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## Forever Haunted By The Disappeared

*Iain Guest Hails the Courage of Families in Nepal and Argentina*

In the summer of 1976, when I was starting out as a reporter in Geneva, Argentinians began to arrive at the United Nations with a haunted look in their eyes. They were numbed by what had happened in their country following a military coup in March, and fearful of being hunted down.

They were right to be scared. Back in Argentina, the dictators had launched a dirty war against “subversives” that would claim as many as 30,000 lives. The tentacles of their campaign would extend to Europe, where they installed a team of former torturers at the Argentinian embassy in Paris and instructed their diplomats in Geneva to muzzle critics at the UN. It was not easy to report on such a story. My interviews with Argentinians were conducted in secret.

And yet something other than terror was also under way. We did not know it at the time, but these frightened people were at the forefront of a movement that would eventually advance democracy throughout Latin America and revolutionize international human rights.

The movement was led by family members of the disappeared and it unfolded simultaneously in Argentina and abroad. In 1977 Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo took to the streets of Buenos Aires to protest the disappearance of their children, followed by the Grandmothers. Both groups led the search for answers after democracy was restored in 1983 and helped the new government come up with a formula – a truth commission followed by prosecutions – that has become the blue-print for transitional justice everywhere.

The families have also made an impact on the international stage. They inspired the UN in Geneva to create [a working group to investigate disappearances worldwide](#). Disappearances were declared crimes

against humanity in 1998 and criminalized by an international treaty in 2007. The practice is now viewed with the same horror as torture.

And all of this was triggered by the actions of desperate family members, most of them women.

It all came back to me recently while making two podcasts on August 30, the International Day of the Disappeared, with my colleague [Beth Alexion](#) from The Advocacy Project.

We talked with two family members from Argentina and Nepal who have made it their life's work to denounce disappearances. [Ariel Dulitzky](#) lost two maternal cousins in Argentina and went on to a distinguished career as a lawyer, professor and chair of the UN working group on disappearances. [Ram Bhandari](#)'s father disappeared in Nepal in 2001. After democracy arrived with a rush in 2006 Ram set about building the Network of Families of the Disappeared in Nepal (NEFAD), which now represents over 1,000 families.

Our podcasts offer a fascinating contrast between two countries that emerged in triumph from repression and violence, but have chosen different paths to recovery. Argentinians have addressed the challenge head on, but Nepalis have largely tried to sweep the disappearances under the carpet. Neither approach has entirely worked. Both societies remain haunted by the disappeared and wonder if they can ever recover.

### [Continue Reading](#)

- Listen to [Beth's podcast on Nepal](#).
- Listen to [Iain's podcast on Argentina](#).
- Meet [families of the disappeared in Bardiya, Nepal](#).
- Donate to the [Bardiya Tiger Bag project run by wives of the disappeared](#).

*Iain Guest is director of The Advocacy Project and author of 'Behind the Disappearances – Argentina's Dirty War Against Human Rights and the United Nations.' (University of Pennsylvania Press)*



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