Physicians for Human Rights

"You Have to Have Proof."

Evidence

In the wake of the 1995 massacre in Srebrenica of more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys by forces commanded by Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic, a team of PHR forensic experts spent months exhuming and identifying remains contained in mass graves there. PHR’s Dr. William Haglund, Senior Forensic Advisor for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, led the team that gathered evidence showing the victims were executed and dumped in shallow graves.

Change

In March 2016, after six years of proceedings, the Tribunal found Karadzic guilty of war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity, and sentenced him to 40 years in prison.

In the United States, Kalonji found a lawyer, who, through Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), introduced him to Dr. Katherine McKenzie, director of the Yale Center for Asylum Medicine and a member of PHR’s Asylum Network.

Dr. McKenzie conducted a medical examination and documented several scars which were consistent with Kalonji’s claims that he had been cut with a bayonet and burned with melted plastic by his torturers. Armed with the evaluation, Kalonji applied for asylum. In 2013, he was granted

The Washington Post

“This is a momentous day for international justice, but also for those in Bosnia who lost husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, sons and daughters in a coordinated campaign of violence.”

Susannah Sirkin, PHR director of international policy and partnerships, speaking of the conviction of former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic.

Dr. Katherine McKenzie measuring a scar on asylum seeker Paulin Kalonji’s leg. Medical evaluations can corroborate claims of torture and other violence by those applying for asylum in the United States.

Photo: Robert Lisak
Paulin Kalonji speaks with Dr. Katherine McKenzie, whose medical evaluation supported Kalonji’s successful application for asylum in the United States. “I was lucky,” he says. “The evaluation was a big element in obtaining asylum. It’s not easy. I have friends who have applied for asylum, but they don’t have proof. You have to have proof.”

Today, Kalonji works for a surgical equipment company. Three of his children are in college. His 18-year-old daughter wants to be a doctor.

For Dr. McKenzie, who has completed more than 70 such evaluations over the past 10 years, working on Kalonji’s case reaffirmed why she does asylum work, and why she helps PHR train other medical colleagues in forensic evaluations. “You really have the ability and the skills as a physician to make a difference in the life of displaced people in the world.... Hearing what happens to people, seeing their resilience – it inspires you and you really feel like you’re able to contribute in a positive way.”

“[I have] the responsibility to be compassionate to a person who has likely suffered a great deal, while providing evidence that is objective and credible in court.... Now more than ever I am grateful that I’m able to contribute my expertise as a physician to promoting human rights.”

Dr. Katherine McKenzie, Director, Yale Center for Asylum Medicine and PHR Asylum Network member

Seeding a New Generation of Human Rights Advocates

The work of PHR’s Asylum Program is often the last step in refugees’ and other immigrants’ arduous journey to safety and freedom. The pro bono medical evaluations conducted by our 700-strong network of volunteers help support asylum seekers’ claims that they were tortured or subjected to sexual or other violence in their countries of origin. Over the past year, the Asylum Program provided a record 520 evaluations; through it, PHR is seeding a new generation of human rights advocates within the medical community.