



Forensic Anthropology Population Data

The clandestine multiple graves in Malaysia: The first mass identification operation of human skeletal remains



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ABSTRACT

The first ever mass identification operation of skeletal remains conducted for the clandestine graves in Malaysia consisted of 165 individuals unearthed from 28 human trafficking transit camps located in Wang Kelian, along the Thai-Malaysia border. A DVI response was triggered in which expert teams comprising of pathologists, anthropologists, odontologists, radiologists and DNA experts were gathered at the identified operation centre. The Department of Forensic Medicine, Hospital Sultanah Bahiyah, Alor Star, Kedah, located approximately 75 km away from Wang Kelian, was temporarily converted into a victim identification centre (VIC) as it is the nearest available forensic facility to the mass grave site. The mortuary operation was conducted over a period of 3 months from June to September 2015, and was divided into two phases; phase 1 involving the postmortem examination of the remains of 116 suspected individuals and for phase 2 the remains of 49 suspected individuals. The fact that the graves were of unknown individuals afforded the mass identification operation a sufficient duration of 2 weeks as preparatory phase enabling procedural and daily victim identification workflow to be established, and the setting up of a temporary body storage for the designated mortuary. The temporary body storage has proven to be a significant factor in enabling the successful conclusion of the VIC operation to the final phase of temporary controlled burials. Recognition from two international observers, Mr. Andrés Patiño Umaña, from the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) and Prof. Noel Woodford from Victoria Institute of Forensic Medicine (VIFM) had proven the mortuary operation was in compliance to the international quality and standards. The overall victim identification and mortuary operation identified a number of significant challenges, in particular the management of commingled human remains as well as the compilation of postmortem data in the absence of antemortem data for future reconciliation. CF Index in this DVI operation is 9%, indicating the primary identifications in this operation were effective. Limitations and further improvements of the mass identification operation will be discussed. This paper details the planning, preparations and management of the mass identification operation on the exhumed human remains which was also a forensic humanitarian service for the dead with dignity and respect.

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1. Introduction

For decades human trafficking across borders for sexual, labour and other forms of exploitation is a subject that has captured the attention of international organisations, activists and policy makers. It is a serious crime and a grave violation of human

rights. In Malaysia the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act 2007 (amended in 2010) prohibits all forms of human trafficking and prescribes punishment of up to 20 years imprisonment [1]. Between May and September 2015, Malaysia was under the global spotlight following the discovery of clandestine multiple graves at several transit camps for human trafficking located in Wang Kelian along the Malaysia-Thai border. The Royal Malaysia Police (RMP) has uncovered 163 clandestine graves in 28 camps, some of which were empty, atop steep hills a few hundred metres above sea level. A total number of 165 human remains were recovered from a total of 8 grave sites (Table 1). Consequently, DVI teams comprising

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Table 1

Phases 1 and 2 victim identification operation.

Phase	Grave site	Date received (all in 2015)	Number of body bags received	Number of human remains
Phase 1	Zone A	25th May	3	1
	Zone B	26th–30th May	37	44
	Zone C	5th June	14	14
	Zone D	20th June	20	20
	Zone E	7th June	30	30
	Zone F	8th June	7	7
Phase 2	Zone G	22nd August	6	31
	Zone H	22nd August	18	18
Total			132	165 individuals

forensic pathologists and anthropologists from the Ministry of Health (MOH), forensic odontologists from MOH, Malaysian Armed Forces and academia, forensic radiologists from MOH and academia, and DNA analysts from the Malaysian Chemistry Department were mobilised in response to the discovery of the graves. The Department of Forensic Medicine of Sultanah Bahiyah Hospital, Alor Setar which is approximately 75 km away from Wang Kelian, was designated as the VIC for this operation as it is the nearest forensic facility to the clandestine graves that is suitably equipped for the anticipated mass identification workload. The mass identification operation for the clandestine graves, code named *Operasi Wawasan Khas* by the RMP, can be divided into scene management and body recovery by the police, preparatory phase (before post-mortem), postmortem phase (during the post-mortem) and post-postmortem phase (after the post-mortem). Unfortunately the clandestine nature of human trafficking itself precludes antemortem data collection, and this in turn necessitates temporary controlled burials instead of a final reconciliation phase for this operation. One substantial issue to be addressed is the setting up of a temporary body storage facility to support the existing mortuary which has been a design storage capacity for only 18 bodies.

2. The mass grave site

The scene management and body recovery phase was managed by the RMP with the assistance of General Operations Force (PGA). The graves were either grouped in clusters or arranged in rows within a camp perimeter, and given the terrain, all the camps were completely inaccessible by vehicles. The location of the camps and graves were divided into sectors and zones respectively for search and recovery tasks, enabling the systematic tagging of the recovered human remains. The zones were marked A–F for phase

**Fig. 1.** Grave Zone A.**Fig. 2.** Grave Zone B.**Fig. 3.** Grave Zone C.

1 and for phase 2; G and H (Figs. 1–10). The exhumations were done manually zone by zone by RMP and PGA personnel without direct anthropological supervision. Forensic pathologists or anthropologists were not able to be present during the exhumation and recovery of the remains due to the treacherous terrain of the graves site. Most of the graves were approximately 1 m deep and none have any religious markings on the ground. The majority of the remains had been buried enshrouded in white linen and the graves were generally oriented towards Mecca, in keeping with Muslim burial rites. The exhumed remains were placed in body bags, one body bag to a grave. The body bags were transferred down the hills on foot by RMP and PGA personnel to the PGA base camp, and

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