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The investigation of the human remains of the “disappeared” in Argentina

In June 1984, in response to a request from Argentina's National Commission on Disappeared Persons, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) sent a seven-member delegation* to Argentina to observe and assist in the medical and scientific investigation of the human remains of the “disappeared” and the identification of “disappeared” children. The term “disappeared” refers to the thousands of people killed or missing during Argentina's period of military rule from 1976 to 1983.

Argentine President Raul Alfonsin, established the National Commission on Disappeared Persons in December 1983 to collect evidence on the fate of the “disappeared” and investigate overall patterns of human rights abuse committed during the previous 7 years of military rule.

Since its formation in December 1983, the independent 12-member commission, headed by Argentine writer Ernesto Sabato, has received testimony on 8,800 persons missing since 1975. Those who have come forward to testify include relatives and friends of the “disappeared,” former detainees, and military and police personnel. Testimonies given

in the commission's main office in Buenos Aires and its affiliate offices in Bahia Blanca, Rosario, Cordoba, and Mar del Plata, are stored in a central computer and compared to documentation gathered previously by human rights groups. The commission maintains that the actual number of “disappeared” persons may be considerably higher, as commission members have traveled to only nine of the country's 22 provinces to receive depositions.

One of the striking findings of the commission's work is documentation on a network of 280 former secret detention centers run previously by the military and police. We visited one such center, called El Vesubio, just outside of Buenos Aires with a judge and a commission member. While we toured the grounds of the center, which was partially demolished by the military in 1979, the judge described how hundreds of detainees were held there, under the authority of the army and police, between 1976 and 1978. The exclusive purpose of the center, according to the judge, was to interrogate detainees under torture. “The few who were broken by torture,” he said, “were later spared their lives if they agreed to participate in the abduction and torture of others.” Of the over 500 persons detained and tortured at El Vesubio, only a small proportion survived and later gave testimony on the center's activities to the commission. The remainder appear in the commission's list of missing persons.

The commission presents to the judicial author-

* The authors of this paper were members of the AAAS delegation. Another member of the delegation, geneticist Dr. Mary-Claire King, describes her work in the application of genetic screening to determine the identity of “disappeared” children on pages 339-347.

ities documentation on secret detention centers, such as El Vesubio, in packets (“paquetes”) for their review and subsequent action. For example, on June 13th, the commission presented to a federal judge in Cordoba detailed information on the activities of three former secret detention centers (“La Perla,” “La Perla Chica,” and “Escuelita de Malagueno”) under the supervision of the Third Army Corp. In its presentation to the judge, the commission stated that the use of torture and the killing of persons held at these centers “could only have taken place with the knowledge and participation of the highest authorities of the Third Army Corp.” According to testimony given by a soldier and an ex-lieutenant, many of those held at La Perla were taken away, murdered, and then buried in mass graves.

Because of the manner in which many of Argentina’s “disappeared” were killed and later disposed of, their identification will be impossible in many cases. The commission, for example, has ample documentation that reveals that many of the “disappeared” were dropped in the South Atlantic from aircraft, making the recovery of their bodies highly unlikely. Moreover, several bodies exhumed from mass and single, unmarked graves in recent months have been found partially dismembered, with hands and feet and even teeth severed from the body. The manner and haste in which these exhumations have taken place, including the use of bulldozers, has further impeded forensic identification of the human remains.

These problems are compounded by the reluctance of relatives to come forward, because of mistrust of local authorities, with premortem information on the “disappeared,” such as dental and medical x-rays. In addition, most of the forensic facilities we visited lacked adequate resources, including proper equipment, sufficient space, and trained personnel, to undertake a task of such magnitude. Identification of remains recovered by the time of our visit, utilizing odontological and/or anthropological methods, had been minimal. For example, local authorities in the Province of Buenos Aires had exhumed 288 bodies, of which three were identified. Only a small fraction of the total bodies recovered had been analyzed.

During our stay in Argentina, we met with members of the National Commission on Disappeared Persons and the judiciary, medical, and other forensic scientists, government officials, representatives of human rights groups, and relatives of the “disappeared.” In the cities of Buenos Aires, Cordoba, and La Plata, we visited individual and mass grave sites, morgues, and forensic facilities, as well as a former secret detention center, El Vesubio.

In each of these cities, we participated in symposia on the application of forensic techniques and procedures designed to aid in the exhumation, identification, and determination of probable cause of death of individuals interred in mass and single, unmarked graves. Such techniques and procedures involve the application of archeological, anthropological, radiological, and odontological methods designed to compare premortem information, including dental and medical records and x-rays, with the human remains of the deceased.

It is our conclusion that the identification and determination of the cause of death of even a small proportion of the “disappeared” could provide the courts with objective and scientific evidence critical to the conviction of those responsible for these deaths.

From a humanitarian point of view, families will finally know the fate of their loved ones and be able to give them a proper burial. In addition, through forensic documentation and subsequent litigation, the knowledge that governments can be held accountable for their actions, may act as a deterrent to such practices in the future both in Argentina and elsewhere.

It must be recognized that the tragedy of the “disappeared” is a national problem that will require a national effort to resolve. It is also apparent that the task of exhumation, retrieval of evidence, and identification of the human remains is beyond the capabilities of local institutions. Therefore, we have suggested that the National Commission on Disappeared Persons and the Argentine government undertake the following recommendations:

A. The establishment, as soon as possible, of a single, national center dedicated to the medical and scientific investigation of the human remains of the “disappeared,” and that all exhumations should be deferred until proper procedures can be implemented under the direction of well-trained forensic scientists.

B. The director of the national center, preferably a judge, should have broad investigative powers including the authority to supercede local jurisdictions.

C. The national center’s staff should include forensic archeologists, anthropologists, pathologists, odontologists, radiologists, and other forensic science specialists. The forensic team should work out of the national center and travel to internment sites for the exhumation of the human remains of the “disappeared” and retrieval of evidence.

D. The center’s director and forensic team should be solely responsible for the exhumation of the human remains of the “disappeared” and the

transportation of all material evidence to the national center for systematic examination, analysis, and preservation.

E. Resources at the national center should include a computer system for the collection and comparison of pre- and postmortem evidence needed for the identification of victims. Premortem evidence collected from family members and friends of the "disappeared" should include accurate physical descriptions of the deceased and, most importantly, their dental and medical records and x-rays.

In addition, as members of the AAAS delegation, we will make every effort to inform the international forensic community, and particularly the International Association of Forensic Sciences, of Argen-

tina's scientific and technical needs in its search for the "disappeared." To this end, we suggest that the Argentine government encourage assistance from the international forensic community for training, education and on-the-scene consultation.

We also recommend that international governmental and nongovernmental bodies, such as the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well as private foundations stand ready to provide funds to assist in the establishment and maintenance of a national center for the medical and scientific investigation of the human remains of the "disappeared." □