

Documenting the Victims of Conflict

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Sarajevo seminar attempts to draw lessons from different countries' approaches to identifying the victims of rights abuses.

When the call to prayer sounded at 10:45pm on a balmy Sarajevo night, Muhammad Jafar of Banda Aceh knew all of the words flowing from the city's mosques.

But he was in Bosnia to learn another language — the use of information technologies to manage the documentation of human rights abuses in post-conflict countries, and even those still in the midst of war.

Jafar, from the Indonesian human rights organisation Kontras Aceh, was attending a seminar organised by the Sarajevo-based Research and Documentation Centre, RDC, which ran from June 23-27.

Eleven participants from Indonesia, Burundi, Guatemala, Colombia and the United States met to exchange their experiences of using databases to process and analyse documents that record often unspeakable acts.

The group included representatives from state archives, human rights groups, government human rights agencies and forensic anthropology associations – all united by curiosity about how the Bosnian experience could improve their own work, and vice-versa.

The Swiss government, which financed the event, had good reason to choose the RDC to host the initiative. In June 2007, the centre unveiled the initial findings of its Population Losses 1991-1995 project, which documented over 97,000 deaths during the Bosnian war.

The effort, also known as the Bosnian Book of the Dead, surprised the public, who had consistently been told that 250,000 citizens died. The latter number was, however, only a wartime estimate, and was not based on empirical data.

"It was amazing to see a database that is so complete," said Jorge

Villagran of the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman, which is the custodian of the country's massive police archives.

In 2005, Villagran's office discovered more than 75 million pages of dusty, deteriorating police records dating back to 1882. The archive covers the period of Guatemala's 36-year civil war. An estimated 200,000 people perished during that conflict, most of them at the hands of state security forces.

There are 40,000 people who count as missing or disappeared from the period of the conflict. The Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, FAFG, conducts exhumations of graves, and has the names of 17,000 in its own database.

FAFG recently started a programme to get saliva and blood samples from families of the missing, similar to an effort conducted by the International Commission on Missing Persons, ICMP, in Bosnia. By the end of the summer, they will set up a DNA identification lab like Bosnia's.

"The political situations are so different from each other, and yet we are so close in trying to match the identities [of victims]," said Fredy Cumes of the FAFG.

Different laws and political climates shape — and sometimes limit — what can be done with documents, so the Bosnian experience has not always been completely transferable.

During the outreach phase of its project, the RDC published lists in local newspapers of people who had been killed, and all the names in its database will eventually be posted online.

"If I published a list with names, I would be killed," said one of the participants, reminding the seminar of the lingering threat posed by unpunished perpetrators.

Colombia struggles to obtain information from communities who want to own the narrative of the war and from those who don't want to stigmatise their town by publicising crimes which occurred there, explained Jorge Restrepo of the Conflict Analysis Resource Centre, CERAC, in Bogota.

"The allegiances to conflict groups are still very much alive," he said. "That is still not an excuse not to try."

There are two basic approaches to investigating wartime deaths – the documentation method, which relies on deaths reported in witness statements, government reports and newspapers; and secondly, survey estimates, which sample households and ask them to report losses in the family.

The RDC's project, for example, has documented just over 97,000 deaths, resulting directly from the conflict. A similar database at the demography department of International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia has over 102,000 names, but includes deaths indirectly related to the fighting.

"We expect these numbers to come closer together in the coming year," said RDC director Mirsad Tokaca, adding that the next phase of the project is to document indirect deaths, such as soldiers who died from eating poisonous mushrooms or babies who died in hospital due to a lack of water.

The RDC also hopes to use Bosnia's planned 2011 census to conduct a broader study of the demographic changes resulting from the war.

Andrew Mack, director of the Human Security Report project at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, said different methodologies not only had different strengths and weaknesses, but also had different uses.

"The Bosnian study represents a gold standard in terms of the sort of precise documentation needed for prosecuting gross violations of human rights. But they take years to produce and for this reason can't be used for, say, humanitarian needs assessments, or the timely tracking of global trends in armed conflict," said Mack.

In 2005, the university's Human Security Report found a large decrease in conflict-related deaths worldwide, and an overestimation of civilian casualties, in line with the RDC's findings for the Bosnian war.

The projects discussed in the seminar have a broad historical role in their societies.

"I see the RDC as providing memory-building," said Restrepo. "You have the documents at the centre - a place where victims can come and see it."

Yet for him, databases have their limitations.

"There are so many instances that you can't capture [with documentation]. They need to be complemented with oral history, demographic studies, and ethnography," he said.

This is not news to the RDC. It is working on a War Crimes Atlas which, using Google Earth, will allow individuals to interact with its video, audio and paper archives. The centre also has an oral history project currently documenting positive stories from the war.

The RDC has set a hopeful tone of how documentation can support war crimes justice. While impunity still reigns in many of the countries represented at the seminar, in Bosnia - although many locals may disagree - the rule of law seems relatively strong.

"I'm amazed to see the legal system here, to see the force of it, to see it's possible to take perpetrators to court where they will face the justice system," said Villagran. "This is not only a technical job, it's a legal job - a job for a strong system and strong institutions.

"We would like to invite [RDC director] Mirsad Tokaca to Guatemala to explain what he has done."

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