



# Understanding Clandestine Gravesite Investigations: Guide for Families of the Missing and Disappeared

**Mirak Raheem**



# **Understanding Clandestine Gravesite Investigations: Guide for Families of the Missing and Disappeared**

**Mirak Raheem**

Conceptualised and authored  
by Mirak Raheem  
ISBN 978-624-5545-23-0  
First Print 2023

All rights reserved. No part of this book  
may be reproduced in any form without  
permission from the author or publisher.  
To request permission, contact Mirak  
Raheem at [mirakraheem@yahoo.com](mailto:mirakraheem@yahoo.com)

Layout & Cover design:  
Chani Perera  
Dulana Ethugala

Sinhala Translation:  
Dr Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka

Tamil Translation:  
Mohammed Fiqrhi

Print:  
Direct Printers

Published by :





# Contents Table

• What is the purpose of this guide?	1
• The search	3
• Families and the search	5
• What are clandestine gravesites	7
• Challenges to clandestine grave Investigations	9
• Investigations into clandestine graves in Sri Lanka	11
• How have clandestine graves investigations progressed globally?	13
• What are the stages of clandestine grave investigation?	17
• Understanding the stages of clandestine grave investigation	19
• Discovery	19
• Reporting	20
• Excavation	22
• Exhumation	23
• Analysis	24
• Identification	25
• Handing over remains	27
• Importance of family participation	29
• How can families participate?	31
• Psychosocial challenges during the investigation process	35
• Support for families	36
• Key sources	39
• Acknowledgements	40

# What is the purpose of this Guide?

This guide is written for families of the missing and disappeared to provide them with a basic understanding of the process of investigation of clandestine graves. It may also be useful for other persons working with families such as activists, counsellors, lawyers and local government officials, to help them understand and explain this process.

The investigation of clandestine graves is a complicated and technical process. Families of the missing and disappeared may wish to intervene or may be called upon to play a critical role to assist the investigation process. In Sri Lanka, there is currently a lack of information that explains such a process, especially to help families of the missing and disappeared anticipate what they may have to deal with during such an investigation.

This booklet attempts to provide information that can help them prepare for such an eventuality. This subject of graves is a very painful one for families. Enforced disappearances are a very specific crime with a distinct impact on the loved ones of the missing, as they await conclusive information about what happened to their loved one.



Families have often done everything they can to search for and find out what happened to their loved one. Even as they search for the truth, they may also fear what they might learn. This booklet, which follows a rights-based framework, recognizes that the investigation of clandestine graves is only one component in the search for missing and disappeared, but one that cannot be ignored.

The content of this booklet may raise difficult questions, thoughts and emotions for family members when they engage with it, whether as direct readers themselves or when the information is shared through another person. It is important that family members are aware that discussing clandestine graves may not be easy, and that they only do so when they feel ready and have trusted support around them.

This booklet recognizes that the term 'family' is often explained in terms of 'blood relatives,' social norms and/or legal definitions. This guide also acknowledges that there may be others, including close friends, romantic partners and former spouses, with whom the missing person shared a profound emotional and social bond. These persons may hold vital pieces of information about the missing, and may also be struggling to cope with the disappearance.

This booklet is inspired by the persistence and courage of families of the disappeared and missing in Sri Lanka, in the face of insurmountable challenges, and by the work of specialized organizations involved in searching for the disappeared in other parts of the world.



## TERMS USED

As described later, there are different types of mass gravesites: those relating to natural disasters, others could be historic graves and those that relate to the missing and disappeared. This booklet will focus on instances where a person has disappeared in relation to large-scale conflicts (such as the civil war from 1983 to 2009 and its aftermath, the JVP Insurrections of 1971 and 1987-1990, and riots) and enforced disappearances as per the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance Act, No.5 of 2018. The guide will use clandestine graves as the main term, as many of the more recently discovered gravesites contain the remains of one or two individuals, whereas mass grave is generally used for three or more individuals.

This booklet uses 'missing' and 'disappeared' but as distinct terms so they are not used interchangeably. 'Missing' is often used by humanitarian organizations and is presented as more of a 'neutral' term. It can cover a broad set of situations including combatants (the term Missing in Action is used with security force personnel) and civilians in conflicts and also persons unaccounted for in natural and man-made disasters and migrations.

'Disappearances' relates to the internationally recognized crime of 'enforced disappearances' where the state or affiliated groups are involved, directly or indirectly, in the abduction, detention and ultimately the fate of the person, and where there is refusal to acknowledge the same. In Sri Lanka different sets of families have preferred terms. As such this booklet uses the phrase 'families of the missing and disappeared.'

## The search

The primary objective of the search is to find the missing person alive. This will involve tracing what happened to the person from when they were last seen, (which could be when they were abducted), to where they were detained (this could be several places over many days or even years) and the last recorded sight or sound of them (which could be verified by eyewitness accounts, for instance from guards at a detention camp).

The search for the missing and disappeared is an internationally recognized legal obligation of the state. The Sri Lankan State signed up to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances in 2015 and passed a corresponding law in 2018. Thus, the Sri Lankan State has both a domestic and international obligation to protect the rights of its citizens with regard to disappearances.

Disappearances by their very nature, i.e. that the person remains missing, means that it is a continuing violation so the obligation remains on the state to find the whereabouts of the missing person.

Disappearances have impacted all the major ethno-religious communities and every district in Sri Lanka. There is no official figure for the total number of disappeared, but Sri Lanka has the second highest number of disappearances recorded with the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances. The Office on Missing Persons (OMP) in 2020 presented a partial list numbering at least 19,013 cases but it has yet to be compared and integrated with the lists from previous commissions and other key institutions. Disappearances have left a scar on Sri Lankan society, and have had a devastating impact on families and associates of the missing and disappeared who continue to wait for any news.

In Sri Lanka the search is carried out by key investigating authorities – the police and the Criminal Investigation Department, but it also involves other arms of the state including the tri-forces and their relevant investigating bodies (for example the military police in the case of the army), the Attorney General's office, the judiciary and more recently the OMP. Over the last thirty years at least 10 temporary institutions, such as commissions of inquiry and committees, were appointed by different governments to investigate the missing. For the most part, however, state institutions have largely failed to provide evidence of the whereabouts of those missing and disappeared.

Given the terrible reality of extra-judicial killings and deaths during Sri Lanka's conflicts and political violence, it is always a possibility that a missing or disappeared person may no longer be alive. Although it is the families' worst fear, clandestine graves may hold answers for some families as to what happened to their missing loved ones.

The investigation of clandestine graves forms a crucial part of the search that cannot be disregarded. The information collected from the grave will help match them to a missing person, allowing for a handover of remains for mourning and final rites. It could answer some questions about how they died and when, and even who the perpetrators may be, which may be vital for families' understanding of what happened to their loved one. The evidence gathered in the investigations may also prove crucial in prosecuting those responsible for the crime of disappearance and establishing a public account of what happened.




# Families and the search

Families of the missing and disappeared have played a central role in the search of their loved ones. In addition to making complaints to the police and multiple government institutions, they have sometimes had to conduct the search themselves. Families across the country have travelled many miles to police stations, military bases, paramilitary and guerilla camps, and political offices, attempting to secure information or the release of their loved ones from suspected perpetrators.

They have also attempted to make complaints at any institution which could follow up, including state institutions like the Human Rights Commission, international agencies including the ICRC, and civil society organisations, such as peace committees and NGOs.

