

Negros Occidental - June, 2000. Relatives of the victims and members of FIND. photo by Silvana Turner/EAAF.



THE PHILIPPINES

A mission to provide technical assistance in specific investigations and to train a local group in techniques of forensic anthropology in human rights investigations.

At the request of the Filipino human rights organization FIND (Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance), EAAF initiated a project of long term cooperation with them in May 2000 to investigate cases of involuntary disappearance. From May 28 to June 19, EAAF members Silvana Turner and Luis Fondebrider conducted a mission to The Philippines to provide technical assistance in specific investigations, and to train a group of local professionals in forensic anthropology. Both activities were organized by FIND in coordination with EAAF. During the first two days of the mission, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearance (AFAD), a coalition of NGO's headed by FIND, was holding a conference in Manila. This was an excellent opportunity to discuss possible future cooperation with members of other organizations from Asia. Representatives from Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Bangladesh also participated in the seminar and field activities. This mission was funded by Diakonische Werk, Germany.

BACKGROUND

Ferdinand Marcos assumed power in 1965 and by the early 1970's, began directing state security forces to "disappear" members of opposition political groups, labor unions, and religious organizations, as well as many others thought to pose a threat to the regime. The human rights group FIND asserts that the Marcos regime used disappearances "as a preferred technique to eliminate active opponents and to discourage protest from the people as a whole."¹ Large-scale disappearances have continued under succeeding Philippine governments, despite the fact that they were democratically elected.

'Disappeared' were (and still are) typically detained or kidnapped by the police, military, or paramilitary forces, taken to prisons or clandestine detention centers (known as "safe houses"), and tortured or killed. The victims are usually buried in the illegal detention centers or in isolated areas. The burial sites are generally individual or relatively small mass graves containing up to about 16 bodies in the sites that have been discovered so far.

Under Corazon Aquino, the Phillipine government implemented a counter-insurgency plan known as Total War; launched to wipe-out armed opposition groups. During this time, the number of disappeared Filipinos increased. The main perpetrators of human rights abuses and disappearances were the Armed Forces of the Phillipines (AFP), the Phillipines National Police (PNP) and para-military groups of civilians formed during military campaigns and reporting to the army (CAFGU). According to FIND, many of the units that perpetrated these violations are still active, and some who are known to be involved in particular cases are still in positions of power.

As former police chief under Marcos and head of the Total War campaign, General Fidel Ramos established what was referred to in the Phillipines as the era of Total Development. Although human rights abuses dropped somewhat during his presidency, in part this was due to the diminished threat of armed opposition and the corresponding drop in counter-insurgency activity by the military.²

FIND, has documented 1,661 cases of disappearances occurring over the past 30 years. Approximately 1000 of these cases occurred during the government of Aquino (1986-92), and 600 during the Marcos dictatorship (1965-86; martial law after 1975). Fewer were disappeared during

the governments of Fidel Ramos (1992-98) and Joseph Estrada who was impeached by the House of Representatives in November 2000 and ousted on January 20, 2001 due to massive protests and snowballing allegations of corruption. His successor, Gloria Arroyo, served as his vice president.

The actual number of disappearances that occurred during the Marcos dictatorship is almost certainly much higher, but due to press censorship and repression prevalent at the time, it has been difficult for human rights groups to gather information about disappearances from this period. The number of disappearances during later governments is probably also substantially higher. As FIND writes: "[the] documented cases, we believe, are few in number compared to the actual victims of disappearances from the Marcos regime up to the present administration."³

EAAF'S ACTIVITIES DURING THE MISSION

1. Training

During the first week of the mission, EAAF members gave a seminar on the three steps of the investigative process in forensic anthropology. Twenty people from NGOs, the university, and government agencies attended. After morning lectures on theory, people were divided into groups, each of which was assigned a human skeleton to analyze. The skeletons used for the training were from a case involving the disappearance of six people, in November 1985, in the area of Bicol, North Zamboanga, Mindanao. In 1997, a team comprised of members of FIND and a contracted local anthropologist exhumed a common grave containing the remains of six persons, presumably those from Bicol. The remains were kept at FIND offices without being scientifically identified. For this reason, FIND decided to use those remains for the seminar and at the same time, to try to identify them.

The second part of the seminar was given in the field - that is, a small group of local participants accompanied EAAF members during two exhumations, receiving hands-on experience with the different techniques involved in exhuming common graves.

2. Investigation of specific cases

During the visit, FIND presented three specific cases to

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Manila - June 2000. Training session. photo by S.Turner/EAAF

EAAF members. The first one, mentioned above, was successfully resolved, with the positive identification of the six skeletons. In order to complete the pre-mortem information recovered by FIND, both EAAF members traveled to Dipolog, Mindanao, where they met and interviewed the relatives of the disappeared. In these interviews, the previous pre-mortem information was improved and blood samples were collected for eventual DNA analysis.

