

“ I have in my hands a great responsibility: I’m saving Guatemala’s history for future generations. Thanks to a chance discovery and computer technology, the recovered stories of men and women who disappeared will never disappear again. ” – ARCHIVE WORKER IN GUATEMALA



CHALLENGE

From 1960-1996, Guatemala experienced a long and brutal civil war resulting in an estimated 200,000 people dead or missing. A United Nations report claims that the Guatemalan military and police forces were behind 93 percent of all human rights atrocities committed during the war. In 2005, over 80 million documents from the National Police Archive were discovered. Families of the victims and human rights organizations believe that the documents could lead to understanding the fate of the “disappeared.”

SOLUTION

Team members from Benetech provided software and statistical models to collect, organize, secure, and back up data from the massive archive. Martus, Benetech’s free, open source software platform featuring strong encryption and cloud storage to gather and protect sensitive data, was used to preserve and analyze the police records. Under the direction of Dr. Patrick Ball, a computer scientist at Benetech, archive workers used a random sampling technique to select documents to code and analyze. All content was encrypted and backed up to multiple servers outside the country to keep the data secure.

IMPACT

In 2008, the PBS television series “Frontline/World” aired an investigative report on the Guatemala National Police Archive project. Interviews with members of Benetech’s team described how they set up the software platform and began the archival process with the Guatemalan team. The University of Texas at Austin and Archivo Histórico de la Policía Nacional (AHPN) digitized 15 of the 80 million records and made them available to the public in 2013 to enable families and human rights prosecutors to uncover the truth.

On September 20, 2013, a Guatemalan tribunal convicted the former director of the National Police of Guatemala, retired Col. Héctor Bol de la Cruz, and his subordinate Jorge Alberto Gómez López for the 1984 disappearance of student and labor leader Edgar Fernando García. Velia Muralles, the AHPN expert, delivered the most powerful evidence in the form of hundreds of documents that provided overwhelming proof that García and Danilo Chinchilla were captured in a joint military-police operation orchestrated by Bol de la Cruz and Gómez López. The two men received the maximum sentence of 40 years in prison.

Benetech is a different type of tech company. We’re a nonprofit whose mission is to empower communities in need by creating scalable technology solutions. Our work has transformed how over 500,000 people with disabilities read, made it safer for human rights defenders in over fifty countries to document violations, and equipped environmental conservationists to protect ecosystems and species all over the world. And our Benetech Labs is working on the next big impact.