



RAFTO

Rafto Prize Award Statement 23.09.2021 10am(cest)

## **The Rafto Prize 2021 to Human Rights Data Analysis Group - Seeking justice behind the numbers**

*The Rafto Prize 2021 is awarded to the Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) for their wide-reaching documentation of grave human rights abuses. By using statistics and data science they uncover large-scale human rights violations that might otherwise go undetected. This novel approach has enabled courts to bring perpetrators to justice and given closure to affected victims and their families. HRDAG represents a new generation of human rights defenders that advances the enforcement of human rights globally.*

HRDAG promotes accountability for human rights abuse. They develop rigorous scientific analysis in partnership with frontline human rights defenders, and they provide evidence of torture, killings, and other violent power abuses. This evidence has been crucial in demanding accountability and justice. Systematic documentation of human rights violations exposes the scope of transgressions. This is central to putting an end to impunity for perpetrators, and vital for the protection and empowerment of the courageous human rights activists at the frontline. HRDAG's rigorous methods and analyses also ensure that every death is counted, and a minimum standard of human dignity is respected.

*"Everyone who has been murdered should be remembered".*  
*([HRDAG Director of Research Patrick Ball](#))*

### **HRDAG: Statisticians for Human Rights**

HRDAG conducts quantitative analysis of human rights violations across the globe. In 1991, founder Patrick Ball initiated databases for human rights groups in El Salvador. By documenting extensive human rights abuses, he contributed to a hundred military officers resigning. Since then, Ball and colleagues have documented human rights violations ranging from state coordinated violence and deaths in prisons in Chad, to disappearances during the civil war in Sri-Lanka and police killings in the US. The HRDAG team consists of a small group of dedicated experts in computer science, software development, mathematical and applied statistics, and

demography, and are based in San Francisco. In their work, HRDAG partner with human rights defenders, experts, and organizations worldwide.

Based on the idea that “truth leads to accountability”, HRDAG provides thorough documentation of torture, forced disappearances, kidnappings, war crimes and extrajudicial killings. Data related to grave human rights violations are often missing, biased, and generated from different sources and incompatible formats. Perpetrators of human rights abuses often do everything they can to hide their crimes from the public, while victims and their families seek answers and justice. The novelty of HRDAG’s approach lies in their efforts to invent and extend scientific methods from other fields, such as mathematical statistics, machine learning, software engineering, and computer science. They apply these methods to the area of human rights to detect patterns of violence and provide statistical estimates traditional approaches have not been able to deliver. They bring the power of quantitative analysis to the pursuit of justice and accountability. In doing so, they establish scientifically defensible historical records of human rights crimes. As HRDAG puts it:

*“We believe truth leads to accountability, and at HRDAG, promoting accountability for human rights violations is our highest purpose”*

*(HRDAG)*

HRDAG’s groundbreaking approach also has broader implications for the defense of human rights globally. Through research publications, presentations, trainings, and other research dissemination, the organization educates human rights defenders to better understand the role and power of statistical data and how to make use of new methods to advance their work.

All HRDAG’s projects seek to uncover statistical facts, ranging from identifying patterns and scale of killings to uncovering systematic abuses. Their analyses set out to establish facts to improve their partners’ advocacy or strengthen the case against a perpetrator. HRDAG searches for, collects, compiles, and analyzes data from different sources, such as individual testimonies, administrative records, exhumation reports, and satellite imagery data.

### **Holding perpetrators to account**

HRDAG’s research has been instrumental in holding perpetrators to account. They have provided evidence to truth commissions, international criminal tribunals, non-governmental human rights organizations, and United Nations missions. For instance, HRDAG researchers gave expert testimonials in the trials of former President Slobodan Milošević in the Former Yugoslavia (2002), and of General José Efraín Ríos Montt who was convicted of command responsibility for genocide against the Maya Ixil indigenous people and for crimes against humanity in Guatemala (2013). HRDAG also presented expert testimony about extremely high mortality rates among political prisoners during the rule of former president Hissène Habré in Chad when he was found guilty of crimes against humanity in 2016.

