INTRODUCTION

The Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF), established in 1984, is a non-governmental, non-profit, scientific organization that applies forensic sciences — mainly forensic anthropology and archaeology — to the investigation of human rights violations in Argentina and worldwide. The team was founded in response to the historical need to investigate the disappearance of at least 10,000 Argentines during the last military regime (1976-1983). Applying forensic anthropology and related sciences, and in close collaboration with victims and their relatives, EAAF aims to shed light on human rights violations, contributing to the search for truth, justice, reparation and prevention of violations.

Forensic anthropology uses methods and techniques from physical anthropology and forensic medicine to investigate legal cases involving skeletal or almost skeletonized remains. EAAF also draws from forensic archeology, which applies traditional archeological methods to legal contexts. The work involves a range of disciplines, including forensic pathology, odontology, genetics, ballistics, radiology, social anthropology, and computer science, among others. EAAF utilizes methods from these fields to exhume and identify victims of disappearances and extra-judicial killings, return their remains to relatives, present evidence of violations and patterns of abuse to relevant judicial and non-judicial bodies, and train local professionals to continue the work on a local level. EAAF members also serve as expert witnesses and advisors for local and international human rights organizations, national judiciaries, international tribunals, and special commissions of inquiry, such as Truth Commissions.
THE ARGENTINE EXPERIENCE

Societies emerging from periods of political violence characterized by gross human rights violations face the difficult task of confronting their pasts while working to prevent the recurrence of such abuses. During the 1970s, many South American countries, particularly Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay and Chile, were shaken by periods of intense violence and repression. Over the course of the decade, severe human rights violations were committed, primarily by military governments.

At the start of the 1980s, these countries began to move toward reinstating democracy. With the establishment of democracy came the immediate need to investigate the human rights violations of the recent past. The role of the judiciary, which was extremely limited or complicit with previous regimes, was questioned and in some cases redefined, as it became very clear that improvements to the administration of justice were crucial to reinforce new democracies. During the last two decades, trials of the perpetrators at the national and international level occurred, in some cases, in relation with these violations, while in other cases, different forms of amnesty laws were passed. Regardless, forensic investigations of human rights violations from the past continue in the region.

Argentina returned to democracy in December 1983. The newly elected president, Dr. Raúl Alfonsín, created the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), which documented the disappearance of at least 8,960 people under the previous military regime (1976-1983). Human rights groups estimated that a much higher number of people disappeared.

The majority was kidnapped, taken to illegal detention centers (Centros Clandestinos de Detención, CCD), tortured and, in most cases killed by security forces.

In Argentina, an abductee was typically taken to a CCD and subjected to interrogation under torture for a few days, several weeks or months before either being released, held as a legal prisoner, or executed extrajudicially. Some CCDs dumped bound and sedated victims from military aircraft while flying over the Argentine Sea; others buried them in unmarked graves in municipal cemeteries. In the latter case, prisoners were killed and their bodies were deposited in barren lots.

Shortly after the victims were killed, an “anonymous” call would be made to the local precinct to report the bodies. The police, sometimes accompanied by local judges, would go to the site and recover the remains. A police or judiciary forensic doctor would often photograph and fingerprint the bodies. At the morgue, officials would examine the bodies and issue a death certificate before anonymous burials in local cemeteries, and the registry office would then generate a burial certificate. While this thorough official documentation of bodies that were later buried in anonymous graves seems paradoxical in human rights abuses, these records have been critical to EAAF’s ongoing investigations and identifications of victims. (For further information, please see Argentina section.)

