

Mapping Human Rights

By Jon Jefferson

A respected presence at UC Berkeley for 15 years, the Human Rights Center has found a new home at Boalt Hall. Led since 1996 by Faculty Director Eric Stover, HRC gathers and analyzes data to protect and expand core human rights around the globe.

The addition of HRC will make the law school “home to one of the nation’s most comprehensive, globally active, and student-oriented human rights programs,” says Dean Edley.

The following story exemplifies HRC’s innovative, courageous, and compassionate work.

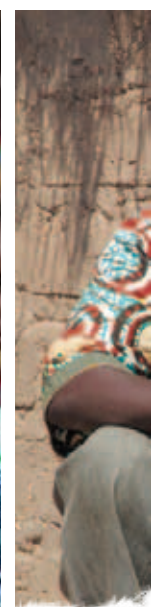


For Patrick Vinck and Phuong Pham, it was another bumpy day of field work—literally bumpy, and literally a field—as their crew-cab pickup jounced past acres of cassava in the northern region of the Central African Republic. CAR—pronounced like the shorthand word for automobile—is aptly named: stick a pin smack in the middle of a satellite photo of Africa, and you’ve probably nailed this dirt-poor nation, which ranks 179th out of 182 countries on the United Nations’ “human development index,” a number combining health, education, and income.

In November 2009, Vinck and Pham began a two-month survey in CAR, interviewing almost 2,000 of its inhabitants about their physical and mental health, their education, their exposure to violence and death, and their hopes for their notoriously unstable government, where corruption and coups have been steady fare for decades. The results of their research will shape human-rights recommendations to CAR’s government, as well as guiding the efforts of humanitarian and development organizations working there to make life safer, healthier, and more prosperous.

Vinck and Pham are researchers with the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center. Pham, an epidemiologist, is the HRC’s director of research; Vinck, an agricultural scientist whose focus has shifted from mapping crops to mapping human-rights abuses, heads the center’s Initiative for Vulnerable Populations. They met in Rwanda in 2000, while Vinck was working on rural development and Pham was participating in a Tulane public-health project. Now both hold dual faculty appointments, in Berkeley’s Human Rights Center and at Tulane University.

During the past decade, Vinck and Pham have documented war crimes in Uganda, Iraq, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; they’ve assessed the collapse of the health-care system in Burma; they’ve investigated the exploitation of illegal immigrants



in the United States; with the help of three Berkeley Law students, they’ve explored what Cambodians think should be done to hold Khmer Rouge killers accountable.

Along the way, they’ve battled malaria, witnessed the devastation wrought by hurricanes in Burma and New Orleans, and narrowly missed being caught in an attack on a U.S. convoy in Iraq. They’ve worried for one another’s safety and have comforted each other in the face of grueling conditions and heart-rending misery. Pham and Vinck aren’t just colleagues; they’re life partners as well.

The couple’s complementary skills and unwavering commitment make for pioneering and productive research, says Eric Stover, faculty director of the Human Rights Center (see *The Rights Stuff*, p. 27). “Patrick’s background makes him very good at mapping and showing quantitative data,” Stover notes. “And Phuong’s very good at designing the research. Together, they can go into a country like CAR, which is absolutely the

toughest situation to be in—safety and even food for the team can be a big problem—and they know how to organize and get things done.”

Dueling Narratives

Vinck and Pham don’t so much spin a story as volley with it, batting the narrative back and forth like a badminton birdie. Here’s how they describe their first visit to Bangui, the capital:

He: We arrived in Bangui in May 2009. We flew to Bangui from ...

She: From Paris.

He: From Paris? Or from Amsterdam?

She: Oh, right, Amsterdam.

He: We arrived at eleven at night; it was very dark. The person who was supposed to meet us wasn’t there. There was no one we trusted or even knew there. There was nothing that was obviously a taxi there.

She: There were 300 people in a room not much bigger than our office. It took about two hours to get our luggage.

He: So after we found our luggage, we went to a hotel, supposedly the nicest hotel in the capital. The carpet had probably not been changed since the 1970s.

She: Or the 1960s.

The he-said, she-said dialogue also characterizes their intellectual collaboration. When designing and planning a study, they continually fire questions, problems, and solutions at one another.

