

# Memory dialogues and symbolic burials

## Paths to reconciliation in Peru

As a human-rights lawyer and community educator, LISA LAPLANTE has worked for the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She shares with us her experiences working with victims of political violence, in their struggle for justice and reparations.



"The wound remains open" reads the slogan chosen to commemorate the third anniversary of the publication of the Final Report of the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Below this motto, on a sticker formed like a band-aid, reads "justice and reparations for the victims of the internal war".

The message conveys a call to action. The campaign, spearheaded by the Peruvian grassroots movement Para Que No Se Repita (PQNSR) ("So It Doesn't Repeat"), aims to raise awareness of the importance of the truth commission's work while showing that it forms only the first step in the country's recovery.

Indeed, the work of Peru's TRC is similar to experiences since the 1980s in neighboring countries like Argentina, Chile, Guatemala and El Salvador, which popularized the catch phrase Nunca mas ("Never again"), expressing the desire that this devastating violence should never be repeated. In each of these countries, truth commissions were formed to investigate "dirty wars", which resulted in the death, disappearance, torture, rape and unjust imprisonment of thousands of citizens. Yet, real change—and prevention—has required constant political action to keep the truth commissions work alive.

Peru's experience follows the trend. Its own truth commission was created unexpectedly when authoritarian president Alberto Fujimori fled to Japan in 2000 following a corruption scandal. Hundreds of secret videos showed his right-hand advisor bribing representatives of congress, the media, the military and other elite powerbrokers. In this window of opportunity, the interim government issued an executive decree to form a truth commission.

The TRC worked for two years to investigate the causes, responsibilities and consequences of Peru's 20-year internal armed conflict between terrorist groups and the state's armed forces (1980-2000). Collecting and digesting about 17,000 private and public testimonies, some coming from 14 public hearings, it produced a nine-volume, 5,000-page final report.

It shocked the nation by tripling the estimated death toll, reporting that almost 70,000 people had died in the war. The TRC determined that this conflict "constituted the most intense, extensive and prolonged episode of violence in the entire history of the Republic" since its independence from the Spanish conquistadores almost 200 years ago.

You may ask, as did the TRC, how did this tragedy happen. The TRC identified how a culture of fear led people to exchange democracy for security, wielded by an unprepared and unfettered military. Moreover, a general indifference towards the majority of victims—the poor, rural, indigenas campesinos living in the battlefield—permitted tolerance of human-rights violations, and impunity. Despite their clamor for help, the victims remained a sub-class whose rights did not count.

For this reason, Peru's truth commission left the country a future agenda: to respond to the needs of these neglected victim-survivors of the war. In particular, it included recommendations for justice, institutional reforms and most importantly the Integral Plan of Reparations (PIR).

Now three years later, Peru's civil society finds itself in a constant struggle to see these measures implemented.

Rosa Villaran, executive secretary of PQNSR sees commemorating the anniversary of the TRC's final report as contributing to "a dialogue of memory".

Since the common tendency in post-conflict settings is to ignore the past, this discourse helps to sensitize all Peruvians of the need to recognize and redress the countless victims.

Finding ways to touch all of society, especially those in power, forms the main aim of this process with the hope that the government will prioritize reparation measures.

The TRC recognized that reconciliation depends on redress, an imperative form of healing as it recognizes the dignity and worth of all Peruvians, and not just those with money and power.

## Las piedras que hablan: creating common memory spaces



Memory dialogues occur often through symbolic measures and spaces that promote reflection. For that reason, this year, much of the PQNSR campaign centered around an important new memorial park called El Ojo que LLora (the eye that cries).

Inaugurated on 28 August 2005 (the second anniversary of the TRC), the monument is fast becoming one of Peru's most important symbolic reparations. It is located centrally in the park "Campo de Marte" in a naturally formed mini-amphitheater ceded by the city municipality of Jesus Maria in the capital Lima.

Designed and donated by the famous Peruvian sculptor Lika Mutal, the monument consists of an "ancestral" mother rock of four tons that naturally resembles a person hunched in grief. Towards the head of this figure is a smaller embedded stone that emits a constant tear-like stream of water into a shallow pool below.

Emanating outwards are 11 circular paths whose borders are formed by rows of 32,000 smaller smooth river rocks, 26,000 of which don the hand written name of a victim registered with the TRC. The blank stones wait for the not yet identified victims whose families did not give their testimony to the TRC. Close to the "mother" is the first name found on the TRC's manual Los Peruanos que Faltan ("Missing Peruvians") and reads "Baby Prado" who at one month old, still unnamed, was killed in 1985.

The paths leading to the center monument form a labyrinth. If followed strictly, it takes up to half an hour to traverse, although it is possible to step over the designated paths to reach the mother rock in a matter of seconds.



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