DefendDoctors in Syria
For 30 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has used medicine and science to document and call attention to mass atrocities and severe human rights violations.

PHR is a global organization founded on the idea that health professionals, with their specialized skills, ethical duties, and credible voices, are uniquely positioned to stop human rights violations. PHR’s investigations and expertise are used to advocate for the protection of persecuted health workers and facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.

Defending human rights is slow, hard work. Across the globe, those who kill civilians, torture detainees, and use rape as a weapon of war all too often act in the belief that they will never have to pay for their crimes. It can take years of painstaking, often dangerous investigation for the perpetrators of such atrocities to be brought to justice.

The key is evidence. At Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), we use the expertise of doctors and scientists to produce solid, scientific, irrefutable proof of human rights crimes. In Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, we empower doctors, lawyers, police, and justice officials with the specific skills to document and prosecute cases of sexual violence. In Syria, we work with our partners to train doctors and lawyers to collect and preserve evidence from survivors of torture. In the United States, we dispatch hundreds of volunteer clinicians to corroborate asylum-seekers’ stories of persecution. We do this because exposing gross human rights violations can help prevent them, because it is crucial to build a record so that those who do commit these crimes will one day be held accountable, and in order to help survivors of extreme violence live a life free from fear.

We know our approach works. This past March, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) convicted former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. PHR, which led efforts to document atrocities during and after the Bosnian conflict, contributed critical evidence and testimony to the ICTY proceedings that resulted in Karadzic’s conviction. Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad, whose forces are daily committing war crimes against the Syrian people, would do well to note: those who believe in justice do not give up.

The force behind our pursuit of justice is the team of world-class professionals, volunteers, and partners who work tirelessly with PHR – sometimes risking their lives to document and expose human rights abuses. These dedicated and courageous human rights defenders have been essential to our successes over the past year.

But none of our efforts would be possible without your support. The need for human rights work, tragically, will probably never go away. But with your backing, we are helping to build and support a global human rights movement that can help turn the wheels of prevention and justice more quickly. Thank you for partnering with us in this vital work.

Donna McKay  Kerry Sulkowicz, MD
Executive Director  Board Chair

Donna McKay, executive director, and Kerry Sulkowicz, MD, board chair.
The first obligation of medical professionals is to “do no harm.” As a doctor, I was outraged when Department of Defense and CIA physicians and psychologists helped design and implement the U.S. torture program. My colleagues and I exposed the harms committed by medical personnel, including one of the most degrading techniques, “rectal feeding.” When we stated that there is absolutely no clinical justification for the practice and that it is “sexual assault masquerading as medical treatment,” apologists for the practice were silenced.

PHR Medical Director Dr. Vincent Iacopino is the chief architect of the Istanbul Protocol, the UN’s guidelines on investigating and documenting torture and ill-treatment. For almost three decades, he has conducted investigations of human rights violations all over the world, and has led a 10-year campaign with PHR partners to expose torture by the U.S. government and to end the complicity of medical professionals in these illegal acts.

For more than 10 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has waged a tireless campaign to expose and end torture by the U.S. government, and to demand justice for victims and accountability for perpetrators. We were the first to document medical evidence of the torture of national security detainees by the U.S. military in a series of landmark reports. Our experts have also played a critical role in showing how health professionals, in callous violation of their ethical duty to “do no harm,” helped design and implement the CIA’s torture program – atrocious acts ranging from waterboarding to “rectal feeding.”

Our efforts yielded historic results. Following intensive advocacy by PHR and our partners, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) released the executive summary of its report on the CIA’s detention and interrogation practices. PHR issued an authoritative analysis of medical complicity, concluding that without the participation of psychologists, doctors, and other health professionals, the CIA’s illegal torture program might have been prevented.

Following that, we won two more victories. Reversing a decade-long policy of permitting psychologists to aid abusive CIA and military interrogations, the American Psychological Association (APA) finally banned psychologists from taking part in national security interrogations or working at detention sites operating in violation of international law. APA’s new policy resulted from years of pressure from PHR and our partners. In response, the Pentagon withdrew psychologists from all detainee operations at the Guantánamo Bay detention center – signaling the power of health professionals when they refuse to be complicit in human rights violations.

