



# International Experts Combat Gross Human-Rights Abuses

*Experts from around the world met in the historic town of Tbilisi, in Georgia, for a four-day conference last October, to share knowledge and continue an international dialogue aimed at combating the effects of gross human-rights violations on victims.*

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By **Janset Berzeg**

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“Doing Justice, Building Capacity” was the theme of the ninth International Society for Human Health and Human Rights (ISHHR) conference. This time Georgia was the host country as ISHHR is committed to holding conferences in places where there has been a recent experience of conflict.

Since 2008, Georgia has had a considerable internally displaced population, the result of its short war against South Ossetia. The recent conflict has created on-going work with survivors of human-rights violations.

During the conference, health professionals from all continents had the opportunity to learn about the on-going dispute that has not been settled as yet and the chance to discuss best practices to overcome its effects.

Nearly two hundred people attended the conference venue, located in Tbilisi’s Rose Revolution Square, for a diverse program of interactive and innovative presentations, over four days, that turned out to be most rewarding. The collective sharing of experiences and the caring spirit of those present shone against the Caucasus mountains backdrop, creating hope for the future.

A selection of sessions with valuable practical information was on offer. The quality of presentations, freshness of workshops, and the personal touch of the organising committee, made it possible to deliver a premium experience. Eleven university students, who became known as the Georgian Angels (named by the participants after they handled all the tasks and challenges in an excellent manner), made

PHOTO: GARY TAYLOR

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it possible for all of us to unwind and smile.

The fresh spirit of the students made the participants feel the way we want our clients to feel; cared for and supported. Our Georgian Angels told us that they were thrilled to see that there was hope for the future, and that we could learn so much from each other.

ISHHR has influenced the work and the thinking of our associates in Georgia and throughout the world. It is an organisation that builds dialogue and capacity amongst health professionals engaged in working with individuals and communities affected by human-rights abuses. A great deal was achieved in Georgia this October.

On the first two days of the event, a set of 10 workshops was offered to participants from 42 different countries. Presenters of these intensive courses, all of whom are experts in their particular area, flew from across the world to equip participants with new knowledge and skills that will help them develop their own abilities in combating human trafficking, using creative movement therapies, and in practical community consultation techniques, bio-feedback, and responses to mourning and loss – amongst many other skills.

Workshops were followed by two pleasant days at the conference that included a variety of concurrent presentations on research, justice, reparation, war and grief, women, and capacity building topics from around the world, along with two absolutely inspiring keynote speeches.

The official opening of the conference marked the

importance of justice and capacity building to overcome the effects of gross human-rights violations in the world.

ISHHR Secretary General Jorge Aroche welcomed participants, together with Nino Makhashvili from the Global Initiative on Psychiatry, who successfully provided leadership to the local organising committee for the conference.

Other speakers were Eva Pastrana who represented the delegation of the European Union to Georgia, Nora Sveaass from United Nations Committee against Torture, and Zimbabwean Minister of State for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration Senator Sekai Masikana Holland.

Three concurrent speakers presented in each room to enthusiastic and participating audiences. The sessions were divided according to themes, as diverse as: the Right to Health, Capacity Building, War and Trafficking, Justice, Grief, Reparation, Women, Children, Research and Asylum Seekers. The concurrent sessions and keynote addresses were video-recorded by ISHHR's Psychevisual, which will be made available online for our colleagues and the wider public.

The first keynote speech of the conference was elegantly delivered by respected Emeritus Professor Vamik Volkan, whose presentation was entitled Massive Trauma at the Hands of Others and Its Societal/Political Consequences. Professor Volkan worked in Georgia for six years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. He talked about the societal and political processes that were typical and

specific to a large group, in cases where tens of thousands of members of a large group share a complicated mourning process, following a massive trauma due to natural disasters, man-made accidental disasters, assassinations, terror or oppression.

He also referred to the importance of holding psycho-politically informed dialogues between influential representatives of opposing groups. His speech helped the audience to separate realities of existing situations from the psychic realities that are filled with prejudices and fantasies.

Professor Volkan concluded his address by stressing the importance of holding unofficial dialogues between influential persons and different large-group identities in the Caucasus so as to achieve a better atmosphere for future official dialogues.

The second keynote address was delivered by the charismatic Dr Pau Perez from the Complutense University of Madrid. Dr Perez's powerful presentation was an eye-opening expedition embedded with fascinating data and evidence. Dr Perez discussed some of the challenges associated with the role of psychology and psychosocial work in the struggle to achieve human rights, as well as outlining the rapid changes of the last century.

He not only presented data outlining the Latin-American context on the many structural conditions of deep social inequality, but also spoke about processes of transitional justice in countries with a history of political violence. At the closing stages of his address, Dr Perez stressed some of the global dilemmas concerning new forms of social control and pointed to the need to spread knowledge about issues related to health and human rights.

Four fruitful and productive days found the perfect finishing touch with a creative solo theatre performance about addressing constructive action against all forms of mistreatment. This was a one-of-a-kind performance, which featured torture survivor, pioneering psychologist and actor Hector Aristizábal. Hector invited participants to explore embodied knowledge and to challenge the inevitability of violence, encouraging the audience in this way to use their imagination as to how they could achieve a more just and joyous life for all people.

The half-hour performance was based on a true story, experienced by the performer when he was arrested and ill-treated by military forces in Colombia.

The piece was followed by a participatory workshop where the performer invited the audience to slide into a dynamic meditation as a way to trigger a catharsis of the different emotions felt by the audience as a result of his performance.

Finally, he invited participants to express their personal reactions to the images of torture by creating their own images in response, and exploring the ideas on how to break them.

It was a touching experience for everyone, one that they will always remember. Hector travels the world staging his show and after the conference he was going to receive the Otto Rene Castillo Award, the Nobel Prize of political theatre.

The main goal of the project was to enable participants to share key knowledge developed in the field of health and human rights. At the ninth ISHHR capacity building workshops and conference, practitioners learnt from theorists and academics. Those with more theoretical than practical knowledge, also learnt from the practitioners, broadening the learning process.

The conference presented a good opportunity for global networking for all professionals who work in the area of health and human rights. It was a success because of the diversity of presentations given by people coming from very different countries, with very different experiences and perspectives.

They will now be working towards integrating these approaches to enable them to better address both the causes and the symptoms of the problems. What's more, we all had a chance to experience the exquisite Georgian cuisine (everyone should learn about mezze from Georgians), taste the renowned Georgian wine, enjoy wonderful traditional dance performances by the world-famous group Erisioni, and experience uplifting hospitality, and many additional acts of kindness.

Being a member of ISHHR provides multiple opportunities to connect with people involved in the area of health and human rights and who operate in a variety of working environments and willingly share their experiences and research.

ISHHR's devotion to creating this unique experience will continue with its tenth event of capacity building workshops and conference on health and human rights, taking place at Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe in 2014. See you then! **R**