Chapter 32
Counting the Unknown Victims of Political Violence:
The Work of the Human Rights Data Analysis Group

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ABSTRACT

The Benetech Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) (http://www.hrdag.org/) analyzes the patterns and magnitude of large-scale human rights violations. Together with local partners, HRDAG collects and preserves human rights data and helps NGOs and other human rights organizations accurately interpret quantitative findings. HRDAG statisticians, programmers, and data analysts develop methodologies to determine how many of those killed and disappeared have never been accounted for - and who is most responsible. This account illustrates how HRDAG pioneered the calculation of scientifically sound statistics about political violence from multiple data sources including the testimony of witnesses who come forward to tell their stories. It describes methodologies that HRDAG analysts have developed to ensure that statistical human rights claims are transparently, demonstrably, and undeniably true.

INTRODUCTION: DOES THE TRUTH MATTER?

We see their pictures in news reports from conflict zones around the world. Frightened people, forced out of their homes, abducted, imprisoned, abused and sometimes killed by assailants who assume they will never be held accountable for their actions. Stories of mass human rights violations stir our moral outrage. We feel compelled to act, to document the violence. How many atrocities have been committed? How many displaced into refugee camps? How many people have simply disappeared?

Data gathering is the cornerstone of human rights efforts. Information about the scope and patterns of violence is needed to support legal action, political sanctions, and humanitarian intervention. Yet this vital information is often clouded by biases or inaccurate data collection. These errors produce more than a distorted view of the facts. Inflated claims or false accounts

that exclude key events can embolden critics and undermine well-intentioned efforts to prosecute perpetrators.

Consider the case of Kosovo. In March 1999, NATO allies launched air strikes against the Yugoslav army based on information from the U.S. State Department that 100,000 Kosovo Albanians were missing and feared dead. Members of the UN Security Council backed this decision arguing that the number of deaths justified action to halt further atrocities. After the bombing campaign and subsequent invasion of Kosovo by NATO, it was found that Yugoslav forces were responsible for about 10,000 deaths. Opponents of the action seized on the ten-fold inflation of possible deaths to dispute that mass violations occurred. Was there sufficient violence to justify war on humanitarian grounds? Do the numbers matter?

In an effort to defend the accuracy of human rights data – and account for mass atrocities witnessed by thousands or tens of thousands of people - truth commissions and other groups have turned to scientists to clarify history. Since 1991, members of the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) have developed relational data bases and statistical techniques to analyze not only how many victims and violations have been *documented* during a conflict – but also how many of the killed and disappeared have never been accounted for. HRDAG helps NGOs and human rights organizations accurately interpret quantitative findings that support historical clarification and the prosecution of perpetrators.

The HRDAG team currently includes two dozen statisticians, programmers, demographers and data analysts who passionately believe that scientific arguments can help clarify the past and end impunity. HRDAG is part of the Human Rights Program at Benetech, a nonprofit technology organization based in Palo Alto, California. The HRDAG team is led by Dr. Patrick Ball, a statistician who has worked with dozens of human rights organizations to build databases that provide a quantitative understanding of human rights violations. HRDAG investigators focus on large-scale violations of civil and political rights. They have pioneered scientific methods for collecting and interpreting information about state-sanctioned violence that can be used to identify those responsible. The scientists of HRDAG have been called on to help clarify patterns of violence under difficult conditions in some of the world's most troubled nations. Over the past twenty years, HRDAG investigators have analyzed human rights data for official truth commissions in South Africa, Haiti, Guatemala, Perú, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste and Liberia. They provided critical information to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia that was used to prosecute former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević for crimes committed in Kosovo. (Ball, Asher, 2002) In 2010, HRDAG analysis of the Guatemalan National Police Archive was used to support the successful prosecution of two former Guatemalan police officers for the 1984 disappearance of a labor activist - one of the few examples of accountability in that troubled country. HRDAG has also analyzed information about human rights violations for the International Criminal Court and United Nations Field Missions in Timor-Leste, Guatemala, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as numerous non-governmental human rights groups.

The methodologies that HRDAG has developed over the last twenty years are now being rediscovered and adapted by social scientists throughout the world. HRDAG analysts created these methodologies by carefully examining a wide variety of data in countries where political conflicts created chaotic descriptions of violence. This chapter will illustrate how HRDAG investigators worked through the technical challenges of how to examine a wide range of information sources in which the obvious data is not a reliable narrator of the true pattern of violence. Each source of information must be carefully examined

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