



## Commentary



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## The need of a forensic center in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo: results of the first half-year experience at the State University of Bukavu

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## Abstract

*The Democratic Republic of Congo is bearing a heavy burden of decades of war. This situation coincides with a rapidly growing urbanization with its subsequent sets of problems: e.g. insecurity and urban violence. To effectively overcome this situation, transitional justice and reparation for the victims remain the only possible solution. The authors discuss the importance of erecting a forensic center in the Democratic Republic of Congo and highlight the key role it plays in justice administration using the short experience from the young forensic center at the Official University of Bukavu. Forensic medicine is crucial in justice administration. Efforts towards funding and scholarships could help improve the work of the young forensic center at the Official University of Bukavu. This calls for advocacy and the funding of the center.*

## Commentary

Forensic science is the application of scientific techniques to answer questions of legal importance. Although the practice of forensic science has been developed all over the world, its practice remains a subject of great confusion in sub-Saharan Africa [1,2]. The Democratic Republic of Congo has been facing decades of wars and cruelty leading to a huge number of atrocities including sexual violence against women, mass killing, minerals spoliations, territorial conflicts to cite a few among them. The DRC bears a heavy burden of sexual violence; some reports from the country indicate that sexual violence is widespread and includes gang rape, abduction for purposes of sexual slavery, forced participation of family members in rape, and mutilation of women's genitalia with knives and guns, among other atrocities [3,4]. Additionally, the rapid urbanization of the country has emerged with another set of problems, the most dangerous being urban criminality (sexual violence, drug abuse, consumption of illicit substances, rapt, etc). In a study by Peterman *et al.* (2011), the authors report

that approximately 1.69 to 1.80 million women reported having been raped in their lifetime [4]. Although some international protocols have been applied in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the country suffers from the absence of an accredited forensic center and often relies to the UN Commissions to lead investigations on massacres and violence suffered by its citizens [3,5]. Thus, it appeared that having a forensic center in DRC could be beneficial for the people and the country. In that perspective, a project for the creation of a forensic center was designed and submitted to the ministry of justice, the ministry of higher education, and the ministry of health, by the State University of Bukavu, in the vicinities of Lake Kivu. Fortunately, the project was authorized and created (letter no. 0975/MINESU/CAB.MIN/TLL/KMC/JMB/2019 of December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2019, and has been functioning since then. This paper aims to present the work achieved so far, the challenges encountered by the center, and argues about its usefulness as a public service.

**Results of the first half-year of The Forensic Center at the State University of Bukavu:** in DRC, forensic science is weakly practiced and its practice is considered mysterious, and often looked at as the science of the dead. Created in 2020, this forensic center has been functioning since then. With a board of experts that comprises a forensic specialist, 2 pathologists, an expert in toxicology, and 3 general physicians, the center serves as a referral center for questions related to forensic science in the province and within the country. Although the center is very young and suffers from equipment paucity, it has achieved various forensic activities in the region (Table 1). It has been consulted by the prosecutor on several justice issues (Table 2). Within six months, we have received 7 justice requisitions for expertise, and most of them concerned dead bodies. The majority of victims were young and all of them were living in the urban area. This situation is similar to the reality observed in most African towns. Sub-Saharan Africa is experiencing various forms and phases of violence upsurge for almost 4 years now. The

dynamics of violence is changing passing from heavy fighting and bombing in the aftermath of post-electoral results in Juba and Bujumbura to urban violence in Kinshasa and Goma. The recent events confirm that the urban area is not anymore the green zone it used to be, thus actually, it represents the neuralgic arena where violence occurs [6]. Additionally, in the majority of the cases, the center was consulted by the prosecutor to proceed with death investigation. The results of the investigations showed that for most cases, the death resulted from a violent attack by an exogenous force. Obenson K *et al.* demonstrate that it requires an investment of money and political will for death investigation to be effective. Moreover, the problem still as for many sub-Saharan countries, the DRC is facing competing public health and financial pressure that affect the disbursement of the scarce funding [7].

**Challenges and perspectives:** despite the efforts made by the University and its clinics to keep the center functional, several challenges are still undermining its development, to cite a few from them: low or inexistent compliance of the Congolese population to forensic services, the lack of a genetic laboratory to address paternity-related problems and issues related to DNA processing; lack of scholarships for the professional development of its workforce, etc. The center lacks a forensic psychiatry specialist and often has to look up the services of other psychiatric centers, something that is costly for the patients. However, from our half-year experience, the results demonstrate a high solicitation of the center, especially by the justice department. Even though the importance of the standard death autopsy has been highlighted in previous studies in death investigation [7], only one of our patients benefitted from an autopsy, due to lack of cash. No policy accompanies the funding of the center. Additionally, there is no scene protection in most of the cases, thus leading the pathologist to deal with manipulated bodies and corrupted crime scenes. This situation is similar to what was described in other African countries by Obenson *et al.* [7].

## Conclusion

Forensic science is a neglected field in Africa. However, the experience from the young center at the State University of Bukavu shows that there is an obvious need to develop and expand the services offered, mainly to meet justice demands. This calls for advocacy and the funding of the center.

## Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

## Authors' contributions

Conceptualization: DSN, MMC, JMB. Writing-Original Draft: DSN, MMC, JMB, BMB, PMK, DAM, JMB. Revision and editing of the main paper: DSN, MMC, JMB, BMB, PMK DAM, JMB Supervision: JMB. All the authors have read and approved the manuscript.

## Tables

**Table 1:** activities achieved within six months

**Table 2:** requisitions of expertise and their motivations

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**Table 1:** activities achieved within six months

Activities	Frequency
Seminars	2
Autopsy	1
Death investigations	6
Domestic violence	1
Toxicological screening	1

**Table 2:** requisitions of expertise and their motivations

Age of the victim (years)	Address	Motivation of the requisition
2	Ibanda commune	Dead body
25	Ibanda commune	Dead body
28	Ibanda commune	Maternal death
18	Ibanda commune	Dead body
9	Kadutu commune	Blows and wounds
25	Ibanda commune	Dead body
21	Kadutu commune	Dead body