

## **Humanitarian Forensics – Application Today and Emerging Challenges**

### Program outline

Introduction to Humanitarian Forensics 1980s to today

- Post conflict search and recovery of human remains
- Why is there a need for forensic science in the humanitarian sphere
- What can forensic science tell us about a set of human remains

Humanitarian Forensics in 2018

- Evolution of humanitarian forensics and the move from post conflict to active conflict engagement
- ICRC forensic presence and areas of engagement
- Missing persons, migration, and emergency response (e.g. Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Rohingya crisis)
- Growing needs and a limited medico legal infrastructure
- Role of first responders in conflict and disasters – a growing role for the armed forces, NSAG's, and Peacekeeping troops
- Cultural and religious needs of the affected population

Emerging Challenges in the Humanitarian Sphere and the role of forensic science in addressing these

- Urbanisation of conflict
- Protracted conflict
- Contexts with limited or non-existent forensic infrastructure
- Humanitarian access
- Managing the dead in refugee camps
- Engaging with States and NSAG's on the dead and obligations under IHL
- Managing expectations of affected population

Discussion on above topics

### Overview

The last approximately 40 years have seen a growing role and application of the diverse range of fields of forensic science to the humanitarian and human rights field. The 1980's saw the emergence of this with the work of teams like the Argentine Forensic Anthropology team (EAAF), spawning a number of similar groups throughout Latin America.

Following its emergence, growing advancements in forensics, such as the fields of forensic anthropology and genetics, saw the large scale application of forensics in regions such as the Balkans following the conflicts there towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Balkans brought some balance to the understanding of what was possible in theory and in practice when it came to the use of forensics, to both assist in the pursuit of justice (e.g. International Crimes Tribunal for the Forensic Yugoslavia) and the need for identification of the many persons who remained unaccounted for at the end of the conflicts. While great advances were made in forensics due to this work during the 90's and early 2000's throughout the world, in particular when it came to understanding the recovery and analysis of large scale assemblages of human

remains, it was also clear that there were limits as to what could be achieved. Hopes to see the identification of all those who were unaccounted for, soon were tempered by the practical realities of situations encountered.

Almost 20 years later we see a much better understanding of forensics and how it can be applied in both conflict and disasters. We have seen a growing shift from the large post conflict, and post disaster response to understanding better how forensics can assist in both preparations for possible disasters and also better support efforts to identify persons who become unaccounted for as a result of conflict by engaging prior to and during conflict itself. In many ways this sees today the emergency of a new era in the application of forensics to humanitarian and human rights issues. The evolution of conflict today, with a more protracted and urbanized character, means the need to further rethink how forensics can continue to be relevant and applicable. Increasing destruction of vital health infrastructure in conflict, which includes forensic facilities, further undermines the capacity of forensic practitioners to respond in times of crisis.

Recognizing the need for strengthening global forensic science, and supporting the empowerment of domestic forensic structures, where present, is fundamentally important. The use of data, in particular ideas around big data, and predictability models to help determine the location of persons unaccounted for will be important areas of study.

Access of forensic practitioners to education is increasingly challenging in modern conflict, with the ability of practitioners to get out of besieged areas one such example. In addition, the ability to obtain visas to attend training courses outside the conflict zone is another challenge regularly faced. How do we envisage forensic training in conflict in five years' time? Do we predict greater use of remote training tools, like video links, and use of virtual reality to train staff? We must look to the future if we are to address growing needs.

A greater focus must be put on preventative actions to mitigate cases of persons remaining unaccounted for as a result of conflict. Better engagement with state and non-state armed groups will be key in this respect. These groups are logically one of the most important first responders in conflict, and often best placed to recover the dead. Identifying contexts where risk of conflict is rising, would allow for humanitarian organisations like the ICRC to engage early to sensitize and prepare the right first responders to manage the dead when conflict does break out. Consideration should also be given to the role that United Nations Peacekeepers could play in the recovery of the dead in contexts where they have been deployed.

Ultimately, a better understanding of conflict, disaster, and the cultural and social needs of those affected will be key if the emerging field of humanitarian forensic science is to continue to play a growing and valuable role in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The ICRC is playing a leading role today globally to ensure that the dignity of the dead is ensured and that all efforts to avoid them becoming unaccounted for are being made. It is doing this through the deployment of 57 forensic specialists across the world, in a diverse range of contexts, supporting forensic structures and needs of the dead in conflict, disasters, and migration. Through working with the responsible authorities on the ground, it provides advice, training, material support, and develops context specific plans hand in hand with actors on the ground, those providing a response that answers to the specific needs of the affected population.