Getting things done in CAR required solving immense logistical problems. Aside from a spider web of bad roads radiating outward from Bangui, CAR has virtually no infrastructure, utilities, communications, or other services outside the capital. Even gas stations are rare. “To



OLD, NEW, AND NEWER: In Bangui, tradition mixes with modernity. At right, a villager trained by Patrick Vinck records interview responses on a specially designed smart-phone device.

travel in most areas,” says Vinck, “we had to bring in all the gas we needed. We rented twin-cab pickup trucks; we had the driver and a supervisor in the front seat, four surveyors in the back seat, and a 50-gallon drum of gasoline in the bed of the truck.” They also carried tents, water, water-purification tablets, and one or two days’ worth of food. “But we’d stay out in the field for five or six days,” adds Vinck, “so we’d end up eating whatever the villagers brought us.”

Pham’s face brightens at the mention of food. “Oh, there’s a fish dish I really love,” she says, “this baby fish that they fry. There’s another, a fish they wrap in banana leaves and throw in the fire.” She beams as if the words somehow conjure up the tastes.

PHOTOS: PATRICK VINCK, PEG SKORPINSKI

The Rights Stuff

HRC’s Eric Stover Fights for Rights on a Global Scale

During nearly 30 years of human rights work, Eric Stover—faculty director of the UC Berkeley Human Rights Center—has covered a lot of ground, much of it war-torn and bleak. He’s studied the carnage wrought by land mines in Cambodia, inventoried mass graves in Rwanda and the Balkans, and witnessed the rise of rape as a weapon of war.

Stover has had a long and productive relationship with Boalt Hall, HRC’s new institutional home. An adjunct faculty member since 2007, he has collaborated with faculty and students on several large-scale projects, including a recent study of former Guantanamo detainees undertaken with Laurel Fletcher, the director of Boalt’s International Human Rights Law Clinic. The study is “a perfect example” of HRC’s cross-disciplinary approach, according to Stover. “We brought in law students to deal with the legal questions and social sciences students to design the questionnaire,” he says.

Thanks to funding from the MacArthur Foundation, the HRC is planning to study sexual violence and accountability in times of armed conflict and political unrest. Sexual violence is “a way of harming and terrorizing both individuals and communities,” says Stover, with soldiers and militia members engaging in systematic rapes, and even deliberately infecting women with HIV. No protocols exist for prosecuting sex crimes in international courts, but Stover hopes HRC can help fill that void.

“The MacArthur funding runs for three years, but I hope to dedicate 10 years to the project,” he says. “Together with Laurel Fletcher and David Cohen, who directs the War Crimes Center, I’d like to create a cadre of students around it.” Stover says that the project may begin this spring in Kenya. Later, he plans to bring in sex-crimes investigators, physicians, and social workers who have provided psychosocial services to victims, and prosecutors and judges experienced in international court proceedings.

It wouldn’t be the first time Stover has helped set standards for prosecuting war crimes. In the early 1980s he led forensic investigations of mass graves in Argentina, Brazil, Guatemala, and Iraqi Kurdistan—work that helped lay the foundations for the UN’s prosecution of war crimes in the Balkans. Stover notes that when prosecuting sex crimes, the needs of victims can differ from those of prosecutors. “It’s important to ensure that what you are doing is in their best interests—not just legally, but also with respect to their emotional and psychological well being.”—J.J.



FOUR FOR RIGHTS: (From left) Phuong Pham and Patrick Vinck with HRC Faculty Director Eric Stover and Executive Director Camille Crittenden.



Speed-Dial Research

HRC's innovative cellphone plan offers roaming chargers

Solange, a young woman from the Central African Republic, listened as a woman in a northern village described her abduction and rape by rebels from a nearby area. Peering down, Solange recorded the woman's answers on a palm-sized gadget. An hour later, the interview—her final one of the day—was done. She returned to the hut where the survey team was based and handed the smart phone to Patrick Vinck, who synched it to a laptop computer. In seconds, the information from the rape victim's interview—along with data from three interviews earlier in the day—was safely encrypted and stored in Vinck's laptop.

Although field conditions in CAR are primitive, the survey technology is a model of gee-whiz innovation. With the help of Neil Hendrick, a Chicago-based mobile-technology specialist who works full-time for the HRC, Vinck and Phuong Pham programmed Google Androids to collect survey data in remote African villages.

"We chose the Android because it's the only cellphone platform that's totally open source," says Vinck. "That allows us to customize the applications, and we get to work with all these young, vibrant developers."

They equipped their 20 local surveyors with Androids and solar chargers—essential, since the wilds of CAR offer no place to plug in—and taught them how to record the interview answers. Every evening, the field researchers would upload the day's data to laptop computers. "Data entry used to take us a couple of months," says Vinck. "This is so much faster. We did our field research in CAR in November and December, and we were already submitting articles in February."