Despite threats to their own lives, harassment, and sometimes direct violence, families have continued to seek their loved ones. Families have also had to deal with persons extorting bribes in return for information about the fate of their loved ones.



Some families have come forward as petitioners, filing habeus corpus complaints requesting the courts to compel the authorities to produce the missing person. Families have also banded together to form collectives to better represent their interests. To amplify their efforts, they have organized and joined civil society and political initiatives to demand truth and justice. In some cases, the search has proved futile in providing any reliable information about the fate of the missing person, forcing families to use other methods such as astrologers.

This situation of not knowing, especially when it stretches over years, makes it very difficult for families to 'move on.' Some families sustain hope that their loved one is alive somewhere, even as they fear the worst. Some families may temporarily suspend actively searching due to lack of credible information,

limited finances or demands of day-to-day life, but they still want to know the fate of their loved one. The demand for truth remains an over-riding concern among families of the missing and disappeared across the country, despite the years or even decades that have gone by.

The discovery or investigation of a clandestine gravesite is often a significant event for families who may fear that their loved one might be found there.



# What are clandestine gravesites?

A clandestine gravesite (frequently referred to as a mass grave) is a site where human remains have been secretly buried or scattered, and where the exact identity of those buried is not verified. In most instances, these are unmarked gravesites not in public cemeteries or other designated burial sites. A clandestine grave by definition suggests its location is unknown but in other

instances there may be rumours of the existence of such a grave but there has been no excavation to prove it.

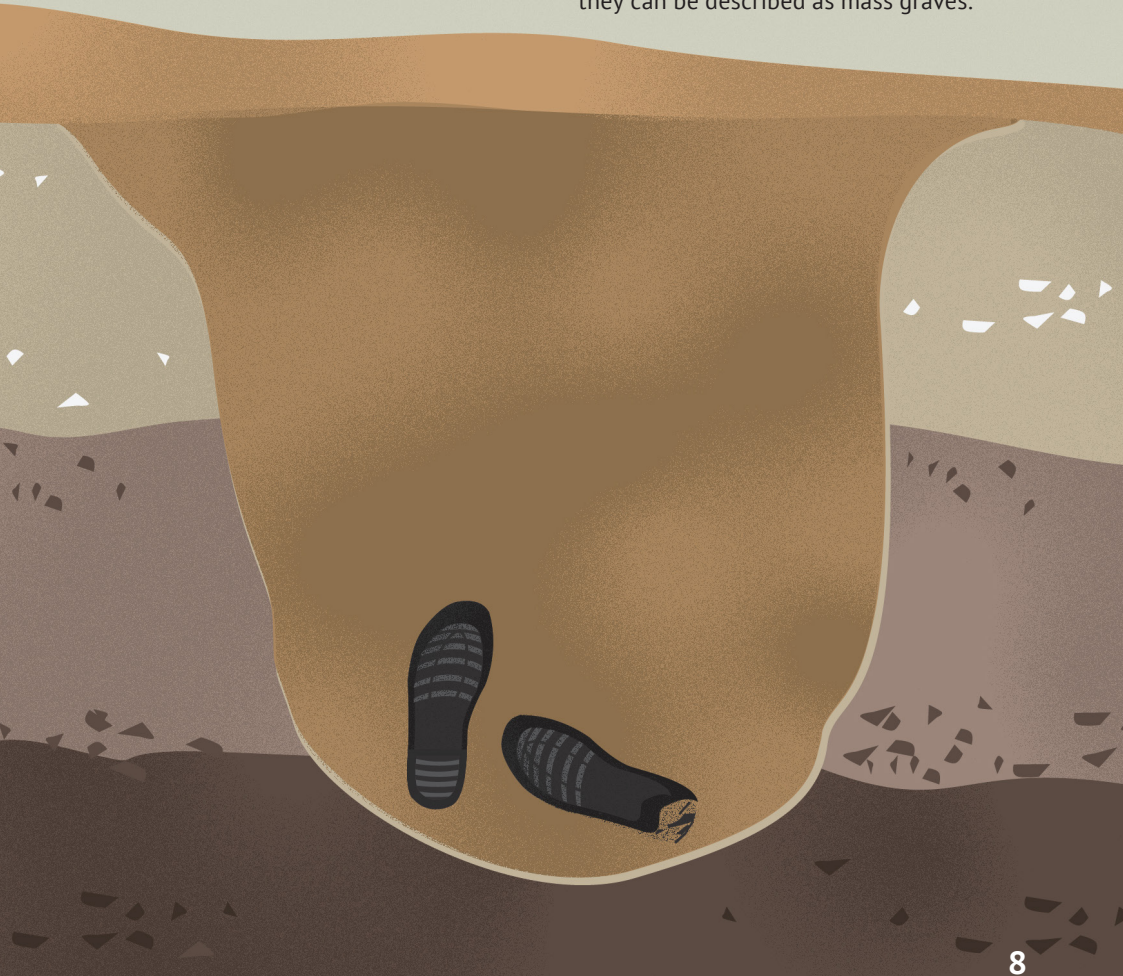
Given that Sri Lankan communities have deep rooted rituals around death and how the body of the deceased should be treated, the discovery of human remains in an unknown location is a cause for suspicion.





Hence, in a 'normal gravesite' one would expect to see the body laid out with care and in a coffin or some other protective material, and each body is most often placed on its own. In comparison in mass graves, the bodies may be in different positions or even one on top of another.

Over the last five years at least one clandestine grave discovery has been reported in the media annually. In such cases it is often one or two skeletons that are uncovered. In other rarer instances such as Mathale (discovered in 2012), Mannar Sathosa (discovered in 2018) and Kakkuthodavai (discovered in 2023) several bodies have been discovered and they can be described as mass graves.



# What can be discovered in the gravesites?

A clandestine grave contains the bodies of one or more individuals. As time passes following a burial, the human tissue (like skin, muscles and organ) decomposes to leave only bones (skeletonized). The rate of decomposition may vary a great deal depending on factors such as the level of moisture and the acidity/alkalinity of the soil.

For investigations, it is not just the remains of the body that are important but also associated finds. These may include personal effects of the deceased persons such as clothes, jewelry or a wallet (which may contain personal identification documents). These can prove very useful in identification, although the biological information from the remains will always be considered of primary importance.

Clothing items and accessories will also help date the site. For instance, the presence of elastic in clothing would suggest it is from the modern era. Assessing the location around the gravesite, such as soil layers, may also help date the site. There may be other finds such as bullets, which may help explain how the person was killed. Gravesites contain other important pieces of evidence that may help explain how the bodies ended in the site.



## Challenges to clandestine grave investigation

Clandestine graves present complex cases for investigation. Clandestine graves, by their very nature, are intended to conceal the truth. In cases of enforced disappearances involving extrajudicial killings, the perpetrators often take efforts to hide the remains of the victims, which are evidence of the crime they have committed. It may be several years, or even decades before they are discovered. In Sri Lanka, most of the human remains discovered in clandestine graves tend to be skeletons.

In some mass gravesites, the bodies may be on top of each other, making it very difficult to easily separate the remains of one individual from another. Digging up a site with multiple victims is a complicated task which may even result in damage to the human remains. This requires experts to carefully expose all the remains, before carefully removing the bones of one individual at a time, in a way that prevents commingling.



Commingling is the mixing up of bones of multiple victims, and can make the possibility of individual identification very difficult, even with DNA testing.