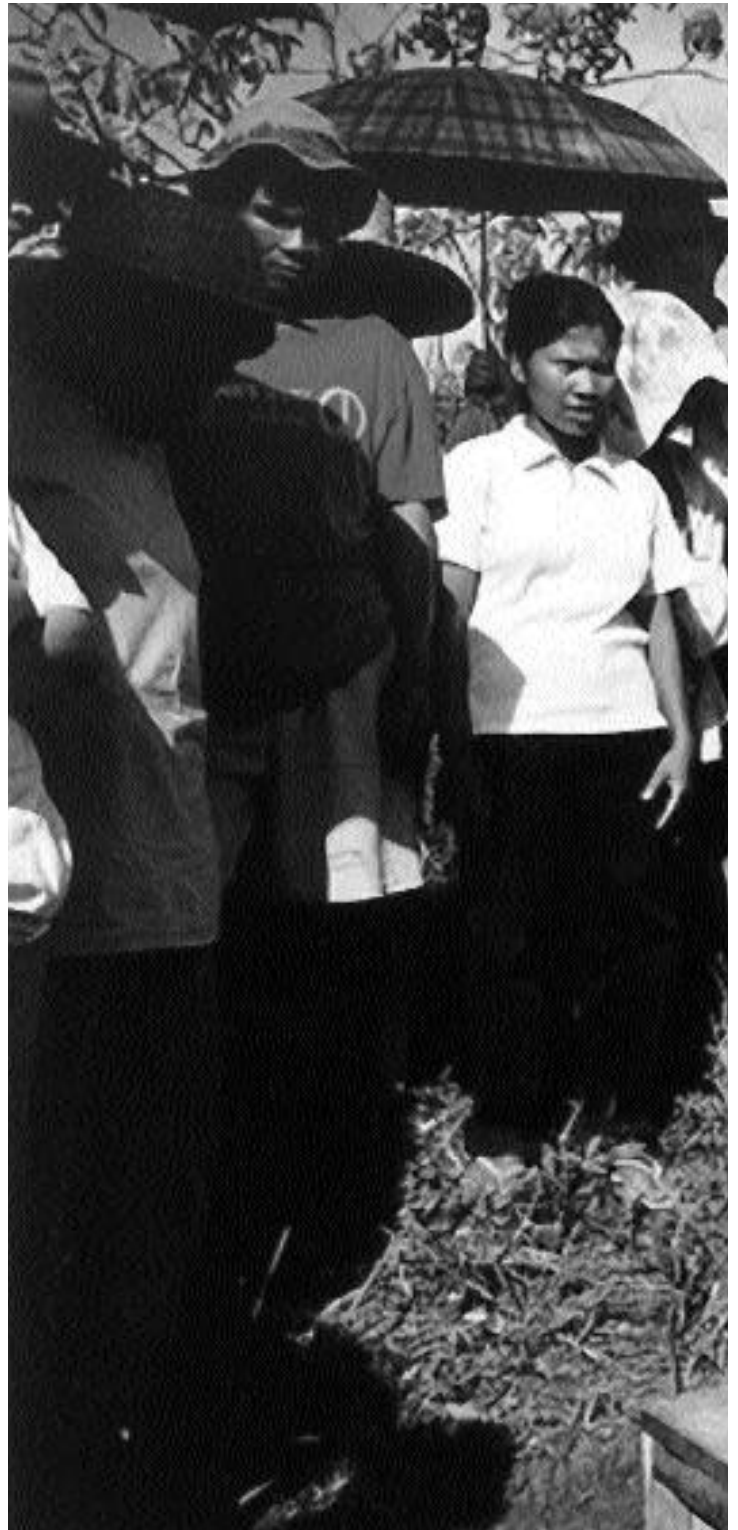
The second case was related to the disappearance of six people in the area of San Lorenzo, Camarines Norte, Bicol. According to the information recovered by FIND, the six were arrested by the military in March 1982. This was the last their relatives heard of them. According to one witness, the bodies of three of the six were buried in the cemetery of Barangay Tulay Na Lupa, in Camarines Norte. On June 8, Turner and Fondebrider, members of FIND and a small group of trainees from the seminar traveled to the Barangay to interview the relatives of the six disappeared and to carry out the exhumation of the grave. After two days of work, the site in the cemetery that the witness had indicated was found to be empty. While meeting with relatives, FIND members explained to them that their investigation of the case would continue.

The final case involved two people killed by military forces in August 1987 in Balagag, Colonia Divina, Sangay City, Negros Occidental. After the killings, the bodies were carried to Hamtikon, and were buried there. Through investigations carried out by FIND, the person who buried the bodies was located. On June 14, the EAAF members arrived at Hamtikon to exhume the bodies with members of FIND and several trainees from the seminar. The sister of one of the victims and the parents of the other were present during the process. Both recovered bodies were transported to their home village, where reburial ceremonies were held for them. In this case, because both bodies were positively identified at the time, and because of the wishes of the relatives, no anthropological analysis was carried out.

The final two days of the visit were dedicated to evaluating the mission and to planning a longer visit for 2001.

FOOTNOTES

1. Her Story: FIND, by the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearance, 1998, p.7.
2. FIND Web site
3. *ibid*, 165.





Negros Occidental, June 14, 2000. The remains of two individuals exhumed by EAAF and FIND trainees were reburied by their relatives. They were reportedly killed by military forces in August, 1987. photo by Silvana Turner/EAAF.