



According to Lupe Jara, who works with the Peruvian human-rights organization Instituto Bartolome de Casas, this pilgrimage symbolizes the constant searching by families of the victims, for up to 20 years. She explains that the effect is to feel “always so near and yet so far”.

In Peru there are about 14,000 disappeared persons, and almost 5,000 clandestine graves. For many bereaved families, locating the bodies of loved ones, so as to give them a proper burial, forms a critical step in their recovery. In the beginning of their search, which under repressive rule, often put them in danger, they used the catchphrase: *Devuelvanlos vivos* (“Return them alive”). Today they simply brandish banners: *Donde Estan?* (“Where are they?”)

As the search continues, the memorial constitutes a symbolic burial site of sorts with tiny headstones. Families use the memorial park as a place to go and mourn—and remember. Indeed, during the PQNSR’s campaign, various victims groups held ceremonies and sermons there, placing flowers, candles and photos of loved ones among the stones.

One of Peru’s oldest victims’ survivors groups, *Comite Nacional de Familiares de Detenidos, Desparecidos, Refugiados en Lima* (COFADER) (National Committee of Families of Detained, Disappeared, Refugees in Lima) conducted a solemn walk around the monument, with a large cross made of pictures of loved ones braced against their shoulders.

Ms Jara recounts helping one of COFADER leaders, a widow, finally find the stone with her husband’s name and remembers that she broke into tears because “after searching all these years alone, she finally felt accompanied”.

The former president of the TRC, Salomón Lerner recently spoke at one of these ceremonies urging that victims must be recognized and given “a dignified burial”. His urging responds to the common struggle against *olvido* (“forgetting”) and to ensure that the casualties are not reduced to mere numbers. In this space one experiences a range of emotions. Weaving slowly through the paths, one feels dizzy skimming the names—Sonia Terraza Alas, age 5; Jorge Tenorio Roca, age 17; Abelarod Tenoria Venta; age 69. Thousand more names follow in alphabetical order signaling the mercilessness of this war.

What would these stones say if they could talk? Instantaneous flashes of simultaneous scenes of brutality and bloody death come to mind. But perhaps they would choose instead to speak of the life and love lived before that tragic moment. It is such love that keeps their families tirelessly searching. Indeed, today, young children and grandchildren play at the edge of the shallow pool that holds the mother rock. This image offers the hope of renewal since new generations have no direct memory of the violence but will nevertheless learn its lesson.

Like this, Mutal was inspired to create the monument when viewing the TRC’s photo exhibition “*Yuyanapaq: Para Recordar*” (“To remember in both Quechua and Spanish) displayed at the National Museum in Lima. She wished to present a homage to the victims while also creating an instrument that could help society become aware of what happened during the years of the conflict. She presented Peruvians with a collective space for reflection that invites the type of “memory dialogue” that might lead to a more just, democratic country.

The centerpiece is meant “to equal the center of each person. Once there, worries stay behind and produce an individual confrontation with evil and the consequences it produces. Later, the visitor begins a journey of return.”

Healing through recognizing all citizens

Rosa Villaran explains that this year’s slogan “the wound remains open” responds to critics of the final report who scold against “opening the now closed wounds”. Yet, as victims and their families can attest: these emotional wounds never closed. Ms Villaran urges: “we need to make others understand this or our society will putrefy if we Peruvians are not able to cure ourselves.”

The idea of curing, however, takes on new meanings in Peru. Importantly, while the memorial evokes great sadness for many, it serves as an important first step towards recognizing the formerly forgotten. Here, it coincides with the TRC’s version of reconciliation, which unlike that of South Africa, does not spin itself in terms of forgiveness between perpetrators and survivors. Instead, reconciliation arises out of a “new foundational pact between the Peruvian State and society, and among the members of society”. In grand terms the TRC proposes: “the great horizon of national reconciliation is full citizenship for all Peruvians”. ■



Elderly refugees from Afghanistan

Last August, the Elderly Afghan Men’s Group celebrated 10 years of friendship. The group’s supportive, cohesive and celebratory atmosphere was in stark contrast to its beginnings back in 1997.

Mr Mohamed Asif Bakthiray, a member of the group said: “I’m very happy to have friends, brothers from our country, to meet with them and discuss matters. It’s good to exchange experiences and a relief to put our views here.”

Since its beginnings, STARTTS has

used support groups as an effective form of intervention and the Elderly Afghan Men’s Group is a perfect illustration of the success of this approach. Since 1988, more than 3,500 people have been helped through 166 different STARTTS groups.

The need to create a support group for elderly Afghan men was identified during consultations with the Afghan community. Counsellor Nooria Mehraby reminded those present that it was in 1966, when driven back from decades

of war and misery, some 14,000 Afghan refugees made their way to Australia and mainly resettled in NSW. “Amongst them were many elderly women and men who had sustained multiple losses. They were in a new country deprived of all that was known and familiar to them and confronted with the daunting task of adaptation,” she said.

Indeed, it is well documented in the literature that the transition period, cultural bereavement and adaptation in a

new country takes much longer for elderly people.

During those consultations STARTTS staff heard that older men were having problems. Socially isolated, feeling apprehensive about the loss of their own culture and grieving the loss of their social status and former identities, they were also having difficulties learning English.

