

# Colombia struggles to identify its 'disappeared'

**Leads from ex-paramilitaries spur discovery of hundreds of bodies.**

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**SAN ONOFRE, COLOMBIA** – For two-plus years, Victoria Berríos suffered over the fate of her son Jose Luis Terán, who disappeared in this small ranching town on the northern coast in 2002 when Colombia's paramilitary forces ruled the region. When officials told her last year that they had found an ID card with her son's name on it in a clandestine grave, Ms. Berríos thought that finally she would be able to mourn and find peace.

But more than a year-and-a-half later, Ms. Berríos has yet to find resolution. Her son's bones, along with those of 89 other bodies dug from secret graves near this town are lying in boxes awaiting analysis and identification.

"I feel cheated. It's almost worse than not having found him at all," says Ms. Berríos.

With former paramilitary fighters and witnesses now willing to speak, authorities have been inundated with information about clandestine graves of victims of Colombia's brutal conflict.

That has given hope to thousands of families. But the avalanche of reports is overwhelming authorities and their slow progress is frustrating victims' families. Officials and experts are looking to other countries to learn from their experience.

Since 2004, more than 400 bodies have been found. But much of the information about the graves is kept locked away for lack of resources.

"We are on the verge of a national emergency because of the number of graves," says Eduardo Pizarro, head of the government-appointed Reparation and Reconciliation Commission, which deals with compensation for paramilitary victims.

While the number of "missing" remains unknown, human rights groups say it's between 3,000 and 7,000. But Mr. Pizarro says there could be as many as 10,000 victims of both right-wing paramilitaries and left-wing guerrillas. Many disappearances were unreported, especially in areas where authorities were coopted by the guerrillas or the paramilitaries, like San Onofre.

"People would go into the local prosecutor's office to report a disappearance and they were warned not to," says Carmelo Agamez, an activist in San Onofre. "They would say: 'If you file an official report, you will be killed.' "

With the paramilitaries demobilized, families of the victims are now coming forward to report disappearances from three or four years ago. At the same time, the paramilitaries are talking, hoping to take advantage of reduced sentences as part of legislation that offers a maximum of eight years in prison for those who confess. And witnesses who had kept quiet are now willing to give information to families. That is how Ms. Berríos could tell investigators about a ranch where her son's remains might be.

"We had to wait two years and six months to find out what happened to him, for people to come forward," his sister Susana Terán says bitterly.

Residents of the village of Palo Alto told her that on the day he disappeared, they had seen Jose Luis at a store with friends when a paramilitary leader known as "El Oso" arrived and ordered him to follow him down the road. Witnesses at the store heard a gunshot and "El Oso" returned. Ms. Berríos believes the murder was related to an inheritance from her former husband, her son's father.

Many experts agree that without a systematic accounting of the disappeared or the capacity to process the evidence found at the graves, it is preferable to keep the bodies in the ground.

"Once you go down the excavation road, you have to decide what you're going to do with the bodies," said Kathryn Bomberger, who heads the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), speaking at a recent seminar on the issue in Colombia.

"The worst thing we can do is become desperate and dig up all we can and then not be able to identify them," Pizarro says.

Rumors that some paramilitary fighters are destroying graves in this region pressured officials to dig up sites. "It is preferable to have the remains in a box in Bogotá to having a backhoe destroying the evidence, but where there is no threat, we have to leave the graves alone for now," he says.

Working with the attorney general's office, Pizarro hopes by the end of the year to have a unified registry of the disappeared and a DNA database of family members. "We need to know whom we're looking for," Pizarro says.

The boxes of numbered remains are stacked nearly to the ceiling at the forensics lab at the attorney general's branch office in the city of Barranquilla. There, a lone forensic anthropologist sifts through evidence from graves in San Onofre, 90 bodies in total. Only 14 have been identified.

In his hands, he holds the skull of what he believes to have been a teenager, found in February. A hole at the top of the skull shows where he was shot. "It appears the paramilitaries [dismembered him] so they wouldn't have to dig such a big hole," says the anthropologist, who was allowed to speak on the condition his name not be revealed.

Forty of the bodies in his lab were found on one farm where the regional paramilitary chief had his headquarters. One informer said there were more than 300 bodies buried on the farm but after two-and-a-half months of digging last year the forensics team packed up and went back to the lab. "It's a 5,000-acre ranch. We worked on 12 acres of it," the anthropologist says.

As one of only six forensic anthropologists working with the CTI in all of Colombia, he does both the field work and laboratory analysis. In June he was pulled away from his work on the San Onofre remains to dig up another 34 bodies in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. Somewhere in his lab are the bones of Ms. Berríos's son. Soon, the anthropologist expects, they will be handed over to his family.

"The day they told me they had found him was the day I accepted that he was dead," Ms. Berríos said. "But ... I will be at peace when I can bury him and can take him a flower from time to time."

