

ON the 13<sup>th</sup> of February, 2009, The National Capital District Commission of Port Moresby carried out a mass burial of approximately sixty bodies that had long been stored at the Port Moresby Morgue, located behind the city's general hospital. The bodies remained unclaimed by their families, and due to storage problems at the morgue, the NCDC ordered that the bodies be removed and buried at the Nine Mile Cemetery, a few kilometres outside of Papua New Guinea's capital city.

Many of these bodies had been stored in temporary refrigerated shipping containers for nearly two years. The condition of the human remains was an appalling sight. Most of the bodies, wrapped in plastic, leaked fluid, as they were moved from the containers and placed in flimsy plywood coffins.

The bodies had deteriorated badly. The smell was atrocious, and hospital staff eagerly handed out face masks to the scores of workers who had been hired for the day to help with the burial proceedings. After the cover of each coffin was nailed into place, the morgue director patiently inscribed, in black text, the details of each corpse and a cross. It was a small, yet moving act of decency given to the dead. Bodies without proper identification were marked "Unknown". There were numerous coffins that read "Body of unknown child".

So why do so many bodies lie here, unclaimed by their loved ones, when the family is such a strong entity in Papua New Guinean culture? There are two main problems that this society faces in terms of dealing with its deceased. The first is the stigma that surrounds the HIV/AIDS virus. Many families are quick to distance themselves from a loved one who has contracted the virus, especially if that person has died. Many bodies that were buried were victims of HIV/AIDS. It can bring great shame to a family who has had a member contract the virus. Sorcery is still widely practiced in Papua New Guinea, and blame and retribution for the disease entering a community can be directed at the family of the deceased.

The other major problem facing relatives of deceased is the cost associated with funeral and burial arrangements. Many families in Port Moresby do not have the financial means to support themselves, and the costs associated with a proper burial can be as much as \$3000AUD. Traditionally, bodies of relatives must be returned to their 'Place', the traditional home of the family. This process, involving preparation, air fares, transport and ceremonial proceedings make it prohibitively expensive. The minimum wage in Papua New Guinea has recently been increased to just over 200 Kina, approximately \$110 AUD a fortnight. It seems humiliatingly cruel.

After the coffins had been loaded onto private trucks, hired by the NCDC for the burial, they were driven to Nine Mile Cemetery, a few kilometres north of the capital.

The job of placing the coffins into the shallow dug graves was left to a mixed group of unemployed people, hired for the day from various settlements around Port Moresby. There was commotion as a group of workers voiced their anger that some of those hired were not doing any work. In this wide open area on a hillside overlooking the main cemetery, the rotting smell of the corpses was still overpowering.

Pastor Militus, a local of Port Moresby, was brought to the cemetery by the NCDC, and he led a moving tribute in Pidgin to those being buried. The large crowd bowed their heads in unison, while he gave these forgotten people their last rights.

The media turned out for the burial and short stories ran on EMTV, the national television station, a little after six p.m that evening. The country's two daily newspapers, *The National* & *The Post-Courier* also ran short stories on the burial in their next editions. Apart from this however, the mass burial was quickly forgotten.

The people buried in the hillside of Nine Mile Cemetery on this day had already been forgotten by their families long before they were laid to rest. The deceased, however, had one last undignified act done to them. A front-end loader dumped dirt on their graves, and the names patiently written on the coffins' lids in Port Moresby, were quickly covered with dirt. All that was left was an unidentified mass grave of people. People neglected by society, forgotten by their families and buried in the ground as if they never even existed.

Sean Davey  
2009