

First Reburial of War Victims in Somaliland Makes a Case for "Posthumous Rights"

Hargeisa, Somaliland: Helped by a team of Peruvian experts, the government of Somaliland has reburied 45 victims from Somalia's vicious ethnic conflict of the 1980s, setting a precedent for other African nations and affirming the right to a dignified burial.

The reburial - the first of its kind since Somalia emerged from civil war - took place on Sunday in an isolated corner of the Hargeisa cemetery, in the capital of the autonomous state of Somaliland. Muslim sheikhs wrapped the 45 sets of remains in shrouds and watched as they were buried in individual graves. Abdul Rahman, a local sheikh, observed: "Islam does not allow people to be buried without dignity."

The [45 victims were exhumed](#) from three mass graves by the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF). Jose Pablo Baraybar, the director of EPAF, helped to manage Sunday's ceremony and predicted that it will strengthen Somaliland's efforts at nation-building.



Preparing for the reburial in Hargeisa

Equally important, said Mr Baraybar, the reburials will have an "illustrative impact" far beyond Somaliland and give credence to the idea that the dead deserve a dignified burial - something that Mr Baraybar has argued for during many years of forensic activity in conflict areas. "Everyone has a right to be buried like a human, and not an animal," he said in a telephone interview from Hargeisa.

The 45 Somali victims, all men, are assumed to have been members of the Isaaq clan, which opposed the rule of former Somali dictator Mohammed Siad Barre. The men were among many who were taken in for questioning by police in 1984 and never reappeared. According to estimates, over 60,000 people were killed during the repression in northern Somalia and buried in anonymous graves. Mr Baraybar described Hargeisa as "one mass grave."



Muslim sheikhs prepare the remains for reburial

After Siad Barre fell in 1991, Somalia plunged into chaos and split into three regions - Somaliland in the north, Puntland, and Somalia (with the capital of Mogadishu). Somaliland has functioned as a democratic state since 1991, and established a War Crimes Commission, but has not been recognized by the international community.

EPAF, a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP), has led efforts by Peru's civil society to identify victims of Peru's own dirty war (1980 to 2000) and is best known for exhuming almost 100 bodies from a mass grave at Putis in the province of Ayacucho (2008). AP [covered the Putis exhumation](#) and will send a Peace Fellow to EPAF this summer to help survivors of violence tell their story through an advocacy quilt.

Since Putis, EPAF has taken its expertise to other countries and conducted exhumations in Nepal, the DRC, Mexico and the Philippines. EPAF was invited to work in Somaliland after Mr Baraybar received an award in 2010 from the Center for Justice and Accountability (CJA), the San Francisco-based organization which takes legal action against human rights abusers. The CJA has pursued a case against Mohamed Ali Samantar, a former general in Barre's army who led the repression in the north of Somalia and now resides in Virginia. A US court [levelled a fine of \\$21 million](#) on Mr Samantar in 2012.

While the Somaliland project represents an important expansion in EPAF's model, it is not without challenges. EPAF is finding it hard to train Somalis to take over the work, because the War Crimes Commission is not providing funds and is not supported by foreign donors. Part of EPAF's own costs are covered by the Sigrid Rausing Trust in London.

But the shortage of funding has also led to innovations. EPAF has set up a field school in Hargeisa where foreign students can receive human rights training and assist in exhumations. Thirteen students - from Austria, Canada, China, Sweden, the UK and US - have spent a month at the school before returning home to embark on what Mr Baraybar hopes will be a life of advocacy.

- For coverage of the Hargeisa exhumations, visit the [Washington Post/Associated Press](#) and [BBC slide-shows](#). Please be advised that some of the photos may be unsettling.
- Watch AP's film on [2008 EPAF's exhumation of the Putis mass grave in Peru - "If I don't come back, look for me in Putis."](#)
- Read the [CJA's case against former General Mohammed Samantar](#) and [consult the transcript](#).