But PHR’s work is not done. The U.S. government continues to indefinitely detain 85 men at Guantánamo, some of whom are on hunger strike and are being force-fed as a method of silencing their protests. The U.S. government also continues to use secrecy to hide its wrongdoing, obstructing judicial orders to release videos, photos, and other evidence of present and past abuse of detainees.

Bringing our unique medical expertise to the fight, we and our partners are pushing the U.S. Department of Justice to criminally investigate all those responsible for detainee torture and ill-treatment, including health professionals. We continue to pressure President Barack Obama to end indefinite detention and close Guantánamo. We are also calling for the U.S. government to read, act on, and release to the public the full SSCI torture report, so these crimes are never repeated. We believe the public should know the truth about the U.S. government’s human rights violations and hold health professionals to the highest standards of medical ethics and the law.

Our People

Using Medical Evidence to Expose Torturers’ Lies

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A young woman embarks on a six-hour journey to a police station in rural Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), traumatized but determined to report the men who raped her. A Syrian doctor appeals for witnesses after enduring months of physical and psychological brutality at the hands of torturers from Syrian government forces. Two male victims who were forcibly circumcised during the widespread violence following Kenya’s 2007 elections are able to testify before a judge about their suffering and the failure of the government to protect them.

In each of these cases, human rights defenders trained by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) or its partners were able to engage with these survivors, collecting, analyzing, and preserving evidence of torture and sexual violence. Their work is part of PHR’s global 30-year effort to prevent torture, including sexual violence; secure justice, reparations, and healing for victims; and hold perpetrators of torture accountable for their crimes.

In 2015, PHR launched our Forensic Training Institute. Its purpose: to empower people around the world to expose and prevent human rights abuses in their communities. Across three continents, PHR and our local partners train doctors, lawyers and judges, police officers, and activists about documenting torture, gathering forensic evidence of rape being used as a weapon of war, or exhuming hidden graves. By doing this, we increase the capacity to collect, analyze, and preserve relevant evidence that prosecutors can use to build legal cases against those who commit human rights crimes, and help survivors of torture and sexual violence to rebuild their lives. The Forensic Training Institute is pioneering a range of innovative technologies to support effective remote learning, ensure secure communication with and among activists, and create and support virtual communities of practice.

In the past five years alone, more than 2,000 clinicians, investigators, and legal professionals – in Afghanistan, the DRC, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Syria, Tajikistan, and the United States – have been enlisted by PHR as defenders of human rights. PHR’s model of training and partnerships is contributing to a culture of respect for human rights around the world.

Grassroots activists like Emérite Tabisha Mongelwa, as well as Col. David Bodeli Dombi and Dr. Nadine Neema Rukunghu, are key partners in PHR’s work to prevent sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
Violence ripped through Kenya in the wake of the 2007 general elections, claiming more than 1,100 lives, displacing more than 660,000 people, and leaving thousands with long-term injuries. Thousands more people were raped or suffered other forms of sexual violence – but very few cases were ever prosecuted. In 2013, PHR joined eight survivors of sexual violence and three Kenyan civil society organizations in a landmark lawsuit against the Kenyan government over its alleged failure to protect the victims, investigate and prosecute the crimes committed against them, or provide any reparations.

This high-profile litigation is being closely watched as the only case in Kenya seeking to hold the government accountable for sexual violence in the post-election period. PHR has taken a leading role, working closely with the co-petitioners to develop the legal framework and strategy guiding the constitutional challenge. We arranged for Kenyan psychiatrists and psychologists to conduct evaluations of the survivors for submission to court, and worked with the litigation team to prepare petitioners and witnesses to testify at court hearings. We have also taken a lead in advocacy, helping to shape messaging, galvanizing the media, and developing a strategy to support the survivors’ demands for reparations.

Ending Rape as a Weapon of War

Rape is part of life for all too many women and girls in Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where post-election violence and impunity, and decades of conflict, respectively, have made sexual violence virtually endemic. Much of this violence is committed by members of armed groups, who use sexual assault as a weapon of war to terrorize and subjugate entire populations – women, children, and men alike. Yet very few victims report rape. Even when they do, few medical workers have the skills to properly document sexual violence, so that police and the court systems can use this evidence to track down and prosecute the perpetrators.