A clandestine grave investigation is often more complicated than an investigation into the site of a murder where a body is found within a couple of hours. In a murder case where a body is found in a good condition it may be easy to identify the victim. This can be done from the physical features of the person; for instance, if they have a birthmark on their left cheek and whether they have any other identifying marks like a specific tattoo on a particular part of the body. Photographs taken of the victim's face can also be used for identification.

In such a murder case, the site of the body can be preserved and marked as a crime scene. By contrast, the clandestine gravesite will be fundamentally altered by the excavation so there is a risk of evidence relating to the context (i.e. the gravesite) being destroyed as the excavation proceeds.

It is important to note that in some cases, the perpetrator may have had doubts about the original burial site, so may have dug up the bodies and re-buried them in a more concealed site (secondary burial site). Investigators thus may have to be extra careful to look out for evidence to determine if this is an original site or a secondary one. The earth attached to the skeleton can be crucial in this regard.

## THE OFFICE ON MISSING PERSONS

In February 2018 the Office on Missing Persons (OMP) was established in order to address the problem of disappearances in Sri Lanka. Its creation marked an important acknowledgement that Sri Lanka's large number of disappearance problem required a permanent institution to address a problem spanning the war, insurrections and political violence.

The OMP was set up as an independent state institution tasked with protecting the rights and interests of victims (OMP Act 10(c)). It was also mandated to trace the whereabouts of the missing and to clarify the circumstances in which persons went missing (OMP Act 2(a), 10(1)(a)).

The OMP has the authority to act as an observer in clandestine grave investigations and to request a Magistrate to initiate excavations (12(d)). As of July 2023 the OMP is observing over 10 clandestine grave cases but none of the cases have resulted in a positive identification. Although it has significant powers, the lack of technical capacity, limited collaborations with other state agencies and insufficient focus on the search are serious challenges for the OMP to fulfil its responsibility towards families of the missing and disappeared, especially of identifying the whereabouts of their loved ones.

# Investigations into clandestine graves in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka most clandestine grave investigations are carried out under the supervision of a Magistrate. These are carried out either as inquests or investigations under the Code of Criminal Procedure Act. The main purpose is to establish the cause of death and where required carry out a criminal investigation. While the case gets called and heard in the court room, the investigations will take place in parallel. A key part of the investigation will take place at the clandestine gravesite.

In such cases, it is the Judicial Medical Officer (JMO) who usually plays the role of chief investigator, but they may be assisted by an archaeologist who will assist in the digging (excavation) process. The Magistrate plays an overall supervisory role and will make key decisions on how to proceed based on suggestions of the investigation team. The police are a central actor in the investigation process and are responsible for protecting the site.

A special unit of the police, the Scene of Crime Officers (SOCO) will generally be first at the gravesite and also conduct inquiries to support the investigations. Evidence taken out of the grave may be kept in the court complex, police station or with the JMO. Some evidence may be sent for analysis to laboratories or government departments, like the Government Analyst Department.

The existing medico-legal system in Sri Lanka is designed to deal with unexpected, unnatural or suspicious deaths but it faces distinct challenges in dealing with clandestine graves.

For instance, the JMOs are largely specialized in forensic pathology, dealing primarily with cases where the soft tissue (muscles, organs etc.) is more or less intact. By contrast, forensic anthropology is a specialized field dealing with skeletal remains (bones).

As explained in the next chapter, Sri Lanka lacks sufficient numbers of specialized forensic experts and does not yet have a comprehensive approach to undertake clandestine grave investigations in an effective manner.

***“The forensic experts in Sri Lanka are regularly carrying out judicial medical investigations on the recently deceased. However, as in most countries, these experts are not fully proficient in the specific skills required to recover and analyse bones, especially those contained within mass graves” (ICRC Needs Assessment, 2015, p.31).***

As such, international forensic expertise could play a vital role until domestic capacity and processes are developed. There is precedent for this in the Chemmani mass grave excavations undertaken in 1999, where 4 international forensic experts were formally involved in the case to provide “technical assistance.”

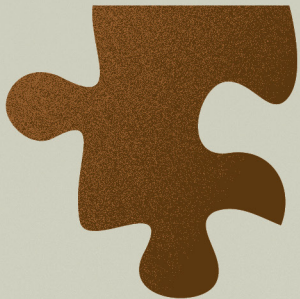


Besides the technical limitations, the context in Sri Lanka is challenging with significant political pressures that undermine independent investigation processes. A majority of clandestine grave investigations that have been investigated are yet to be concluded. Many of these cases remain unresolved and the court has not provided its conclusions, and some of them, including Mathale (2013) and Kalawanchikudy (2014), have been 'laid by,' as the relevant court does not continue to hear the case.

In such situations, families and civil society groups can play an important role through intervening to ensure that cases are investigated properly and that there is public access to information relating to the investigations.



# How have clandestine grave investigations progressed globally?



The horrific problem of mass disappearances is an issue faced by many countries across the world from Europe and Latin America to Africa and Asia. These large-scale disappearances most often took place in the context of a civil war or authoritarian regimes. In a number of countries, clandestine graves have been investigated to find the truth of what happened to some of the missing and disappeared. These investigations have sometimes resulted in the identification of remains, matching them to missing persons, and the handover of remains to families.

There have also been some prosecutions of perpetrators using evidence discovered in the graves. In Bosnia-Herzegovina where more than 34,000 people went missing during the civil war (1992-5), the fate of 80% have been accounted for and their remains identified, following substantial international assistance and

expertise. In response to the phenomenon of clandestine graves globally over the last forty years or so, we have seen the emergence of specialized skill sets, processes and institutions for investigations.

As a region that has faced this phenomenon of disappearances, Latin America has emerged as one of the pioneers with a number of specialized civil society organizations who have been able to investigate such graves. While in some instances it has been civil society, equipped with forensic staff, carrying out the search, in other countries it has been state institutions (like the OMP in Sri Lanka) that have been established to undertake this task.

Parallel to the emergence of these institutions, specialist fields have also developed, especially in forensics. While each institution may have different skill sets, techniques and modes of operation, there are important similarities in approach:

## **Involvement of families:**

An effective and credible investigation needs to involve families of the missing and disappeared in different ways. As noted, families have a right to observe activities around a clandestine gravesite investigation. Their participation lends credibility to the investigation process as there is general public distrust in state authorities. In cases where the investigating authorities failed to include families or even provide them information directly, the result was increased public distrust in the outcome of the tests and the independence of the investigating authorities.



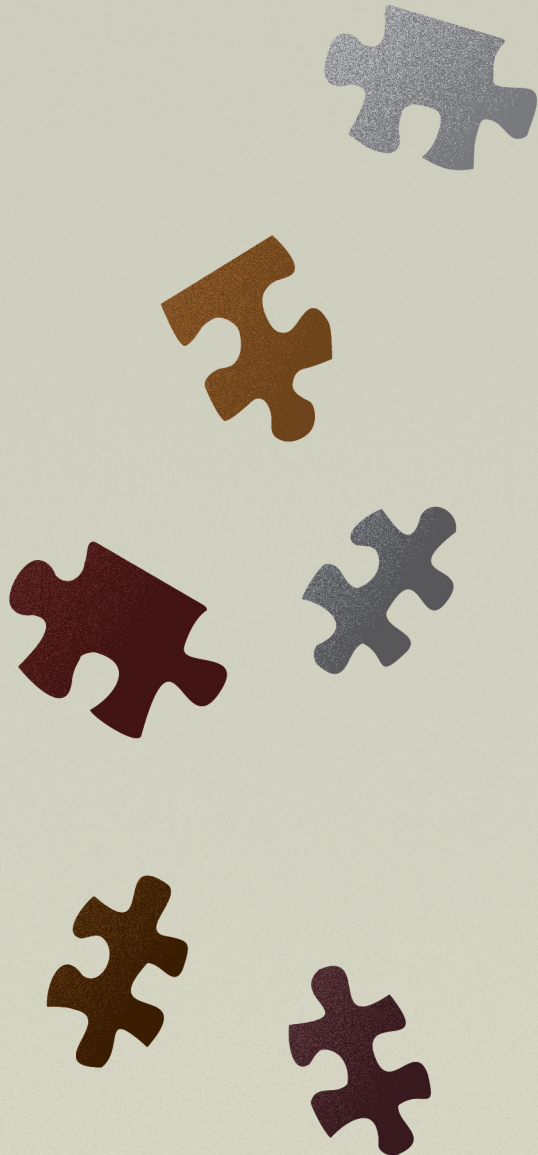
Families are vital sources for information crucial to an effective investigation, such as providing unique physical characteristics of the missing person. Family members are also required to provide DNA to test if it matches with that of the body found in the grave. For institutions working on the search, families are not just seen as sources of information but necessary partners in a challenging process. Later on in this booklet we will discuss different approaches to involving families in investigations.

### **Use of forensic skills:**

The investigation of clandestine graves requires specialized forensic skills. Archaeology offers a vital set of techniques and skills that need to be adapted and applied in clandestine grave excavations. However, a clandestine gravesite should ideally be excavated by a forensic archaeologist who can not only recover the contents of the site in a safe and secure manner with minimal damage to evidence, but can explain how the bodies and associated evidence may have been deposited in the site.

The task of exhuming and analyzing the human remains (particularly when the bodies are skeletonized) requires the assistance of a forensic anthropologist who will examine the skeleton and provide analysis. Other forensic sciences such as forensic odontologists will also play a role to examine the teeth and compare data gathered from interviews with family members and medical reports in order to determine the identity of the body. Forensic geneticists will compare the DNA of the remains against that of presumed family members.

Continuing development in genetics can play a crucial role in identification. In this sense, both in terms of the state and non-state sectors, Sri Lanka has lagged behind in terms of these forensic skills.



### **Diverse Team:**

The investigation team has to be comprised of a diverse set of professionals. Besides investigators who have criminal investigation experience, the team will also require persons with research skills who have knowledge of disappearance patterns and the overall context of violence. In addition, the gravesite contains vital pieces of evidence such as soil, bullets and animal remains, all of which should be analysed.

The investigation team may consult external experts to understand specific pieces of evidence. The team should have access to other resources including admin support staff, labourers to assist in gravesite work and a psychosocial expert to provide counselling to members of the team or family members of the missing and disappeared, as and when required.

### **Multi-disciplinary and integrated approach:**

For an effective investigation of complex cases, several different methodologies need to be used. These methods include conventional criminal investigation procedures (for example interviewing potential witnesses and gathering of evidence) and also forensic sciences. Comparing medical records of the missing person with a recovered skeleton can help with identification, if for example, a particular person is known to have had a hip replacement or pace-maker, or other such “medical markers.”

In a multi-disciplinary approach these different methods are integrated in order to ensure more accurate outcomes.

Thus the solid relationship built by an investigator with families of the missing and disappeared can yield important information about a missing person's biological history. For instance, a sibling may reveal to an investigator that their brother who is missing had a motorbike accident that resulted in a knee-cap injury, which was not disclosed to their parents.

This multi-disciplinary approach seeks to combine the strengths of diverse fields ranging from criminal investigation and archaeology to odontology and genetics. Part of this integrated approach is that the final report for the case will bring together all the findings from the different sets of specialists, reconciling different lines of evidence. This is in contrast to individual experts following one technique, submitting separate reports to the judge, who may lack specialist knowledge, and who is therefore forced to come to conclusions on his/her own.

The approach to clandestine grave investigations continues to develop, especially with advances in technology and methodology.







## **EFFORTS TOWARDS DEVELOPING INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR INVESTIGATING CLANESTINE GRAVES**

Over the last few decades there have been significant developments in international humanitarian and international human rights law to recognize specific rights and obligations in relation to different aspects of disappearances. However, the development of a unified set of principles for clandestine grave protection and investigation has lagged behind.

In recent years there have been some efforts to introduce international standards, which although not binding, provide guidelines and best practices. In particular, the Bournemouth Protocol on Mass Grave Protection and Investigation (2020) along with the Minnesota Protocol on the Investigation of Potentially Unlawful Death (2016) can provide a reference point for improving practices and standards.

# What are the stages of a clandestine grave investigation?



**1. Discovery** is when a clandestine grave is identified.

**2. Reporting** is informing the relevant authorities of the discovery of a clandestine grave.

**3. Excavation** is the process of unearthing the site, down to the level of the human remains and other important evidence.

**4. Exhumation** is the process of continuing to expose the remains, in order to be clear as to which bones belong with which individuals. Exhumation also involves recovering the remains and associated finds from the grave.

**5. Analysis** involves multiple investigators examining different pieces of evidence in order to establish key facts relating to the crime.

**6. Identification** is the process of matching the human remains to a missing person.

**7. Handing over Remains** is when the human remains and personal items found in the gravesite are handed over to their families in order to conduct funeral rites.

It is also important to note that the investigations are not restricted to work in the gravesite and evidence collected from it, but is part of a much larger investigation process.

In parallel to the work at a gravesite, investigating authorities such as the police will conduct inquiries regarding the site and potential victims. These inquiries may continue to take place across the duration of the different phases of a gravesite investigation.



# Understanding each stage of a clandestine grave investigation

This section details the various stages of the investigation. In Sri Lanka, most investigations have not progressed to the last stages of identification and handing over of remains. Thus, the stages discussed below represent a more ideal scenario than experienced reality here, although positive examples from Sri Lanka are referenced.

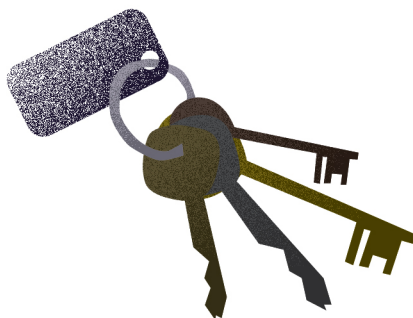
## 1. Discovery

In the last three years the media has highlighted the discovery of two clandestine gravesites annually. These discoveries have taken place in different circumstances, such as when

- a farmer began cultivating a plot that had not been cleared for years,
- construction workers dug up land to lay the foundation for a building,
- demining was carried out to clear an area of unexploded ordinances.

It is important to be cautious in instances of accidental discovery of bones, and not presume that it is a clandestine grave related to the conflict or political violence, as there are several possible explanations:

- some animal bones at a superficial glance may look like human bones, which is why specialized investigators are required before public pronouncements are made,
- discovered human remains may in fact be a burial site of historical interest – i.e. they are skeletons of people who lived before the modern era,
- clandestine graves may not necessarily relate to conflict-related or enforced disappearances but may be linked to other crimes,
- after the tsunami of December 26 2004, over 35,000 people were killed or went missing in Sri Lanka. Recovered bodies were most often buried together in mass graves. Not all these sites were clearly marked due to the sheer scale of destruction, which overwhelmed the authorities and local communities.



## POTENTIAL EMOTIONS

The announcement of a discovery of a clandestine grave can set off a series of emotions for families of the disappeared and missing. These may include:

- fear that the remains of their loved ones could be in the grave,
- confusion as to whether this news is related to their loved one in any way,
- guilt or anger (directed at themselves or others) for considering that their loved one may be dead,
- anxiety that the discovery of the grave could in some way confirm their worst fears,
- renewed emotional pain that their loved one is still missing,
- feelings of exhaustion that they still have no news of what happened to their loved ones,
- irritation that third parties, including embassies and activists, continuously ask them about what is happening at the gravesite.
- or they may feel nothing.

For persons working with disappeared persons it is important to share news of a discovery or respond to such news from a family member in a measured tone and without raising expectations or directly linking the discovery to the family's missing loved one when there is no clear proof. Where possible, care workers and people supporting families of the disappeared should attempt to follow up and get updated information to share with family members on developments relating to the grave.

## 2. Reporting

The discovery of suspected human remains must be reported in order for the investigation to progress:

Reporting to the appropriate authorities:

Where possible the police should be alerted as soon as possible, but where they are not present, like in a small village, another local official like the Grama Niladhari Officer or Justice of Peace should be informed. If it is not reported to these officials but instead to others, like some local army personnel or another government official, an investigation may not be initiated.

Failure to report: In some cases, individuals who discover suspected human remains may choose not to report it to the appropriate officials. This may be due to fear, as they may be worried that an investigation could prevent the continuation of their work on or near the site. If this happens, an investigation will not be initiated. However, a clandestine grave is a potential crime scene, therefore not reporting its discovery is an obstruction of justice and a violation of the law.

Suspending on-going activities: All on-going work or other activity on the site needs to be immediately suspended. For instance, if a backhoe is being used by construction workers to dig land when the human remains are found and earth from the site is being moved to another location, this work should immediately stop. This cessation will avoid any further damage to or loss of crucial evidence.



It is also important that those who make a discovery do not continue digging up the site in search of remains, as this may also result in the loss or destruction of critical evidence.

**Protecting the Site:** Following the reporting of a clandestine gravesite, the police may cordon off the area as a crime scene and a police presence might be established to ensure security for the site and to avoid tampering of evidence.



## MANNAR SATHOSA CASE

In March 2018, a woman found bone fragments in the sand she had bought for construction work. She reported the matter to the authorities and the police became involved. Their investigations led to the Sathosa construction site in the heart of Mannar Town. Declaring this a crime scene, an investigation team began excavations and soon found several skeletons. Over time, more than 300 skeletons were found at the site. It was thanks to the timely action taken by the woman that this site was discovered.

Like this woman there are a few such individuals who have reported similar discoveries to their relevant local authority and/or police thereby ensuring that there was proper follow up. Reporting is extremely important, or else the remains will remain hidden, the potential crime will not be investigated, and families may not learn about the fate of their loved one.

### 3. Excavation

**Purpose:** The excavation process seeks to locate the remains and other evidence. The excavation will also help gather evidence to explain how the human remains ended up at this site and provide answers to key questions like a) how old is the grave? b) were the bodies buried with care and respect or was the burial more haphazard? It should be noted that the process of excavation and exhumation are tightly linked but for purpose of clarity are explained separately.

**Need for care:** The site has to be excavated carefully for several reasons. Firstly, to avoid any damage to the human remains. Secondly, the focus is not just on extracting the human remains but also ensuring that all other associated evidence is identified. Thirdly, the site, including the earth wall of the grave and the earth above the remains holds crucial evidence to understand the history of the grave. Excavations dramatically change and damage the site, and the original context of the gravesite cannot be re-created.

**Method:** Excavations need to be carried out in a systematic and scientific manner. The site and each step of the process of excavation has to be carefully documented and recorded. Methods and tools such as site maps, diagrams, measurements and photography used by archaeologists have been adapted for this process. In an ideal scenario, forensic archaeologists and forensic anthropologists will work together on a site.

**Need for documentation:** In order to preserve all evidence from the site

during the process of excavation, full documentation is necessary, including photography, video and logging of all items/remains as they are found.

**Potential loss of information:** Excavations carried out without proper training and experience can result in loss of key information and can result in inaccurate interpretations. For instance, it is important to establish a relationship between the artefacts and the human remains. If the page of a calendar, where the year is clearly visible, is found close to the surface, and the human remains are close to 6 feet under, one cannot immediately assume there is a relationship between the two. If the fact that they were discovered at separate depths is not recorded, investigators may assume that the calendar indicates the date of the burial. It is possible that the human remains and the calendar were deposited at the site in different time periods.

**Ensuring access:** Investigators of a clandestine gravesite need to ensure that they provide information about the process and access to the site on a regular basis to both media and families of the missing and disappeared. This is to ensure transparency and give credibility to the investigation process.

**Time & Labour:** Excavations, especially where there are several suspected bodies or where the site is physically complex (for example down a well or where there are landmines), can be both time and labour intensive. Hence, excavations can often be slow processes and may take weeks, or, with complicated mass graves, months.

## 4. Exhumation

**Purpose:** The aim is to recover all of the human remains and associated artifacts to ensure that there is no loss of evidence, and to avoid commingling (mixing up) of remains if there is more than one individual.

**Need for Care:** Exhumation needs to be conducted with care to avoid damaging the human remains. In some gravesites, the earth will be very damp and acidic, so the bones may be more fragile. Ensuring the physical integrity of the remains is important for the investigation process, but also to preserve remains for possible return to family for mourning and final rites.

**Chain of custody:** All human remains and associated evidence need to be carefully recorded, packed and labelled. This is important for the integrity of the investigations, especially if the case is taken up in court. It is vital to prove chain of custody and that the evidence has not been manipulated or tampered with.

## CARBON DATING AND DATING A SITE

In at least two clandestine gravesites (Mathale and Mannar Sathosa), a decision was made by the Magistrate Court to use carbon dating to determine how old the skeletons are. Carbon-14 dating or radiocarbon dating is generally used by archaeologists to date organic material, including human bones to identify which historical period they are from. It is also possible to determine if a person is from the modern era (i.e. post 1945) due to nuclear testing that resulted in a sharp increase in radiocarbon in the atmosphere.

It should be noted that the use of carbon dating is not commonly used by other search mechanisms around the world who tend to use evidence gathered from the human remains, associated finds and the gravesite context, in addition to circumstantial information, in order to determine the period of the gravesite. If carbon dating is to be used, the report from the test alone should not be used to conclude a case but the findings should be included into a larger report that integrates other test results and analysis from different experts.

## BIOLOGICAL PROFILE

A biological profile includes the sex, general age at death and stature of the individual. In the case of skeletonized remains, this is undertaken through an examination and by measurement of different bones, ideally by a forensic anthropologist. For example, observations of bone development and tooth eruption in the skeleton of a child can be used to determine the age range. The hip bones and skull can be used to distinguish sex.







## 5. Analysis

**Purpose:** Different pieces of evidence are examined and a hypothesis is developed regarding critical questions including the identity of the victims, date of the grave, cause of death and possible perpetrators.

**Investigation Personnel:** The scientific analysis of the individual types of evidence may be undertaken by members of the investigation team or sent to specialist investigation institutions. For instance, bullets or remnants of a shell may be sent to a ballistic expert. In a grave where there are multiple skeletons, the remains may be sent to a university with a forensics unit.

**Examining human remains:** When examining the skeletal remains from a gravesite, the specialists will attempt to determine identifying features of the victims and how they died. Analysts will try to establish a biological profile for each skeleton. The remains will also be examined for any signs of trauma.

## DIFFERENT TYPES OF BONE TRAUMA

Experts will look out for damage to bones, which is referred to as trauma, and any other deviations, which could be pathologies (for instance the fusion of specific bones due to arthritis). There are three different types of trauma:

**Antemortem/pre-mortem:** trauma prior to the incident of death. For instance, if the person had a fall when they were a child and broke their arm, this could be identified by the specialist who can observe the fracture and re-growth.

**Perimortem:** trauma around the time of death. For example, the way in which the bone is damaged will indicate the form of violence and type of weapon. Analysis can reveal if the damage was caused by stabbing or gun shot.

**Postmortem:** trauma to the bones after death, which could be a result of animals, plant growth or human interventions. For instance, if the skeleton was discovered by a farmer who was using a shovel and accidentally damaged a bone. The manner in which the bone was damaged, especially colour and texture, will indicate that this damage took place after death.

## POSSIBLE EMOTIONAL CHALLENGES

Visiting a gravesite may be extremely distressing for family members, even though they may not know whether their loved one's body is buried there or not. Some families may want to go but may have mixed feelings. Seeing skeletal remains may be especially hard so it is important to prepare oneself.

In certain instances, the investigating officials may be reticent or even hostile towards families. They may refuse to share basic information around the case, frustrating families' efforts to know the status of the case and how they can help.

Families may be even obstructed from visiting the site, which may heighten fears that evidence is being tampered with or manipulated. As noted in the chapter on family participation, families of the missing and disappeared have specific rights but in each case the authorities will determine how much access and participation will be permitted.

## 6. Identification

**Purpose:** Investigators need to identify the human remains in a clandestine grave and confirm that the remains match the identity of a missing person.

**Tools:** A number of methods can be used for identification including:

- i) Comparing specific physical features of the missing individual and matching these to the skeleton, and to associated effects. This kind of personal information is most often provided by family members. For instance, if the missing person had a chipped tooth or wore an amulet on their fractured right arm. In the past visual recognition was commonly used where a person was identified using their clothes and personal items. Currently, biological indicators are considered more important than personal effects for several reasons, including as the latter may be displaced during burial.
- ii) Analysing the circumstances of when the person went missing and the events around the gravesite can provide important evidence to piece together a timeline.
- iii) Matching the DNA of the human remains with that of presumed family members.

**Positive match:** Instead of relying on just one of the above tools, it is advisable to use several methods to achieve a higher probability of an identification. For instance, if two

cousins disappeared, and their DNA samples prove inconclusive, using other methods of identification could result in a positive match. This could include looking at any antemortem trauma.

**Informing families:** Adequate attention should be paid by the authorities to inform families when human remains have been identified. This should be undertaken with sensitivity and as a priority action, with families being informed first instead of having to hear about it from the media or a third party. Counselling support should be made available.

## USE OF DNA FOR IDENTIFICATION

DNA analysis has become a popular tool for identification. The DNA of each person is unique. Humans inherit half their DNA from their father and half from their mother. Each child will have their own DNA combination. But DNA analysis has its limitations. The DNA from a discovered skeleton cannot be used on its own to identify whose body it is. This DNA has to be compared with another sample, most often of 'potential' immediate family members. These are immediate 'blood relatives' such as the individual's parents or children of the missing person. If the missing person is a married man, his wife's DNA or that of his adopted children cannot be used, as they are related only by marriage, not blood.

Ideally both his parents would be approached to provide samples. If his biological parents are not alive but he has biological children, their DNA along with of his wife's can be used in that scenario (as the children will have DNA from them both). Where immediate 'blood' relatives are not available, more distantly related relations, such as cousins, can provide samples.

DNA can be collected from family members in different ways. One of the most common and painless methods is by rubbing a cotton swab against the inside of the cheeks. Ideally, DNA from a skeleton is obtained from the thick bones, such as the femur (long leg bone), humerus (long arm bone) or teeth. If the skeletal remains have been burned or are severely damaged by acidic soils, then it may be difficult to obtain a good DNA sample or the DNA may be heavily degraded. Extracting DNA from bones is specialized and complicated, and needs a special laboratory.

While Sri Lanka has different entities who work with DNA (such as the Government Analyst Department or private entities like Genetech), they lack the expertise to undertake the kinds of required tests. Therefore, the State may send a tiny bone sample to a foreign laboratory where the DNA will be extracted and tested. This is an expensive process.

## EMOTIONALLY DIFFICULT PROCESS

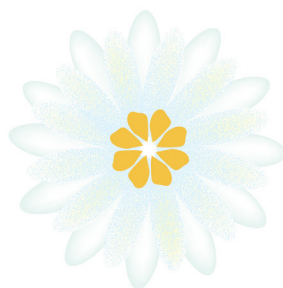
The process of identification can be painful and difficult to process. For instance, when investigators question family members about what their missing loved one looked like and ask about any injuries they may have suffered in their youth, it can be emotionally painful to recall.

Similarly having to identify personal effects of loved ones like clothes and jewelry can be heart wrenching. It may be difficult to recall specific details that seemed so clear, like what colour shirt their loved one was wearing when they saw them last; but this is not unusual. Sometimes they may doubt their memories.

In cases where investigators positively identify the remains of an individual, families may find it extremely distressing to finally find out the fate of their loved one. Although families want to know the truth, their hope is that their loved one is alive. After years of living between hope and their worst fears, they have to come to terms with their loss.

The handing over of remains can also be hard when, instead of a body, the family has to receive a set of bones that may barely fill a coffin, though finally finding out what happened may provide certainty and relief.

## 7. Handing over remains



**Aim:** Handing over remains to family members allows them to mourn and conduct religious and cultural rituals to bid farewell to their loved one. In other countries that have experienced disappearances, the handing over of remains is considered a very important phase in the investigation process of clandestine graves.

**Protecting remains:** It should be noted that because the remains often form part of evidence in on-going investigations or court processes, they cannot be cremated but are usually buried and the site is kept clearly identifiable.

**Process of handing over:** Care should be taken in arranging the process of handing over remains as some families may wish to do so in private, while others may wish to do so in community settings.

**Rituals:** Some families may find comfort in finally being able to hold rituals associated with funerals when they receive the remains of their loved ones. Such rituals provide a space to mourn and remember their loved ones, in addition to providing public recognition for the loss.

## UNSYMPATHETIC SOCIETY

The social environment can be challenging for families of the missing and disappeared. Exhumation processes may become complicated in specific communities where there are religious or social restrictions on buried remains being disinterred. Even acquaintances who may be broadly sympathetic may not understand the experience of having to deal with disappearances first-hand.

Thus, families may not only have to deal with their personal emotions and family dynamics but also with societal expectations and prejudices that would make the process tougher.

The process of mourning can be further complicated when religious leaders or faith communities are unwilling to allow or participate in funeral rites. Being denied funeral rites or feeling unsupported can be an additional source of distress for families, and dealing with such challenges may require different types of emotional and social resources, including friends and extended family members. It is important that families have space to undertake rituals that are meaningful to them.





# Importance of family participation

Families can and should be allowed to play a crucial role in the investigations of clandestine gravesites. Families have specific rights and obligations due to them in relation to disappearances, enshrined in both national and international law. In 2018 the Government passed the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance Act, No.5 of 2018 which domesticated key rights. Some of these rights include:

- The right to truth, to know what exactly what happened to missing and disappeared persons
- The right to an official investigation which the state needs to conduct
- The right to reparations and fair compensation
- The right to form and be part of associations dedicated to locating the disappeared
- The right to mourn, which is increasingly recognised as a fundamental right

These rights broadly reflect the differing needs of families. Families should not be compelled to choose between these rights; hence opting for compensation does not mean that families waive their right to truth and justice.

Families can serve several important functions in investigations:

**Provide investigator contextual information:** Families will have vital context-related information that can help investigators reconstruct the context of the case. This could be background information such as who were the local commanders of the paramilitary operating in the area and key events during the time of the disappearance. It could also relate to the history of land plot where the gravesite is situated.

**Provide information on missing and disappeared persons:** As the investigation proceeds it may focus on specific missing and disappeared persons in relation to the human remains in the grave. Investigators will turn to families to provide critical information discussed earlier, such as the circumstances of disappearances, and physical and other distinguishing features. As the case progresses towards identification, DNA may be required from families.

**Provide information about other cases:** Families hold critical pieces of information that no one else may know, including about other potential gravesites. These sites may not necessarily pertain to their family member but to other disappeared persons.

**Connect families with investigations:** Family associations of the missing and disappeared or their representatives can help connect investigators with the







families linked to a specific case. Where there is mistrust of the authorities, these links may prove vital to assisting the investigating team gain some trust and confidence of the families.

Provide credibility for investigations: The involvement of families in clandestine grave cases can lend credibility to investigations, especially in contexts like Sri Lanka, where there is deep-rooted suspicion of the state and investigating agencies. The meaningful involvement of families in such cases can help allay concerns around lack of transparency and the independence of the investigations.

## How can families participate?

Although families do participate in some of the on-going cases, it is sometimes seen by authorities as burdensome and unnecessary, when in fact, as outlined above, it strengthens the investigation process. There must be more advocacy to ensure families secure their right to do so, including in the ways outlined below.

Intervene legally in judicial inquiries into on-going clandestine gravesites: In countries like Sri Lanka, where a gravesite investigation very often becomes a judicial inquiry, it is possible for families to intervene in such cases. This representation allows families more access to the investigation process, and they can raise issues and concerns through their lawyer in case they see any problems in the process or have specific requests. At the outset of investigations, families and family associations may not have enough information that links the gravesite to their missing loved one.

However, they may intervene in order to follow the case until they have enough information to make a determination, or they may do so on behalf of other victims, or to better ensure an effective investigation process.





## RIGHT TO INTERVENE

The right of families to be represented in clandestine grave cases is recognized in Sri Lanka. In February 2022 in relation to the Mannar Sathosa mass grave case, the Vavuniya High Court (HCV/REV/327/20) recognized the rights of the families to participate, and have their interest represented by a lawyer in court. This right to intervene is important for families who have been searching for years for the truth and whereabouts of loved ones.

For a family of the missing and disappeared to do so they need to identify an attorney-at-law who will appear on their behalf. This lawyer will not only appear in court but will observe the investigations at the gravesite. Their lawyer will represent their interests, which could include making suggestions to ensure the case is properly investigated. This may also better ensure that there is greater transparency in the case and that other families of the missing and disappeared have access to information.

Families of the missing and disappeared have a right to intervene in such a case even when they can't be certain that it is their loved one in the grave. Under Sri Lankan law, an aggrieved party (meaning a directly affected person, in legal language) has a right to be an intervening party. Unlike in other cases where it is clear who is an aggrieved party, in a clandestine grave case this is more complicated as it is unclear whose human remains are in the grave.

The identity of the remains has to be established through an investigation process, which requires the assistance of families of the missing and disappeared. As such families have been able to intervene in a number of previous and on-going clandestine grave cases.

In March 2020 the lawyers appearing on behalf of families in the Mannar Sathosa mass grave case in the Mannar Magistrate Court were informed that they would no longer be able to be an intervening petitioner. This decision was made following the submission by the Attorney General that a laboratory report relating to the carbon dating of the remains showed that it was a historic rather than a modern grave, hence the families of the disappeared were not connected to this case.

This decision effectively barred the lawyers representing families from appearing in the Mannar case. In response these lawyers filed an application for revision in the Vavuniya High Court. They also requested a stay order on the inquiry, which was granted, thereby temporarily suspending the Sathosa case proceedings. The Vavuniya High Court decision, in February 2022 sets an important precedent marks a victory for families in ensuring their right to intervene in such cases, and their broader right to truth and justice.

Assist in initiating an investigation:  
Besides intervening in on-going investigations, families of the missing and disappeared play a significant role in initiating investigations. As noted at the outset of this booklet families have most often exhausted the different options and tried to convince different state authorities and non-state organizations that investigations can be initiated.

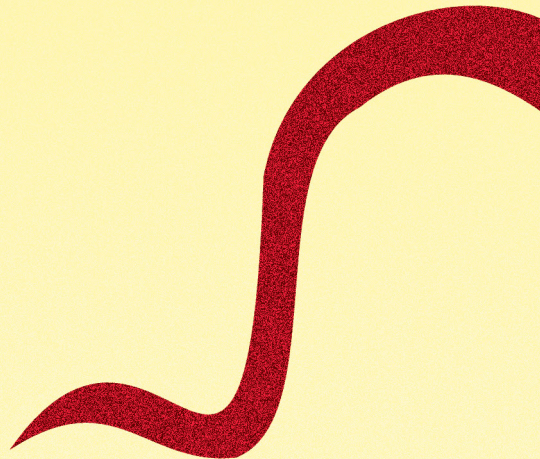
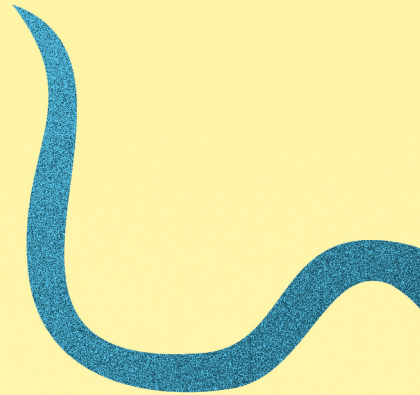
In instances where families have credible evidence of the existence of a grave, they can still complain to the police or the OMP to initiate an investigation. However, state agencies may prove unresponsive, uncommunicative and may not engage in effective follow up action, which can be very frustrating for families.

Observe investigations on the site:  
Families may wish to observe the excavation process. They may choose to do so for many reasons and in spite of how painful it may be to be present at the site and see skeletons being uncovered. Their very presence places a moral responsibility on those at the site to take greater care and to be aware of the human cost.

It also ensures greater transparency in the process, which in turn strengthens the credibility of the process. Some families in other parts of the world, in addition to standing vigil at the site, offer prayers and carry out rituals prior to excavation for the victims in the graves and to assist the investigators.

Actively Follow the case: Some families may prefer not to directly participate in a case. They could instead follow the case through the media, and civil society

institutions or associations of families of the missing and disappeared who may be directly involved in the case. Family associations may make public statements or organize protests when they are concerned about how the case is proceeding.





## COLLECTION OF DNA FROM FAMILIES FOR IDENTIFICATION

A key activity in different countries attempting to address the issue of disappearances is the collection of DNA from families of the missing and disappeared. Besides the collection of DNA required for specific cases being investigated, in such contexts state agencies or civil society organizations work towards establishing a DNA bank consisting of DNA from families of the missing and disappeared and from human remains.

This is very useful for identifications as in some clandestine graves investigations may not yield much information about the victims. Hence, comparing the DNA of human remains against a large volume of family DNA samples may yield a positive result. This is particularly important in contexts where it is evident that those who were abducted were moved to detention centres in another locality for weeks, if not months, and then killed and buried elsewhere.

In this way, even if the family member who donated DNA passes away, they will continue assisting in the search of their loved one.

# Psychosocial challenges during the investigation process

Different phases of the investigation process can be emotionally and socially very difficult for family members. Anticipating these possible scenarios and likely emotions may help some families to be better equipped and prepared to face them. In addition to the potential emotional challenges highlighted in the previous section, there may be other problems that families encounter in the process:

**Delays:** Clandestine grave investigations may take a long time. While families want to urgently know the identity of the victims, the process of investigation may take several months or sometimes longer. Even after the DNA is obtained from families to compare against the human remains, there may be delays in the tests, for instance if the DNA that is extracted from the bones is found to be degraded.

In some ongoing cases, several years have passed since the grave was discovered but those cases have not yet yielded conclusive findings whether the human remains found were related to conflict-related disappearances. For instance, the Mannar Sathosa case was discovered in 2018 and excavations commenced rapidly, but 5 years later the investigations still continue.

**Hurtful:** During the investigations families may have to hear different

assertions made about their loved ones or even the yet-to-be-identified bodies in the clandestine grave.

Disappearances are a highly politicized issue, so there may be claims that the persons buried in the clandestine grave belonged or collaborated with different armed groups, which may not be true. Families have had to deal with unsympathetic or cruel government officials who try to dissuade family members from making official complaints by claiming their loved one has 'merely' abandoned their family and are living elsewhere. Sometimes such allegations may be repeated in court and highlighted in the media.





# Support for families

Family members, friends, relatives, other families of the missing and disappeared, religious practitioners, counsellors or psychosocial practitioners, members of the investigating teams and others close to the clandestine graves investigations can all play a role in supporting families through these challenging processes.

Access to information, meaningful opportunities to participate, religious and cultural rites, social support and space to deal with and manage difficult emotions and social dynamics, as well as professional mental health services, can all help families through the difficult process of a clandestine graves investigation.

For those providing support to families it is important to review potentially effective ways of supporting them. While some individuals may need professional counselling, it is important to look at different forms of support:

Updates about the case:

The whole process of investigation may be confusing. Keeping track of what is going on and understanding the different legal issues and technical processes may be extremely difficult. This is an important area where those working with families have a vital role to play to ensure that families are kept informed and updates are provided in an easy to understand and timely manner.

Increasing awareness among families:

As noted in the beginning of this booklet, there is very little information accessible to families of the missing and disappeared about what clandestine grave investigations are like. In addition, there is little dialogue and awareness raising on this issue and its importance to the search. Civil society organizations working on disappearances and others can help create increased awareness through different forms of outreach so that families are better prepared to deal with this issue. The importance of collecting DNA samples from family members is also an important area.

Legally intervene in case:

Some families may want to intervene legally in the case, so it is important for allies to assist them, both to identify suitable lawyers who will work at minimal or no cost and also to make families aware of what is expected of them in the case. Lawyers who take on such cases should clearly explain the process and ensure regular updates to families.

Assisting in participation:

As noted earlier, participation can take multiple forms and for families who wish to participate or may have to become involved it is important to explain what exactly is expected of them. For instance, when families decide to visit, it may be useful for those working with those families to describe the process, what the site looks like, and the emotions they may feel, in order to prepare them to manage the visit as best as they can. For families who wish to legally intervene, potential lawyers should explain the process and ensure they continuously



update such families as the case progresses.

#### Accompaniment:

Families may find accompaniment during key phases of the investigation very useful. Accompaniers could be friends, individuals working with community-based organizations or even fellow families of the missing and disappeared. They can help provide company to families during difficult processes. For instance, after the visit to a gravesite, some family members may find it useful to sit with a trusted person to talk through what they experienced.

#### Community preparation:

Families of the missing and disappeared may not have the support of the wider community and may even face stigma or hostility as they attempt to participate in clandestine grave investigations and undertake rites when remains are handed over. It is important to build solidarity for families so that they feel more supported as they try to conduct rituals for their loved ones.

Undertaking awareness-raising at a community level on this subject is important. When families want to conduct rituals to remember or bury their loved ones, they may require the assistance of others to mediate with religious and community leaders who may not be supportive.

#### Advocacy:

Family participation both as a broader principle and in its implementation in individual cases is an issue requiring public advocacy. Through recognition at

a policy level it will be easier to apply in individual cases. Simultaneously, those involved in cases, especially lawyers, need to ensure that the rights of observation are implemented.

#### Counselling:

Some families may require the support of a counsellor to deal with the cumulative emotional toll. Sometimes, this emotional pain may manifest itself in a physical form, including breathlessness, headaches or aches in other parts of the body. It is important to identify an experienced counsellor who can best support them to reflect on how they are feeling and help them to manage any upsetting emotions and thoughts.





# Key sources

International Committee of the Red Cross, Accompanying the Families of Missing Persons, A Practical Handbook, March 2013.

International Committee of the Red Cross, The Forensic Human Identification Process: An Integrated Approach, January 2022.

International Commission on Missing Persons, Resolving the Missing Persons Issue in the Western Balkans, A Q&A and Topical Issue.

International Commission on Missing Persons, Family Rights, A Short Guide for Families of the Missing.

The Bournemouth Protocol on Mass Grave Protection and Investigation, 2020.

# Acknowledgements

This publication was made possible through a grant provided and knowledge shared by the Foundation de Antropologia Forense de Guatemala (FAFG). The Law & Society Trust (LST) offered a home for this project and this publication, and I am thankful to Prasanna Gajaweera, Sandun Thudugala and Sakuntala Kadirgamar.

Thank you to Claudia Rivera and Shari Eppel for checking the text for inaccuracies and gaps. Your enthusiasm for the project was heartening. Ananda Galapatti not only provided input on the psychosocial elements but helped re-work the text and provided opportunities for me to test the material with mental health and psychosocial practitioners. I am particularly grateful to Amara Happuarachchi, Marilyn Weaver, Sarala Emmanuel and Visaka Dharmadasa for helping me to workshop the material and for giving me feedback.

Chani Perera took on this task despite her heavy work schedule, and found ways of making this difficult and painful subject more accessible to readers. I am also thankful to Dulana Ethugala for your work in developing the illustrations and layout. Leana Pieris, thank you for taking the time to edit the text. Ximena Londono, Deanne Uyangoda and Nigel Nugawela, I am grateful for your advice and support. I have drawn inspiration and ideas from a number of publications, some of which are listed in the references, but I would like to draw special attention to the work I undertook in a Sri Lankan context with my former colleagues Sajini Fernando and Aruni Jayakody.

Many thanks to my translators who worked with me on the Sinhala and Tamil versions of this publication; Mohamed Fiqrhi and Dr Ganga Rajinee Dissanayaka. I appreciate the time and effort you took in trying to make the text both precise and accessible. My gratitude also to my readers for checking the text: Nehama Jayawardene, Asoka Piyarathna, Dr Ponni Arasu, K. Venthan and Dr Tanuja Thurairajah.

Any omissions or errors in the text are mine alone. If you have any comments or suggestions, please email me ([mirakraheem@yahoo.com](mailto:mirakraheem@yahoo.com)).

## About the Author:

Mirak Raheem is an independent researcher who is focused on finding ways to strengthen the search for the missing and disappeared in Sri Lanka. He previously served as Commissioner of the Office on Missing Persons (2018–2021) and was a member on the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms (2016).

