People were “disappeared” for having their name in the address books of other desaparecidos. Lawyers disappeared merely because they filed petitions on behalf of the families of abducted persons.

Some were kidnapped because they were wealthy and held for ransom. Whether or not the ransom was paid, the victims were never seen again.

**Physicians Assist in Torture**

Before their execution, victims often received “intensive therapy” from their captors. To the shame of Argentine medicine, physicians often supervised these torture sessions so that the victims did not die before they were supposed to.

The junta’s death squads often targeted entire families of suspects. Fathers were tortured in front of their wives and children, girls were raped in front of their mothers and fathers.

Pregnant women usually were kept alive until they gave birth and then dispatched. Their babies became botín de guerra or “war booty,” either sold or

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The black market or given as presents to military or police families.

Some idea of the magnitude of the state-sponsored murder can be gained from a letter that the staff of the Córdoba Judicial Morgue sent to President General Videla in 1980.

**Morgue Workers Complain**

They begged relief from the oppressive workload. The staff complained that the bodies in the unrefrigerated facility produced clouds of flies and that the “floor was covered in a layer about 10.5 cm deep in worms and larvae, which we cleared away with buckets and shovels.”

They asked the president for a raise and more time off from the brutal workload (Joyce C, Stover E. *Witnesses From the Grave*. Boston, Mass: Little, Brown & Co; 1991:224-225).

The Argentine team exhume more than 300 skeletons from a tennis court-sized section of Avellanda Cemetery on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The mass graves lie just outside the former police morgue now used by the team as their laboratory.

In 1985, General Videla and eight other junta leaders were tried for their crimes.


“What we try to do is corroborate oral testimony with hard, forensic evidence,” says Snow. “We enable the victims of state-sponsored murder to testify for themselves.”

It was the first time in Latin American history that a civilian government brought to justice military leaders for past human rights abuses. However, after several military uprisings, current President Carlos Menem pardoned the convicted junta leaders.

“The importance of this work goes beyond the documentation of crimes for possible prosecution of individuals responsible,” says Kirschner, who is chair of the AAAS Science and Human Rights Advisory Committee.

Kirschner says, “It is also important to create an indisputable historic record of these crimes against humanity. We learned from the Nazi Holocaust that it doesn’t take long before people come forth and try to convince the world that such atrocities never happened. By so doing, they make it much more likely for these atrocities to begin again.”

Snow and members of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team have also spent a great deal of time assisting in investigations in other countries where human rights abuses ran rampant. They have helped investigations in Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Iraq, the Philippines, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

**Arrested in Kenya**

Kirschner has observed or participated in human rights investigations in Argentina, El Salvador, Czechoslovakia, the West Bank and Gaza, South Korea, the United States, and elsewhere.

In Kenya, he was arrested briefly for the crime of attending an official inquest into the death of a suspected police-torture victim.

The sleuths work closely with the AAAS, Physicians for Human Rights, Americas Watch, Mideast Watch, Amnesty International, and other human rights groups. Eric Stover, a consultant to Americas Watch, has assisted Snow in a number of investigations.

In July, Snow returned from his third trip to Iraqi Kurdistan where he and members of the Argentine team and others were sent by Physicians for Human Rights and Mideast Watch to document atrocities committed against Kurdish civilians by Iraqi soldiers. To get to the site of the mass grave under study, the 64-year-old anthropologist had to travel 8 km by mule and sleep in a cave.

Snow and his colleagues recovered the remains of 27 men and were able to piece together details of the massacre.

In August 1988, the Iraqis rounded up the men from the small village of Kurme, marched them over a hill to a ravine, forced them to kneel down, and opened fire with assault rifles. They took the women and children south to a concentration camp where many died from exposure and starvation. They then razed the entire village.

Says Snow, Kurme’s fate was similar to 4000 other Kurdish towns systematically destroyed in Iraq’s ethnocratic war against the Kurds.

With help from antemortem information collected from survivors by Mercedez (Mimi) Doretti, another founding member of the Argentine team, all 27 of the recovered skeletons were identified and were given a funeral by surviving relatives.

**International Cooperation**

Fondebrider says that members of the Argentine team have increasingly traveled abroad to conduct investigations, to give lectures and seminars, and to share their experiences with other human rights groups.

“The international approach of the team’s activities is considered essential, particularly at a regional level, where the scientific documentation of human rights abuses for legal and historical purposes is a growing need in the newly elected civilian governments,” he says.

Unfortunately, there is an enormous amount of work for forensic science investigators throughout the world. “We can’t do everything ourselves,” Snow says, adding: In places that need them most, “we need to set up in-country teams.”

Once they get a team operating in Guatemala, he says they would like to start recruiting and training a Kurdistan team.

However, Guatemala and Iraqi Kurdistan pose problems for human rights groups and their sleuths. Argentina and Chile, where teams of forensic scientists were successfully established, had new civilian governments with a commitment to respecting human rights.

Iraqi Kurdistan, which faces the danger of Iraq’s renewing its genocidal war against the Kurds, has no central government. In Guatemala, the new civilian government does not appear able to stop the death squads and to enforce human rights. Indeed, there is great concern about the safety of the forensic anthropologists now being trained.

Hope, however, may come from an international commitment to support the human rights work of forensic scientists. At a recent meeting of a United Nations human rights commission in Geneva, Switzerland, a resolution was proposed by the Netherlands to encourage international cooperation in the use of forensic science to investigate human rights abuses.

It was sponsored by Russia and Argentina and was opposed only by the delegate from China, who objected on the basis that disturbing the remains would unnecessarily upset the victims’ families. Says Snow, the Chinese are suddenly concerned about the feelings of the families of the young people they “ran over like cockroaches in Tianenmin Square.”

While he doesn’t expect the financially feuding United Nations to be able to subsidize the work of forensic anthropology teams, he says its recognition would prove valuable.

“Having a little bit of the UN’s light blue colors,” Snow says, “could help protect forensic scientists who put themselves in harm’s way by investigating the work of government-supported death squads.”

―by Andrew A. Skolnick