Group work was considered an appropriate strategy to address these concerns. Groups not only provided a safe space to make connections with other men in similar positions, but also allowed the

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participants to discuss common experiences with others from a similar culture. A group approach also helped members to take pride in their culture, share insights about the Australian culture and gain helpful strategies for adaptation.

Group work can be an effective form of stand-alone therapy for people who are opposed to the idea of western counselling or are apprehensive about it. Alternatively, it can provide an introduction to STARTTS' services and the concept behind counselling.

The safety and trust created in a group can develop into individual counselling. For the Afghan men, the groups worked as a stand-alone therapy, a primary intervention and as an adjunct to other forms of therapy.

The western notion of one-on-one talking therapy was foreign to this group. So most of the approximately 100 Afghan members over the past 10 years were introduced to STARTTS through this group. A minority was already seeing individual counsellors but most came to trust STARTTS counselling services because of the relationships developed with the two original facilitators of the groups, Mrs Nooria Mehraby and Mr Zalmai Haidary.

In its earliest days the group met very informally. The aims and rationale for the group were decided between the facilitators and members. The aim was to help members to connect with others from similar situations, share common experiences, find a source of support and enjoy hobbies in an environment where cultural expectations of members were considered.

Conflict among group members was common during the early years. Members belonged to different ethnic groups (Tajiks, Pashtuns and Hazara), different religious

denominations (Sunni and Shiite) and had with different political views. Being highly educated and outspoken they engaged in intense arguments over present-day and historical politics as well as ethnicity. Most members of the group had escaped from Afghanistan during the Soviet-supported communist rule of their country in the 1970s and 80s.

They had occupied senior positions across a wide variety of professions including law, academia and religion. Some had retired prior to the invasion, but many had been forced from their jobs or had

resigned in protest. Most of the men left the country because they feared for the safety of their sons, who were likely to be conscripted to fight for the communists, or imprisoned. Both options meant almost certain death. It is estimated that five million Afghans perished in the process.

The facilitator's contribution and some rules (safety, confidentiality and mutual respect) were instrumental in overcoming initial tensions. When conflict among members escalated, one of the facilitators would step in to remind the members of the rules they had established together. Facilitators would also model impartial and neutral behaviour. As the group matured and began to trust one another, conflicts were largely self-managed. Instead of having the facilitator intervening, members would remind themselves of the rules.

The group has participated in many activities during the last 10 years. Psycho-education sessions have been important in normalising and validating torture and trauma symptoms among group members. These sessions reassured them that reactions to trauma were not necessarily a sign of "madness" but a normal, common reaction to extreme stress. These sessions included information on the effects of migration, exile and the refugee experience, and on emotions such as loss and grief, anxiety and depression, stress, pain, anger manage-



ment, and sleep problems.

A series of health-education sessions covered topics from healthy food and nutrition, exercise, body functions and asthma, to diabetes and high blood pressure.

General information sessions addressed relevant issues such as immigration processes and sponsorship, housing, police, the legal system, Centrelink, the health and education systems, media, government and politics in Australia. Scientific information sessions covered new technology and discoveries, computers, astronomy, the solar system and the universe.

The men also shared information with one another. These sessions were vital in keeping members connected to their culture as well as improving self-confidence and self-esteem. These became particularly important during times of crisis, for instance when the United States attacked Afghanistan in 2001. The group provided a safe venue where participants could share the latest news and express their concerns about the safety of their families and friends. It allowed them to express their frustrations at what they saw as an unjustifiable war, which was killing many civilians. The facilitator was able to hold and contain their acute pain and re-traumatisation.

Outings were useful in helping the

men connect with Australian cultures and pastimes. They were a relaxed, informal space for building friendships, reducing stress and enjoying activities.

Group therapy was extremely effective in overcoming the divisions. The

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group is a lot more independent, a sign of the growing strength of both the group and its individual members. They organise their own outings, take care of finances, purchase food, decide upon activities and negotiate among themselves. Despite this, counsellor Nooria Mehraby is still heavily involved, particularly during times of crisis.

Speaking at the 10th anniversary celebrations Nooria said: "It is an honour to facilitate this group. I have been overwhelmed and inspired by the degree of respect that I received from the group members over the last 10 years. Each Tuesday morning when I joined the group, I was treated with enormous respect and dignity, some called me doctor or lecturer, while others named me helper, healer and carer. This is in contradiction to the generalisation that Middle-Eastern men do not

respect women or don't listen to someone who's younger than them."

Social re-connection is the essence of recovery for trauma survivors. Groups are crucial because they provides a new

bridge to society and opportunities for enjoyable and satisfying activities. It also helps people to share experiences, normalize the symptoms, emphasize the commonality of experience and overcome isolation. The combination of group work and individual counselling seems to be the optimal combination.

Mr Mohamed Mamozai, a group member said: "We would like to express our appreciation to the Australian Government and the Ministry for Health for having an excellent and humanitarian organisation such as STARTTS where people who have experienced hostility and trauma are cared for, respected and supported. STARTTS' dedicated staff made us feel welcome and looked after, and they treated us with dignity, respect and pride. Each Monday evening I cannot wait to see my friends and come to STARTTS." ■