PHR is helping to change that. To date, PHR experts and our Kenyan and Congolese colleagues have trained more than 1,000 doctors, nurses, police officers, lawyers, and judges to use forensic science to collect, document, investigate, and prosecute cases of sexual violence. We understand that survivors have the best chance of justice when all sectors work together to prosecute cases, and a unique feature of our program is the training of all of these professionals together. In 2015, PHR brought together change-makers from Kenya and the DRC who are working on the front lines of sexual violence cases. Kenyan participants shared lessons learned from their country’s adoption of a standard forensic medical form to document sexual violence cases, which inspired Congolese colleagues to mobilize for the adoption of a similar mechanism that will help to streamline these cases and expedite justice for survivors. 

"We were in this small town of Kahele, and 19 female survivors came. And they were waiting for their day in court. What was so striking to me... was their deep desire to face their perpetrators and to demand justice."

PHR’s Karen Naimer speaking of the DRC trial of two militia members accused of holding 400 women as sex slaves in 2009.

Karen Naimer, director of PHR’s Program on Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones, speaks with Dr. Désiré Alumeti, a pediatric surgeon who specializes in treating survivors of sexual violence at Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Survivors of sexual and other violence during the post-election unrest in Kenya are briefed following a hearing in a landmark lawsuit against the government brought by eight survivors, PHR, and civil society organizations.
Justice from Beyond the Grave in Afghanistan

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have littered the country with mass grave sites. Each is an untold story that the Afghan people desperately want revealed. Locating and exhuming these graves can help do that.

The Afghanistan Forensic Science Organization (AFSO), a group of forensic investigators that PHR helped to form, is working to strengthen Afghanistan’s justice system by mapping and registering mass gravesites throughout the country and training representatives of the government and non-governmental organizations in crime scene documentation. In 2015, more than 35 years after the Afghan upheaval of 1979, Dutch authorities arrested a former Afghan Army commander suspected of mass killings in the Kunar province of Afghanistan. Crucial research by PHR and AFSO, including grave exhumations, GPS coordinates, and photographs, are helping to build the case against the commander – and proving the fundamental importance of scientific, objective, and relevant evidence.

Less than two years after Rahmanberdi Ernazarov was arrested in Osh Province, Kyrgyzstan in 2005, he was found bleeding to death in his cell. When a perfunctory police investigation ruled Ernazarov’s death a suicide, his family’s lawyer called PHR. Our experts’ review of the Kyrgyz authorities’ autopsy found that it did not support a suicide finding. In April 2015, the UN Human Rights Committee – relying in part on PHR’s evaluation – held that the Kyrgyz government was guilty of turning a blind eye to Ernazarov’s torture and death while in custody. The ruling made clear that security of detainees is the state’s responsibility, including protecting them from violence by other detainees.

The decision also illustrates the critical importance of training independent forensic experts to investigate and document medical evidence of torture in accordance with international standards, as PHR has done for the past five years in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. In Central Asia, impunity for torture is the norm, because legal systems depend on forced confessions for “successful” prosecutions. We work with partner organizations and governments in the region to reform policy and to train doctors, lawyers, and judges to use UN Istanbul Protocol standards of torture investigation and documentation to prevent torture and ensure accountability for torturers. Hundreds of clinicians are now poised to apply these standards. In Tajikistan in 2015, one of PHR’s trainers submitted the first ever forensic medical evaluation of an alleged torture victim using Istanbul Protocol standards.

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When 55,000 photographs of tortured and mutilated bodies were smuggled out of Syria in 2014, the world saw clear evidence of a shocking crime being committed by the government of President Bashar al-Assad: the systematic torture and killing of detainees. Taken by a former military police photographer, the so-called “Cansur pictures” showed what had happened to thousands of the people – some of them children – that government forces have detained and disappeared since the conflict began.

Some of the victims of these violations are medical workers, who are seized and tortured simply for doing what the ethics of their profession demand: to provide medical care to all, regardless of political allegiance. In 2013, PHR began training Syrian doctors and lawyers to collect, analyze, and preserve evidence from people who have been tortured – the vast majority by Syrian government forces. Our purpose is to ensure that the appalling reality of what is happening in Syria can be used to try the torturers in local, regional, or international courts once the conflict is over.

Operating inside Syria, or in refugee settings outside the country, these courageous human rights defenders work at huge risk to themselves and their families in order to make justice possible for the survivors of torture. In 2015, the PHR-trained Syrians established their own self-sustaining independent human rights organization of lawyers and doctors, who will train and mentor colleagues and continue the critical work of documenting torture and other human rights crimes.

PHR’s Forensic Expertise Supports a Key Human Rights Ruling

“The Screaming Never Stopped, Even for a Moment”

Documenting Torture in Syria

Human remains on the surface of a mass grave documented by the Afghanistan Forensic Science Organization and PHR at the Dasht-e-ESA Khan mass grave in Bamyan, Central Afghanistan.

International Forensic Program Coordinator Zabi Mazoori manages the Afghanistan project as a consultant for PHR, spearheading trainings on mass grave exhumations, providing country-level expertise and analysis, and advising the Afghan government on transitional justice.

“Have visited and documented many mass grave sites in Afghanistan. Recently, at the request of victims’ families, I travelled with PHR staff to the site of a massacre in Badakhshan province, in the far northeast of the country. The families desperately want answers about what happened, and the chance to lay their loved ones to rest with dignity. By scientifically exhuming the grave, we can give them some of those answers.”

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In the horrific carnage of the now five-year Syrian conflict, 2015 set tragic new records of destruction. The government of Bashar al-Assad escalated its unprecedented assault on civilians, deliberately targeting markets, schools, homes, and hospitals, and besieging and starving entire communities. Barrel bombs tumbling out of helicopters continued sowing terror, annihilating neighborhoods and causing catastrophic injuries to defenseless populations. More hospitals were attacked in 2015 than ever before, depriving thousands of people of crucial medical care. Milions of men, women, and children fled the fighting, surging across the borders into neighboring countries and risking their lives in perilous journeys to seek safety in Europe. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), using open-source documentation and partners on the ground, has meticulously documented the wholesale destruction of Syria’s health care system since the start of the conflict. PHR researchers revealed through an innovative interactive mapping project that the Syrian government and its Russian allies carried out more than 95 percent of the 122 attacks on 93 medical facilities in 2015 – the highest number yet. They were responsible for 83 of the 107 killings of medical workers. Russia’s entry into the war in late September brought a firestorm of attacks on health facilities, three in the first four days of Russia’s intervention alone. Our objective analysis undermined Russia’s denials that it was targeting health workers and bombing infrastructure, and showed that October 2015 was the most destructive month to date for Syria’s devastated medical system. Leaders at the highest levels of international and U.S. policymaking and humanitarian response rely on the unique expertise and research of the PHR team. Each month, we send our new data to policymakers, members of partner organizations, and other influencers. PHR’s findings are included in monthly reports from the UN secretary-general to the Security Council. News reports around the world regularly quote PHR’s statistics and information, making PHR a de facto source for meticulously corroborated data about attacks on Syrian health care – data that can one day be used to ensure that those responsible for these savage and illegal acts are prosecuted.

“Doctors in the Crosshairs
A Brutal Dictator Targets Syria’s Medical Community

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR)

PHR.org

Our work is enhanced by cutting-edge technology provided to us on a pro bono basis by Palantir Technologies, a Silicon Valley software company, through our partnership with the Carter Center. Palantir’s software and access to the Carter Center’s extensive dataset enables us to run deep analysis to identify trends in hospital attacks and determine whether hospitals have been targeted.

“Newsweek

“The crisis in Syria has involved the most intense and directed and brutal attacks on health care and health workers that we have ever seen.”

Susannah Sirkin, PHR director of international policy and partnerships
Aleppo Abandoned
A Case Study

In eastern Aleppo city, two-thirds of hospitals no longer function and 95 percent of doctors have fled, been detained, or been killed. PHR researchers travelled to Gaziantep and Kilis, Turkey to interview people who are working in or supporting the 10 hospitals still functioning in Aleppo. They heard that the city’s remaining 70 to 80 doctors are stretched incredibly thin – each one serving 7,000 people, compared to 800 people per doctor before the conflict – and that all are practicing medicine beyond their expertise.

One of Aleppo’s two neurosurgeons, who was doing his residency when the conflict broke out and never completed his training, told us he has done brain surgery without an MRI machine – there is no MRI or CT scan machine in the city. A dentist with no prior surgical training is forced to do maxillofacial surgery. A pediatric resident works as an emergency medicine doctor and surgery assistant. Nurses bravely run many of the city’s clinics.

Buttressed by our ongoing research, PHR pieced together a picture of both the cataclysmic destruction of Aleppo’s health care system and the extraordinary resilience and courage of the city’s remaining health workers. Our report “Aleppo Abandoned: A Case Study on Health Care in Syria” showed the disastrous result of the international community’s failure to stop attacks on health care. But it also illustrated the ingenuity and resolve of the many Syrian medical workers who heroically choose to stay on in their shattered communities, working in the face of constant danger and extreme scarcity to continue treating those in need.

The Syrian government’s deliberate assault on health care is the most extreme the world has ever seen. Every doctor’s death or hospital’s destruction means that thousands of people are deprived of life-saving medical care for horrendous war injuries, illness, and disease. Each of these attacks, whether the bombing of a hospital or the detention and torture of a doctor for providing health care to the opposition, is a war crime. Collectively, these systematic attacks constitute crimes against humanity. PHR’s work in 2015 to amass and disseminate evidence of these crimes aimed both to prevent the attacks and to create a record that can someday be used to bring the perpetrators to justice. This evidence pressures the UN Security Council to enforce resolutions it has already passed which demand an end to these attacks. We continue to advocate for increased humanitarian aid and to demand that the international community act to stop these assaults as well as to pursue credible justice initiatives to ensure that perpetrators of these war crimes and crimes against humanity are held accountable.

“If the international community does not mobilize to stop the attacks on Syria’s medical professionals and infrastructure, civilians will continue to suffer and die. The longer the international community fails to enforce humanitarian law, the greater the chance that these violations will become the “new normal” in armed conflicts around the world.”

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Within the same period of time, five hospitals were targeted and the targets were very precise. It’s not a coincidence.”

Dr. A, a young pediatric resident working in a trauma hospital in Aleppo

These patients need us to stay inside Syria. This is our duty, our humanitarian duty. If we go outside, who will stay to treat them?”

An ear, nose, and throat doctor at one of the main hospitals in Aleppo’s suburbs
A man evacuates a child from a building following a reported barrel bomb attack by Syrian government forces on the northern Syrian city of Aleppo.

Photo: Karam al-Masri/AFP/Getty Images
This is the story of a war crime.

This is how we documented what happened.

For thousands of others was compromised.

Near the city of Idlib, each facility at least six miles from the nearest airstrikes hit nine medical centers within 30 miles of each other in just four days in August 2015, a massive barrage of government targeting of civilian facilities.

Corroborating them with information from our sources on the reports, videos, and photographs like those on this map.

With each attack, Physicians for Human Rights’ Syria mapping team combs through scores of open-source materials, news reports, videos, and photographs like those on this map. Combining them with information from our sources on the ground, we create the most comprehensive picture of the massive scale and brutality of this destruction: the relentless and deliberate ground, we create the most comprehensive picture of the massive scale and brutality of this destruction: the relentless and deliberate ground, we create the most comprehensive picture of the massive scale and brutality of this destruction:

Since the start of the Syrian conflict, the government of President Bashar al-Assad has waged a savage campaign to destroy its opponents by unleashing doctors and hospitals in opposition-held areas. These illegal attacks violate the most basic rule of war: that medical workers and facilities be given special protections in times of conflict. Attacks like the ones launched every week in Syria are war crimes.

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How Does PHR Investigate a War Crime?

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How Does PHR Investigate a War Crime?
738 medical workers have been killed since the start of the Syrian conflict*

- 386 killed by shelling and bombing
- 176 killed by shooting
- 101 killed by torture
- 61 killed by execution
- 14 killed by unknown/other causes

Who’s killing medical workers in Syria?*

- 13 killed by opposition forces
- 13 killed by Islamic state forces
- 14 killed by other or unknown causes
- 698 killed by Syrian government and allied Russian forces

These figures are drawn from PHR’s Syria mapping project. Every time our researchers learn of an attack on Syrian medical facilities or personnel, they sift through hundreds of articles, social media posts, photos, videos, and reports from our sources on the ground to determine exactly what happened and who was responsible. Our data is relied upon by leaders at the highest levels of global policy-making and humanitarian response.

“Dr. M* is a Syrian doctor who has refused to leave his embattled country and continues to work under grueling conditions and at great personal peril to treat all under grueling conditions and at country and continues to work refusing to leave his embattled Dr. M* is a Syrian doctor who has sought justice.”

It was the image of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi, his lifeless body washed up on a beach in Turkey, which finally awoke the world to the profound horror of the Syrian refugee crisis. Every single day in 2015, thousands of men, women, and children like Aylan poured out of Syria, running from the bombs that have devastated their homes and killed hundreds of thousands of people since the fighting began. But leaving didn’t end their torment. The conflict in Syria has led to the largest refugee crisis since World War II, overwhelming countries where Syrian families have sought refuge and sparked acts of both great generosity and shameful xenophobia. Hundreds of refugees have died in the perilous journey to safety, and many more have endured extreme deprivations. As the tidal wave of refugees engulfed Europe, countless women and girls suffered sexual violence and exploitation. PHR’s executive director, Donna McKay, traveled to the Balkans and Germany with the Nobel Women’s Initiative to focus attention on the plight of women and girl refugees, to support the extraordinary work of civil society groups, and to insist that the international community keep its doors and hearts open to Syria’s suffering people.

PHR Executive Director Donna McKay speaks with former Croatian Interior Minister Ranko Ostojic during a Nobel Women’s Initiative visit to the Naoboski Bnd refugee reception center in Croatia.

PHR board member Dr. Michele Heisler has volunteered for PHR since medical school, when she participated in a human rights investigation in Turkey. Now a professor at the University of Michigan Medical School and an associate director of its Global REACH program, Dr. Heiser is a dedicated human rights defender who has contributed to numerous PHR investigations and co-authored PHR’s report “Aleppo Abandoned,” among others. She has also authored more than 100 peer-reviewed studies in medical and public health journals.
Crisis at the Border
Helping Asylum-Seekers Secure a Safe Haven

Demand for Physicians for Human Rights’ (PHR) expertise in asylum cases sky-rocketed in 2015, as the refugee crisis that has been unfolding on the United States’ southern border continued unabated, and the number of unaccompanied children and families apprehended more than doubled. Many have suffered extreme violence, including sexual violence, but are too traumatized to successfully plead their case for asylum. In the United States, thousands of asylum-seekers – many of them children – who come seeking safety and protection are locked up every day, facing indefinite detention in poor conditions while they await the outcome of their case.

One 27-year-old Honduran woman, held for several months at a family detention center with her daughter, had been too embarrassed to tell a male officer about her lifetime history of sexual abuse; when she tried to explain this omission to a male judge, he dismissed her entire story as untrue. Another suffered gang violence and horrific domestic sexual abuse, including one attack that physically scarred her young daughter. The two fled to the United States, but were too traumatized to successfully plead their case for asylum. In the United States, thousands of asylum-seekers – many of them children – who come seeking safety and protection are locked up every day, facing indefinite detention in poor conditions while they await the outcome of their case.

One 27-year-old Honduran woman, held for several months at a family detention center with her daughter, had been too embarrassed to tell a male officer about her lifetime history of sexual abuse; when she tried to explain this omission to a male judge, he dismissed her entire story as untrue. Another suffered gang violence and horrific domestic sexual abuse, including one attack that physically scarred her young daughter. The two fled to the United States, but were too traumatized to successfully plead their case for asylum. In the United States, thousands of asylum-seekers – many of them children – who come seeking safety and protection are locked up every day, facing indefinite detention in poor conditions while they await the outcome of their case.

Another suffered gang violence and horrific domestic sexual abuse, including one attack that physically scarred her young daughter. The two fled to the United States, but had been held for seven months at a family detention center, where both mother and daughter were suffering severe psychological distress. In both these cases, PHR volunteers stepped in to conduct evaluations and submit forensic reports to the judge, resulting in the women and children being released from detention and allowed to apply for asylum in the United States.

Without credible evidence, immigration courts regularly dismiss allegations of abuse, putting desperate asylum-seekers like these women on the fast track to deportation back to their homelands – to suffer more harassment, intimidation, and even death. PHR trains volunteer health professionals to conduct forensic medical and psychological evaluations of people seeking asylum. Their affidavits and court testimony become critical for defending asylum claims. Even if the treatment happened months or years earlier and visible scars have faded or disappeared, health professionals, with their skills and our training, are able to conduct examinations, make observations, and elicit responses from people that can confirm the aftereffects of torture, including sexual violence and other inhumane treatment.

To meet the surging need, PHR has greatly expanded its asylum project to recruit and train clinicians – especially pediatricians and child mental health professionals. In 2015 alone, we trained more than 250 clinicians to join our Asylum Network, including two sessions that focused exclusively on pediatric exams. Network volunteers took on 470 evaluations and donated countless hours of their very limited free time to working with asylum-seekers in their communities. Some volunteers travelled at their own expense to stay for a week at a time near detention centers, in order to be on hand for emergency evaluation needs. By corroborating asylum-seekers’ experiences of torture and abuse, PHR ensured that immigration courts would not force these vulnerable people back to dangerous situations in their countries of origin.

Nearly 90 percent of the people whose cases we evaluate are granted asylum or some form of relief, a figure far exceeding the national average. Camilla* was just one of the tens of thousands of people who fled to the United States in 2014 and 2015, escaping extreme violence and insecurity in their countries. A victim of severe domestic violence and gang abuse in her native El Salvador, Camilla had made the difficult journey through Mexico with her two children to seek asylum in the United States. But because she could not persuade the judge that she had a credible fear of harm if she were sent home, Camilla and her children faced imminent deportation.

Pro bono lawyers in Texas contacted a PHR volunteer doctor to document Camilla’s case. In a long and difficult interview, our volunteer probed Camilla’s history and current situation. Then, at the close of the interview, the doctor asked: “Is there anything else you want to talk about?” Camilla suddenly divulged something she had never told anyone else – a horrifying story of childhood sexual abuse. Our volunteer was able to show how this early abuse magnified the trauma Camilla felt at every subsequent point in her life. With this evaluation, the immigration judge overturned the earlier “no credible fear” finding on the spot. Camilla and her children were released and are applying for asylum protection.

*Camilla’s name and country of origin have been changed to protect her identity.

"The rights of asylum-seekers and refugees are under attack all over the world – from closed borders in Europe to the detention of refugees children in the United States and Australia. A forensic evaluation can be one of the most important and consequential pieces of evidence in an immigration case, and there’s no question about it: our volunteers are saving lives.”

Our People
Saving Lives at the Border

"Is There Anything Else You Want to Talk About?"

Two young girls watch a World Cup soccer match in their holding area at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Nogales Placement Center.

PHR trains volunteer health professionals who provide pro bono forensic evaluations to asylum-seekers across the United States.
Doctors and other health professionals are under threat or attack every day around the world, often simply for being faithful to the ethics of their profession: treat all those who are injured or sick, without bias, and strive to do no harm. Persecution of and attacks on medical personnel violate international and human rights law. Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) works globally to document interference with medical workers who are carrying out their professional duties as well as the deliberate targeting of health facilities and personnel — and we advocate to stop these violations.

Syrian doctors treat a wounded man in a field hospital in the city of Qusayr. Photo: Antonio Pampliega/AFP/Getty Images

With our pioneering work to document the five-year assault on Syria’s medical system, PHR has placed the issue of global attacks on health care squarely in the public and policy discourse. Our hashtag #DefendDoctors has been used to bring attention to attacks on health care workers worldwide; it was trending during a PHR-organized “die-in,” which brought together hundreds of protesters from New York City’s medical and human rights communities to show solidarity with slain Syrian medical workers. The event, just steps from the United Nations, was picked up by news outlets around the globe.

Hundreds of health workers and human rights activists participate in a “die-in” organized by Physicians for Human Rights near the United Nations to draw attention to health workers killed in Syria.

“Undeterred by any sense of moral compass, Mr. Assad is flattening cities, blocking food aid from rebel-held areas and, according to Physicians for Human Rights, systematically attacking doctors and health care facilities, an especially heinous action that violates the norms of war and can constitute a crime against humanity under international law.” — The New York Times Editorial
PHR has long opposed force-feeding of hunger-strikers, particularly in detention situations – a form of ill-treatment tantamount to torture, and deemed “inhuman and degrading” by the World Medical Association more than two decades ago. Since 2014, PHR has defended a U.S. Navy nurse against retaliation for refusing to force-feed hunger-striking detainees at the Guantánamo Bay detention center. Compelling health professionals to forcibly treat competent adults who choose this form of protest violates their ethical duty to “do no harm” and to respect patient autonomy. When the Navy tried to discharge the nurse, PHR mobilized medical experts and professional organizations, including the American Nurses Association (ANA), to protest at the highest levels of the U.S. government. Our campaign succeeded: in June 2015, the Navy dropped the discharge proceedings. The ANA subsequently honored the nurse with its Year of Ethics Award. But the struggle was not over. When the Defense Department then sought to revoke the nurse’s security clearance, PHR continued to advocate for the nurse and to rebuff this latest assault on professional independence, so that all health workers can continue acting according to the highest ethical standards and placing their patients’ interests first.

The Miami Herald

“Force-feeding at Guantánamo ... is a military policy that serves to silence detainees from protesting 12 years of indefinite detention without legal charges. Health professionals should never be used as a tool to carry out such policies.”

Dr. Vincent Iacopino, PHR medical director

A letter from the attorney of the U.S. Navy nurse, acknowledging the role PHR has played in his client’s case.

Our Turkish medical and human rights colleagues have come under a barrage of legal fire from their government in the wake of the peaceful Gezi Park protests of 2013. Medical personnel who provided life-saving emergency medical care to demonstrators have been persecuted and targeted by legal authorities, leading PHR’s longtime partners the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) and the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey to ask for our help documenting human rights violations and the harassment of medical personnel. When the government sued the TMA and passed a law criminalizing “unauthorized” emergency medical care, PHR provided analysis of medical ethics and international human rights law and mobilized the global medical community in an advocacy effort to call attention to the baseless cases. In 2015, PHR and our partners – including leading medical organizations such as the British and German Medical Associations, the American Academy of Emergency Medicine, and the World Medical Association – were vindicated when courts dismissed two cases against the doctors.

Dear PHR,

My client has asked me to pass on to you his gratitude for your support. I must add my own. The way you jumped in at an early stage to help us with ideas, strategy, and resources; your intelligence, empathy, and good cheer; and, not least, your placing our client’s needs and desires in the forefront, were truly remarkable. I have met many devoted professionals in the course of my legal career, and you are at the very top. You allowed us to do things we had not accomplished on our own, and gave us the encouragement to fight for a good cause side by side. I think support for the enforcement of professional ethics has, largely due to your efforts, been energized.

Sincerely,

Ronald Meister
Partner

Our Partners
The Healing Power of Justice

“Justice has a healing effect, and I try my best to end impunity by revealing truth through documentation.”

Dr. Şebnem Korur Fincancı, president of the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey, is a world-renowned forensic expert who for more than 25 years has used her knowledge and skills to prevent torture and hold perpetrators accountable. A long-standing PHR partner, she is one of the authors of the Istanbul Protocol and has led generations of clinicians in Turkey and internationally in worldwide efforts to end torture.

PHR Director of Communications DeDe Dunevant speaks at a press conference in Ankara, Turkey preceding the dismissal of a case against Turkish doctors who provided emergency care in the wake of the 2013 Gezi Park protests.

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