



THE DNA TRAIL: Investigators search a paupers' graveyard near Pretoria, looking for the bodies of young men murdered in the apartheid era

TRUTH TEST

Digging Up the Dirt

A forensics team is tracking down South Africa's disappeared—and reopening some very cold cases.

By KIM GURNEY and
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ONE JUNE DAY IN 1986, SECURITY agents from South Africa's apartheid regime abducted 10 black teenagers from Mamelodi township, 40 miles from Johannesburg, injected them with a coma-inducing drug, and left them to burn to death in a staged vehicle explosion. The grisly fate of the "Mamelodi 10" became a poignant symbol of apartheid-era abuses, and then of South Africa's brave attempt to deal with them in a nonpunitive way: in 1999, some of the killers confessed to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and were granted amnesty.

But the story didn't end there. More than a decade later, following the TRC's recommendation, the bones of those teenagers are being dug up in a thorny Winterveld cemetery north of Pretoria. "These are the unsung heroes of the struggle," says Madeleine Fullard, who is directing the team looking for the bodies. "They were not guerrillas. They were abducted, held and tortured. They died the worst kind of deaths."

Fullard is the head of South Africa's Missing Persons Task Team, set up three years ago to complete the unfinished business of the TRC: to find and exhume the hundreds of people "disappeared" at the hands of the apartheid government and whose cases were heard by the TRC. The

task team aims to offer mourners the truth about their loved ones' final resting places. It has located dozens of graves over the past couple of years. And its advanced forensic work is attracting attention from elsewhere in Africa, where decades of conflict have left legions of unidentified bodies.

Within South Africa, however, the team's work is raising uncomfortable questions. After the restoration of majority rule in 1994, when the country opted to set up the TRC to deal with apartheid-era crimes, it resolved to forgo mass Nuremberg-style prosecutions. Officials and their henchmen would be granted amnesty on two key conditions: that their crimes proved politically motivated, and that they came clean about the deeds. Those who lied or failed to fully disclose their criminal involvement could still be prosecuted.

Now some of what Fullard and her team are digging up is clashing with the official TRC histories and could undermine the amnesties granted a decade ago, setting in motion new prosecutions. That's what happened when the task team took a closer look at the case of the "Pebco Three": slain Eastern Cape activists whose ashes were supposedly washed down the Fish River in 1985. When investigators scoured the murder site last year, they found the severely burned skeletal remains—some of them in a septic tank. This proved that the victims had not in fact been dumped in the river as their killers had claimed.

Sifting through 6,600 gallons of raw sewage proved daunting for even the most hardened investigators. Claudia Bisso, one of several visiting forensic experts from Argentina, has worked in killing fields around the world, but the thought of Pebco still elicits a grimace: "I would rather pick Bosnia," she says.

Distasteful as their work can be, Fullard's team is persevering. So far they've successfully exhumed about 50 burial sites; about half that number of skeletal remains have been positively identified and returned to their relatives for reburial. This has some hoping for new prosecutions, though they've yet to commence. Meanwhile, the government is now building a major DNA lab to advance this work and its legacy. The \$57 million research center will offer affordable world-class forensic expertise to other African countries and human-rights investigators. "There are probably far more individuals dying in conflicts in Africa [than elsewhere], yet there's absolutely no infrastructure in place at all for human-rights work at a regional level," says Neal Leat, a forensic scientist at the University of the Western Cape. Officials from Kenya, Burundi and Namibia—where mass graves were discovered last year—have already expressed interest in getting assistance from the new facility, in the hopes it will offer a much more accurate means of addressing their own murky pasts.

For now, however, the task team's focus remains firmly on South Africa's own disappeared. "Partly it's trying to say, these people lived and mattered," says Fullard. "Really, it's about reducing racism even in the field of death—particularly in political conflict. It's about recovering memory and gathering information." Grisly work indeed. But necessary if this country is ever to fully account for the lingering traumas of apartheid. ■