

Mexican forensic expert bathes bodies to solve crimes

March 24 2013, by Jesus Alcazar



Members of the scientific team of Mexican dentist Alejandro Hernandez Cardenas carry a gurney with mummified human corpse to rehydrate it in a special chemical bath in an intent to rehydrate it, at the forensic scientific laboratory of the Attorney General, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on March 6, 2013.

Mexican forensic expert Alejandro Hernandez dips dry, yellowish cadavers in a see-through bath, hoping his technique to rehydrate mummified bodies will solve murders in crime-infested Ciudad Juarez.

The city bordering Texas has endured drug-related violence and a wave of murders of women in recent years, with bodies dumped anywhere and drying up quickly in the desert climate, complicating the task of identifying victims and their cause of death.

With his special solution, whose recipe he keeps secret, Hernandez can rehydrate bodies, making facial features as well as gunshot or stab wounds reappear.

"It is common with the climate in Ciudad Juarez...for bodies to mummify or stiffen, with the skin stretched like drums," Hernandez, an expert at the Chihuahua state prosecutor's office, told AFP.

"It has always been a great satisfaction every time we were able to identify or determine the cause of death in the 150 cases that we participated in."

The scientist has plenty of work on his hands.

Juarez became infamous in the 1990s when hundreds of women were killed in an inexplicable homicidal binge that cast a dark shadow over the city.

The "femicides" were followed by a surge of violence between powerful drug cartels that left more than 10,500 people dead in the past six years.



Mexican dentist Alejandro Hernandez Cardenas speaks with reporter about the procedure to rehydrate a mummified corpse, at the forensic scientific laboratory of the Attorney General, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico on March 6, 2013.

Sometimes, victims are discovered in a mummified state years after they were buried, often making it impossible to identify them. This is where Hernandez comes in.

Techniques to rehydrate fingers in order to get fingerprints have existed for more than a decade, but Hernandez began using his method to restore entire bodies in 2008. He is currently seeking a patent to protect his secret method.

Elizabeth Gardner, a forensic science professor at the University of Alabama who saw a body treated by Hernandez, said that the "process works, the corpse was restored and looked like it could be identified from its facial features."

"To the extent of my knowledge, this is the only method for rehydrating a corpse," she said. "This technique will be most useful in dry areas, like Juarez. It's labor - and materials - intensive, but it will be useful when other techniques fail."

With the help of assistants in a lab that smells of death and chemicals, a cadaver is raised in a harness, gingerly lowered into the hermetically sealed bath, and left to soak for four to seven days. Sometimes, technicians just dip a body part.

"We spin (the body) around the whole time until the human parts or the cadaver regain a more natural aspect," Hernandez said.

"Then you can observe moles, scars, blemishes, pathological or traumatic characteristics, which allow you to find the cause of death."

Hernandez freezes decomposing bodies until they dry up, and then he soaks them in his special bath.

"We are only doing this here in Ciudad Juarez," he said, adding that the process is inexpensive.

The brutal drug war between the Sinaloa and Juarez cartels has waned in the past year, dramatically lowering the homicide rate in the city that was once the murder capital of Mexico.

But bodies continue to pile up, with women still disappearing and human remains being discovered around the desert city of 1.3 million people.

Just this month, mothers of people who disappeared worked with the police to look for remains in a desert area near Juarez, and found bones they hope to identify one day.

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