In the beginning of 1984, individual judges began to order exhumations in cemeteries known to contain the remains of disappeared persons. Relatives of the disappeared, desperate to find out what had happened to
their loved ones and hoping to recover their remains, often attended the exhumations. However, these exhumations were problematic in several ways. First, official medical doctors in charge of the work had little experience in the exhumation and analysis of skeletal remains; in their daily professional experience they generally worked only with cadavers. Second, exhumations were carried out in a completely unscientific manner by cemetery workers who often used bulldozers. As a result, the bones were frequently broken, lost, mixed up, or left behind in the graves. Thus, the evidence necessary to identify the remains and support legal cases against those responsible for these crimes was seriously damaged. Third, some of the forensic doctors involved in these efforts were complicit, either by omission or commission, with the crimes of the previous regime. In Argentina, as in most Latin American countries, forensic experts are part of the police and/or the judicial system, and their independence was severely hindered during non-democratic periods. For all these reasons, it was necessary to find a scientific alternative to these procedures.

THE FOUNDING OF EAAF

In early 1984, CONADEP and the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, a non-governmental human rights organization searching for children that disappeared with their parents and disappeared pregnant women, requested assistance from Eric Stover, who was at the time director of the Science and Human Rights Program at American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS). Stover organized a delegation of forensic experts to travel to Argentina, where they found several hundred exhumed, unidentified skeletons stored in plastic bags in dusty storerooms at several medical legal institutes. Many bags held the bones of more than one individual. The delegation called for an immediate halt to exhumations.

Among the AAAS delegation members was Dr. Clyde Snow, one of the world's foremost experts in forensic anthropology. Dr. Snow called on archaeologists, anthropologists and physicians to begin exhumations and analysis of skeletal remains using traditional archaeological and forensic anthropology techniques. Snow returned to Argentina repeatedly during the next five years, trained the founding EAAF members, and helped form the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF). Dr. Snow and EAAF continue to work together in other countries and projects.

Following Dr. Snow, EAAF is among the groups that pioneered the application of forensic sciences to the documentation of human rights violations. In 1986, the team began expanding its activities beyond Argentina and has since worked in more than thirty countries throughout the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe, including Angola, Bolivia, Bosnia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Croatia, Democratic Republic of Congo, East Timor, El Salvador, Ethiopia, French Polynesia, Guatemala, Georgia, Haiti, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraqi Kurdistan, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Kosovo, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, The Philippines, Romania, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe.

A guiding principle for the team is to maintain the utmost respect for the wishes of victims' relatives and communities concerning the investigations, and to work closely with them through all stages of exhumation and identification processes. Our work is grounded in the understanding and experience that the identification of remains is a great source of solace to families suffering from the “disappearance” of a loved one.

EAAF also works towards the improvement of international and national forensic protocols, transparency of criminal investigations, and the inclusion of independent forensic experts in human rights investigations (see country reports, Recommendations, ALAF, and ICRC’s The Missing Project).

Furthermore, since EAAF was founded, it has worked to develop standards for the field and train experts throughout Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Other forensic anthropology teams have been established in Chile (1989), Guatemala (1991), and Peru (2001). Today,
Latin American teams exchange members for cross-training and occasionally work together on foreign missions, such as the United Nations War Crimes Tribunal in the former Yugoslavia. In February 2003, members of these teams and other forensic anthropologists from Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela gathered to form the Association of Latin American Forensic Anthropologists, ALAF, enhancing this exchange (see special section).

EAAF is currently comprised of thirteen full and part-time staff who specialize in archaeology, physical and social anthropology, computer sciences and law. EAAF also counts on the generous support of part time consultants, volunteers and a network of international professionals who are often invited to join our missions.

**OBJECTIVES OF EAAF’S WORK**

- Apply forensic sciences to the investigation and documentation of human rights violations;
- Provide this evidence in court, special commissions of inquiry, and international tribunals;
- Assist relatives of victims in their right to truth and justice, by providing an independent forensic investigation and the possibility to recover the remains of their “disappeared” loved ones so that they can carry out customary funeral rights and mourn;
- Collaborate in the training of new teams in countries where investigations of human rights violations are requested;
- Conduct seminars on the human rights applications of forensic sciences for humanitarian organizations, judicial systems, and forensic institutes around the world;
- Contribute to the historical reconstruction of the recent past, often distorted or hidden by the parties or government institutions which are themselves implicated in the crimes under investigation.