



The First Asian Conference on Psychosocial Work in the Search for Enforced Disappeared Persons, in Exhumation Processes and the Struggle for Justice and Truth *A Report*

*Lotus Garden Hotel, Ermita, Manila
8-11 November 2009*

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Introduction

The phenomenon of enforced disappearances was and unfortunately still is practiced in many countries to silence political opponents. The families of the victims not only have to face the economic and emotional consequences of the loss. They also have to cope with the impact of the insecurity about the destiny of their beloved ones, the social stigma and the resulting psychological problems.

Psychosocial support and a good coordination of all disciplines involved in the search for the enforced disappeared persons, in the struggle for justice and truth and in exhumation process is important to reach the common goal: **to support the families in the best possible way.** Psychologists, forensic anthropologists, lawyers, human rights workers, family organizations and family members of the disappeared have to do their acts together to reach this goal.

Background

The 1st International Congress on Psychosocial Work in the Search for Enforced Disappeared Persons in Exhumation Processes and the Struggle for Justice and Truth, was held in Antigua, Guatemala in February 2007. As a result of the Congress, a working group consisting of people from the different disciplines involved in the search for enforced disappeared, the struggle for justice and truth and in exhumation processes, worked together on a proposal for an **International Consensus on Minimum Standards for Psychosocial Work in Exhumation Processes of Serious Human Rights Violations.**

The need to continue the interdisciplinary debate and discussion both at the international and regional levels was the basis to organize the

1st Asian Conference in Manila, Philippines on 9-11 November 2009. This event was organized by the *Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial* (ECAP) - Team of Community Studies and Psychosocial Action from Guatemala (ECAP), and the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) – as the substantial regional partner in Asia – and GEZA. The Asian conference forms part of an international conference cycle that will culminate with the Second International Conference that will be convened in Bogotá, Colombia on 21, 22 and 23 April 2010. The idea is to present the rich Asian experiences and the outcome of the Asian conference to an international audience.

Preparations and Goals

To prepare the event, Ms Katharina Lauritsch was assigned to investigate the situation of families of enforced disappeared in the different Asian countries, search for Asian actors, contact experts working in the field and encourage them to comment on the validation form of minimum standards for the psychosocial work with families of enforced disappeared.

As the validation form was developed in the Latin American context, the proposed standards reflect to a certain point the experiences made there. The comments from the different Asian experts helped us continue to understand better the working context here and to incorporate the Asian perspective into the document.

The goal of the conference has been to learn from different experiences, discuss the present state of psychosocial support during the search for the enforced disappeared persons and in exhumation processes, work on the validation of proposed international minimum standards, strengthening the Asian network of professionals and family organizations and encourage the participants to document their work, giving the Asian experiences a strong voice.

Results

In the first Asian conference, 36 experts from 12 different countries participated.

On the first day, we had 17 presentations from psychologists, lawyers, forensic experts, family organizations and human rights activists. Each presentation lasted fifteen minutes and each block of 3

presentations was followed by time to ask questions and for discussion. We could catch a glimpse of the rich and diverse backgrounds and experiences the participants brought to the meeting. To see and feel the atmosphere of high motivation that made the conference room dense was rewarding.

Issues on the importance of religion and rituals, political education, special needs of children, forensic aspects, etc. had been discussed and the audience had been given the opportunity of exchanging and learning from different conditions. This first objective of the conference was highly appreciated by the participants. On the second day and half of the third day, the validation of the minimum standard in the Asian context took the center. We continued working in groups about psychosocial support for families of enforced disappeared, the role of the State, what alternatives in the support of families are there if exhumations are not possible and how the collaboration and coordination between the different actors involved in exhumation processes and already in the search for enforced disappeared persons can be improved.

The main arguments were:

- a) Even though in Asian countries, very few exhumations took place already, the minimum standards in exhumation processes are an important document that contributes to the systematization and of exhumation processes in the future.
- b) The most important issue in Asian countries is the struggle against enforced disappearances itself. The document is ambivalent, because it focuses on exhumations. From the Asian point of view, exhumations are



Participants seriously study the subject matter of the conference in an effort to fully give their share in the discussion.

only one of the many possibilities to find the disappeared persons. Therefore, in the minimum standards document, the search for the disappeared should be in the foreground.

- c) The cultural background should be a general condition itself and not only "to be taken into account" as one of the many points in the standards. The participants discussed for example the different implications for the work with families in countries with Hindu, Muslim, Christian and other religions as basic preconditions.
- d) One important point of the participants were the difficulties with understanding the terms used in the form. Many of them in the Latin American context probably make sense. However, in the Asian context these terms, while applied in some situations, are not very well-used (e.g. accompaniment, community, integral care, integral reparation, etc.). On the other hand, a central term like "exhumation process" is, in some parts, referred as forensic anthropological excavation and in other parts, as the whole process of search and struggle for truth and justice. A common point therefore was the need for a clear terminology and an extension of the glossary.
- e) The chapter in the minimum standards document about "the State" has deemed it necessary for an additional standard for social and political situations where the state doesn't fulfill his obligations. In the Asian context, the minimum standards are "maximum standards" in the sense that there is no trust in actual political systems, even if these are in the context of democratically-elected governments.
- f) As a special contribution to the validation, the participants discussed alternatives, in case no exhumations are possible.

A clear outcome was that enforced disappearance is world widely known as a Latin American phenomenon. Asian countries however, reported the highest number of cases to the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances in recent years, therefore the Asian contribution to



From various Asian countries, participants share their rich experience in the search for the disappeared.

the minimum standards and to the international discussion about the psychosocial support for families of enforced disappeared persons in general should be highly taken into account. Further on the third day, the participants wrote separate letters to the presidents of the Philippines and Indonesia, urging them to ratify the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance.

Moreover, the organizers presented the idea to publish an Asian documentation about the working context and the experiences of professionals and families working with families of enforced disappeared persons.



Katharina Lauritsch is currently working in a research project on psychosocial support for families of disappeared persons in Asia. Having studied Latin American history and literature, she learned about the phenomenon of disappearances. She had the opportunity to spend 6 months with the AFAD office in Manila where she helped organize the first Asian conference on psychosocial work with families of the disappeared. Having worked as a teacher, she is also interested in the effects of violence on children, peace education and conflict management.