In Mexico, HRDAG worked with Data Cívica and the Human Rights Program of the Universidad Iberoamericana to develop tools that support searches for the remains of victims of forced

disappearances. Using machine learning models to identify and predict sites where clandestine or hidden graves may be located, this project assisted families and authorities in developing a search program. The search program has been recognized and consulted by federal and local authorities and relatives of victims of forced disappearance in Mexico. It enabled identification and recognition of the magnitude of the phenomenon and provided a fundament for processes of truth, justice, and reparations. The information from HRDAG's work strengthens advocacy of family groups and their efforts to know the fate and whereabouts of their disappeared loved ones.

In their recent work on police violence in the US, HRDAG show that one third of all victims murdered by strangers are killed by the police, suggesting that official statistics substantially underestimate police violence. The organization points out that documenting deaths is a fundamental obligation of governments and argues that deaths resulting from government actions are among the most important category of deaths to be recorded. HRDAG have partnered with the *Invisible Institute* (a non-profit organization), in Chicago. Together they aim to address this issue by design and maintenance of a database to systematically process large amounts of data on police misconduct in Chicago.

### **Spotlight on systemic failures**

Not all human rights violations are conducted deliberately by conscious perpetrators. Systemic and institutional failures also lead to human rights abuses. HRDAG use statistical analysis to detect such failures. HRDAG examined the pre-trial risk assessment tools used by judges in the US. These tools are algorithms-based computer programs and supposed to be "bias-free." HRDAG showed that the tool provides racially-biased recommendations because the data that the models rely on are themselves racially biased. Through rigorous analysis HRDAG uncovered systematic discrimination in an instrument that was intended to prevent it.

### **Data and statistical analysis as a fundament for human rights advocacy**

In an era of misinformation and polarization, credible information is more crucial than ever. The Rafto Prize 2021 aims to highlight the importance of HRDAG and other human right defenders' work in seeking and upholding the truth as a foundation of human rights advocacy and justice. HRDAG's innovative methods and dissemination of relevant statistical information demonstrate that credible data provides a fundament for the protection of human rights and the rule of law, enabling the society to recognize and respect the experience of every victim of abuse.

The recognition of HRDAG's work is a global call to hold perpetrators to account and bring justice to the victims and their loved ones. All governments are responsible for identifying human rights abuses and for preventing systematic abuses that threaten fundamental rights. The uncovering of facts is instrumental to fighting impunity. Governments, business, civil society, and international institutions should endorse the importance of data and verified knowledge, and use this to demand accountability, protect human rights, and promote justice.

The Rafto Prize 2021 is a recognition of HRDAG's pioneering approach and dedicated commitment to detecting and deterring human rights violators by providing reliable scientific

documentation. The prize sends a firm message to human rights violators, both state and non-state perpetrators, that violations will not go unnoticed.

The Rafto Foundation,  
Bergen, Wednesday 18 August 2021.

*The Rafto Prize will be presented at 18.00 on Sunday 14 November 2021, at the Bergen National Theatre in Norway.*

## SOURCES

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<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/HRIndicators/StatisticsAndHumanRights.pdf>

### **Human Rights Watch Report**

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020>

### **HRDAG in the media**

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/27/the-body-counter/>

<https://www.icij.org/inside-icij/2019/09/counting-the-dead-how-statistics-can-find-unreported-killings/>

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### **HRDAG projects**

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#### **Sierra Leone:**

[http://www.sierra-leone.org/TRCDocuments.html,](http://www.sierra-leone.org/TRCDocuments.html)

#### **Liberia:**

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#### **Guatemala:**

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<https://www.ijmonitor.org/2013/04/prosecution-experts-testify-on-psychological-cultural-statistical-and-gender-issues/>

<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB440/>

#### **Chad:**

<https://hrdag.org/content/chad/State-Violence-in-Chad.pdf>

#### **Mexico:**

[https://datacivica.org/assets/pdf/Fosas\\_web.pdf](https://datacivica.org/assets/pdf/Fosas_web.pdf)

#### **US**

[https://granta.com/violence-in-blue/,](https://granta.com/violence-in-blue/)

<https://invisible.institute/police-data>

[https://statsandstories.net/society1/risk-assessment-biases,](https://statsandstories.net/society1/risk-assessment-biases)

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