

Forensic Scientists Go to Argentina's Aid

New government seeks to identify bodies of those who "disappeared" under military regime

In June a group of five forensic scientists from the United States went to Argentina, at the invitation of the new government, to help in the grisly task of identifying the bodies of thousands of people who "disappeared" under the preceding military regime.

President Raúl Alfonsín, whose election in December marked the end of 7 years of military rule, is setting an unusual example to the world in his systematic approach to punishing the crimes of the military, as well as to tracking down the fates of the victims, who number anywhere from 12,000 to 20,000.

Argentina thus offers an ideal circumstance for forensic scientists to contribute information about the victims and their deaths that will furnish valuable evidence when the perpetrators are brought to trial. In the long run, international groups such as Amnesty International hope that the availability of such expertise will be a deterrent to state-sponsored abduction, torture, and murder.

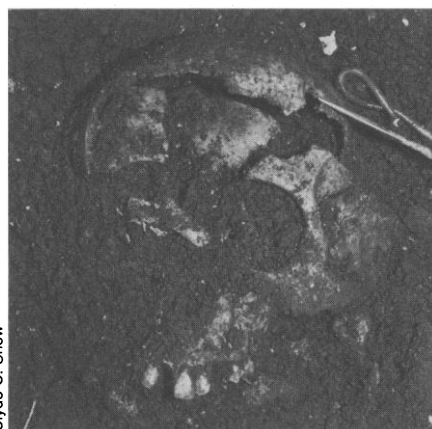
The experts came at the behest of the Argentine National Commission on Disappeared Persons (or *desaparecidos*). The trip was organized by the AAAS Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility. Members of the delegation gave lectures on techniques for exhuming, identifying, and determining cause of death. They also visited morgues, forensic facilities, detention centers, and grave sites in Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and La Plata. "It was kind of a depressing trip," says Clyde C. Snow, a forensic anthropologist for Cook County.

The majority of the deaths occurred between 1976 and 1978 in the course of the government's "dirty war" against subversives. People, most of them young and many of them from the universities, were abducted, questioned, sometimes tortured, and shot. They were usually delivered to cemeteries in the dead of night by army trucks and buried in anonymous graves. At least one mass grave containing about 300 bodies has been found, in a cemetery dump.

The main immediate need the delegation saw was for local judges to halt exhumations until they could be done properly. Diggers uncovering the skeletons have been disturbing or losing potentially revealing evidence such as teeth, bullets, small bones, personal effects and clothing. So Snow got some

young anthropologists from the University of Buenos Aires and instructed them in excavation techniques. At first, he says, they were somewhat hesitant—"they were afraid of running into someone they knew." But now they are eager to train other teams.

Meanwhile, in Buenos Aires, another delegation member, geneticist Mary-Claire King from the University of California at Berkeley, worked with the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, a group of grandmothers seeking the children of their murdered sons and daughters. About 120 babies were born in detention and adopted by military families. Working at the immunology lab at Buenos Aires's public hospital, she sought to identify two children who had been tracked down by the grandmothers. She



Skull of a desaparecido

Bullet hole can be seen at upper right.

used paternity testing techniques to develop an "index of grandpaternity." With blood samples from the children and the three surviving grandparents in each family as well as other relatives, she calculated with 99.9 percent certainty in the case of one child, and 93.2 percent with the other, that they belonged to the families who claimed them.

At present there is no way of estimating how many bodies have been found or identified because they are spread over a number of jurisdictions. The commission on the *desaparecidos* is attempting to systematize the search by taking testimonies on disappearances, about 8800 of which are now on a computer. Many people are still afraid to come forward.

The forensic group recommended that a single national center be established for

the medical and scientific investigation of the remains of the *desaparecidos*, preferably directed by a judge with broad investigative powers. It called for a halt to the exhumations until they could be done under proper guidance. It advised that all the evidence be brought for examination to the center, which should also have a computerized system for the analysis and comparison of pre- and postmortem information on the victims.

Delegation member Lowell Levine, a forensic odontologist with New York University, explains that the country's own forensic experts, while competent, are not in a position to initiate investigations because in many cases their credibility is tarnished by association with the old regime. If the disciplines became more professionalized—in Argentina, a forensic doctor is a doctor who works for the court—he, along with Nassau County Medical examiner Leslie Lukash, expressed the belief that forensic scientists everywhere would be in a stronger position to unite against official political pressures.

International human rights groups would like to see the establishment of a global network of forensic scientists ready to conduct independent investigations of suspicious deaths or torture. They believe this could have a significant deterrent effect on governments that resort to extralegal means to silence their opposition. The AAAS committee has also suggested that the International Association of Forensic Sciences could appoint a representative in each country who would conduct an "independent" autopsy in cases where official cover-up of a death is suspected. Such a procedure might be feasible even under a repressive government if the alternative were a blast of negative publicity.

Delegation member Luke G. Tedeschi, pathologist at Framingham Union Hospital in Massachusetts, has referred to the exercise as "applying a scientific model to torture as a social disease." The formalization of the discipline that this implies will, it is hoped, cast a harsher light on practices that dictators try to keep in the shadows. In a similar vein, Snow notes that uncovering evidence against a murderous state means, for forensic scientists, going after "the biggest game of all."

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN