



Scene Documentation for Human Rights Investigators



Tal Simmons*, PhD, Department of Forensic Science Virginia Commonwealth University
Scott Edwards, PhD, Amnesty International Crisis Response Program

Aims

These workshops taught best practices of documenting scenes of crimes and human rights violations in accordance with accepted best field practices from the forensic sciences. The emphasis is not on cutting edge technology, but rather disseminating minimum standards for capturing and preserving critical scene information in a potentially hostile environment to investigators.



Images from Sudan (left) and Nigeria (right) are typical of those sent by investigators in the field to experts for analysis of victim demographics, trauma, and the postmortem interval.

Goals

1. Ensure effective documentation by field investigators to allow for effective fact-finding
2. Build capacity of Amnesty International to equip civil society partners with basic knowledge and technical capacity to document deaths and injuries, relying especially on notes, sketches, and photo- and video graphic documentation.
3. Improve existing partnerships with forensic experts to enable them to better analyze sites of mass and clandestine graves, or to estimate time since death, and/or to determine cause of death or injuries of victims largely based on photo- or video graphic documentation, and/or to identify victims.

Participants

Mexico City training (August 2017) - Amnesty researchers and investigators working on Latin America the Caribbean.
London training (October 2017) - Amnesty researchers; law and policy staff; and research managers. These covered staff from the Middle East/North Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and professional staff with a global remit (e.g. Crisis Response and Refugee and Migrant staff).

Final Syllabus

DAY 1

- Case Study - Importance of Good Scene Documentation for Post Scene Examination
- Systematic Approach to Scene Investigations – how big is your scene?
- Note-taking
- Mapping, Sketching and Very Basic Measuring Techniques
- Notetaking and Sketching Exercise (Outdoors)
- Exercise Review & Question and Answer Session
- Case Study – Amnesty, Aba, Nigeria



At left, a photograph sent to an expert from an exhumed mass grave in Myanmar. Amnesty investigators sought information concerning victim trauma and the postmortem interval. At right, participants in the London training get ready to search the scene for evidence and to document it with photos and site maps.

The training included the use of and practice with basic documentation tools such as scales, measuring tapes, quadrille sketch paper and DSLR cameras and scales. Additionally, short and portable guides on photography were also provided.

DAY 2

- Case Study - Photography's Role in Post Scene Assessment
- Photography - Scene Photography for Investigators
- Scene Photography Exercise (Outdoors)
- Photography exercise review
- Wound Documentation Photography
- Wound Documentation Photography Exercises
- Exercise Review
- Open session – any topic Q & A

Mexico City Feedback

Positives

- How forensic experts can use photographs or videos
- How these photographs can be improved for analysis. What type of documentation (photographic characteristics, etc.) will help experts while evaluating a scene or case.
- Reminder of the need for detail and rigor

Room for improvement

- Make it more relevant to human rights investigations
- More practical/field exercises



At left, participants in the Mexico City training take notes on the mock scene; in the center, participants use close up photography to document evidence located at the scene; and at right, a participant measures his pace so that he can create a rough map of a scene without needing measuring equipment.

NGO Human rights researchers often face situations that are not comparable to other professions that deploy forensic scene documentation. For example, in contrast to law enforcement, Amnesty International staff normally do not have access to secured scenes and do not document evidence for use in courts as a goal. Amnesty may now integrate parts of the training into the organization's standard research induction training.

London Feedback

- "I think this is a life skill, and trains you to think in an investigative manner. Very transferable to our work."
- "Every session was good but the sessions on drawing and photographs are probably the ones that I will incorporate into my work."