



REBUILDING HEALTH AND DIGNITY

after trauma and human rights violations

There are few more challenging things than organising a conference in Peru, on behalf of a Norwegian-born institution, currently being run from Australia, with hundreds of participants from all over the world, in English and Spanish. But that is exactly what has been happening for some time now from the Carramar offices of STARTTS in Sydney NSW.

By ALEJANDRA SZCZEPANEAK

The International Society for Health and Human Rights (ISHHR) will hold its 8th International Conference in Lima, Peru, between the 15th and 18th of October.

ISHHR was established to share knowledge, skills, experiences and concerns regarding the impact of persecution, torture and other human rights violations. This organisation was born out of the need to bring together health professionals, human rights advocates, refugees, survivors of torture and people affected by trauma and human rights abuses from all over the world. Every few years, ISHHR

organises a major conference to combat the effects of trauma, torture and human rights abuses on mental health.

Violations of human rights have consistently become more sophisticated and widespread and therefore issues and problems relating to torture, trauma, and poverty have changed and become more complex. This has inadvertently meant that the ways in which these issues have been dealt with has also had to change. New and creative methods of analysing, diagnosing and treating survivors of torture and trauma are constantly being developed.

The ISHHR Council chose Peru as the host country as a way of highlighting that country's recent plight regarding human rights violations, and perhaps more importantly and admirably, the way it has been dealing with issues of truth, justice, reparation and reconciliation.

Throughout the 80s and 90s, Peru was subject to extremely violent and bloody internal conflict, born out of clashes between the government and the People's Guerrilla Army, the official name of the armed branch of the communist party.

Serious violence ensued, not only between the military and guerrillas,



predominantly the Shining Path, but also among civilians and peasants who were supporters of either side, which also scarred innocent civilians, including children, who were unluckily caught in the middle.

The Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación (CVR) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission) was established in June 2001 to examine the atrocities committed in the 1980s and 1990s. Its work was formally concluded in August 2003, when the Commission, made up of many sectors of Civil Society, including scholars, journalists, sociologists, priests and artists, presented its final report to the then President Alejandro Toledo. The Commission found in its 2003 Final Report that 69,280 people died or disappeared between 1980 and 2000 as a result of the armed conflict and that over half of the deaths and disappearances reported to the Commission were caused by Shining Path. According to a summary of the report by Human Rights Watch, "Shining Path... killed about half

the victims, and roughly one-third died at the hands of government security force. The commission attributed some of the other slayings to the MRTA (Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement), smaller guerrilla groups and local militias.

In this light, Peru proved to be a highly appropriate choice as host country for the 8th Conference, and even more so, when the organisers managed to secure Dr Salomon Lerner as one of the keynote speakers at the Conference.

Dr Lerner is a leading Peruvian academic and former president of the Committee for Truth and Reconciliation of Peru. He received the honorary medal on behalf of the Peruvian Congress to honour the work he undertook within the Commission.

He will speak about the challenges faced by Peruvian society after the social chaos and political unrest which shook Peru for two decades, and which still manages to rear its ugly head and remind Peruvian

society of the violence and sadness of yesteryear, with small rebel cells making their presence felt in recent months.

Reconciliation, justice, rehabilitation, renewing community harmony and concerns about mental health and recuperation, are some of the cornerstone issues Dr Lerner will speak about in his opening address to the expected 300 delegates.

In the ceremony marking the end of the Commission's work, Dr Lerner, as chairman of the Commission, stated:

"The report we hand in contains a double outrage: that of massive murder, disappearance and torture; and that of indolence, incompetence and indifference of those who could have stopped this humanitarian catastrophe but didn't."

The mix of participants expected will be from all over the world, and many will fully relate to Dr Lerner's closing remarks regarding the catastrophe that has scarred

Peru and its people forever.

Many participants have suffered violence and trauma themselves, and others are professionals who are experienced in helping survivors to cope and move on.

To make the conference even more interesting and far reaching, the conference will be translated live into Spanish and English, and recorded by PsycheVisual, an Australian multimedia company that will film the Conference and make the content available on their website (www.psychevisual.com.au)

Several international leaders in the field of treatment of torture and trauma survivors and refugees will also be attending, among them Eileen Pittaway, the Director of the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, and Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Work. She coordinates and teaches in the Masters Programs of International Social Development, and Refugees and Forced Migration. She has notched up countless awards and international recognition for her work as a trainer and as an academic. Her curriculum is as expansive as her passion for human rights.



She will be addressing the delegates in Peru as keynote speaker as well as running a capacity building workshop.

Dr Pittaway's workshop will be one of nine being run over two days prior to the conference. The workshops aim to train and provide specific skills and capacities, prioritising the exchange between less developed countries.

Experts from all corners of the world, travelling from Europe, Australia, the US and other countries in Latin America will gather in Peru to shed some practical light on some complex issues.

These workshops will add a whole new dimension to the conference, as the advantages of including training sessions were recognised when the India Conference took place in 2005.

The workshops will include: Analysis of the Istanbul Protocol; Therapy through

exploration of artistic expression; STARTTS' own groundbreaking Neurofeedback Therapy; Therapeutic workshops as tools for group interventions; intercultural treatment of complex posttraumatic damage; Overcoming barriers to social reconstruction in a divided community; and Historical memory as a part of the reconciliation process.

One of the interesting aspects born out of putting this conference together from Australia is that it has given those involved in the conference a very particular perspective on things. We are geographically at a vantage point that provides unequal perspective through distance to examine contentious issues that involve people's lives and human cruelty.

Inadvertently it also provides scope for examining one's own backyard, and the role that Australia plays in a globalised world,

particularly issues relating to refugees and the rather heavy burden they carry when they arrive in Australia, and the manner in which this affects everyone.

It is perhaps a little disappointing that it is necessary to organise a conference of this magnitude that focuses on health and human rights in order to get people thinking about how widespread the problems are and how diversified the field has had to become in order to deal with the complex and sophisticated ways in which people are made to suffer. But then again, it is comforting to know that every couple of years or so, hundreds of professionals and survivors of torture and trauma have the chance to gather, exchange views and learn from one another.

The conference promises to be a success on many fronts. We'll keep you posted. ■