Digital data is more accurate than paper-based, too, he says—and it's less vulnerable to damage from, say, hurricanes. "We had about 30 boxes of paper surveys from Uganda stored in the garage in New Orleans in 2005," recalls Pham. When Hurricane Katrina hit, the garage flooded—"Patrick's car was totally submerged," she laughs—and the surveys were ruined. Fortunately, the hard-won content in the soggy stacks of paper had already been computerized.

The mobile technology is a step forward for the locally hired field workers, too. "Most of these people have never seen a computer before," says Pham, "so this fascinates them. In Uganda, one of our field researchers was a woman who was a victim of violence—one of her hands had been cut off with a machete—and we were able to find a way for her to hold the PDA and enter data with one hand. It was so empowering for her. And it's great to see our surveyors excited about their work. The PDA adds another dimension to technology transfer, potentially enabling war-torn countries to leapfrog several decades of development."—J.J.

"We've eaten monkeys, snakes, wild hogs, and all sorts of insects and caterpillars," Vinck says. "What I like is the peanut sauces. They cultivate the peanut there, and they make all these great sauces."

The local food isn't just cuisine; it's also connection—banana-leaf diplomacy. "The first thing we try to do when we arrive in a village is go see the chief," explains Vinck. "A lot of people come to see what's going on, and some of them bring food. It's not exactly a ceremony, but it's an important way to start connecting. In every village we try to meet with the chiefs, priests, sometimes the military—people who know the situation and who can get us permission to work in the area."

Hiring local surveyors is crucial to their success—and even their survival. Besides winning trust and boosting participation, the local surveyors help keep the researchers out of harm's way. "If an interviewer tells us, 'no, we cannot work there,' we believe them," says Vinck. "If they say, 'OK, now it's safe to travel on this road,' we listen."

During two months of field research in CAR, Vinck and Pham, along with colleague Neil Hendrick, led a team of 20 locally hired interviewers—10 men and 10 women—and trained them to use specially programmed smart phones to record and log the survey data. (see *Speed-Dial Research*, left) The teams visited 117 villages and conducted 1,879 face-to-face interviews, each one averaging an hour in length. As sample sizes go, it was no big deal for Vinck and Pham, nor for HRC. "We're known for these huge population-based surveys," says Stover. "I think the words 'without fear or favor' should be inscribed over our doorway, because we go and find out from people what they're really thinking—which is not necessarily what the humanitarian groups think they're thinking."

Stover cites an unexpected finding that emerged several years ago from HRC surveys in northern Uganda, where ethnic violence has raged for nearly a quarter-century. Guerrillas with the Lord's Resistance Army have killed, mutilated, and enslaved tens of thousands of northern Ugandans; the strife displaced an estimated 1.6 million people, forcing them to live for years in squalid refugee camps. "In Uganda," Stover says, "we learned that people do want justice, but even more than they want justice, they want peace."

The situation in CAR is bad, but it's different from Uganda, says Vinck. "In CAR the violence is widespread and nationwide," he explains, "but it's about political power, not ethnic differences. It's not so much atrocities as theft, kidnapping, banditry. For example, anytime people try to go anywhere, they get stopped at a checkpoint and forced to give up half of what they have."

"A lot of villages formed self-defense groups," adds Pham, "but then as those grew, they became rebel forces and militias, and in the end, all the groups prey on the population."

Calculated Risks

Working in areas plagued by violence, Pham and Vinck risk becoming victims themselves, but they're stoic about the dangers. "I think we worry more for one another than for ourselves," says Pham. "When I left the Congo in 2007, there was fighting about 80 kilometers from where Patrick was working. I called colleagues from Rwanda and asked them to go evacuate him."

But Vinck remained—he worked in the Congo for half a year, during the peak of violence—and wrapped up his project. He worried more about the Congolese than about himself. "The first question we ask ourselves before we go anywhere is whether we're putting the respondents at risk," he says. "Our second concern is the security of the interviewers. But the reality is, in most of these places, they don't target foreigners. In CAR, we had to work in rebel-controlled areas, so in one village I had to negotiate with the rebel leader to get permission to work in the northern part of the country. They have an interest in negotiating peace, so they agreed."

"That's one of the things Patrick does that I do not like," says Pham. "He takes the most dangerous sites."

He shrugs. "I can't send teams to places that I wouldn't go." In CAR, Vinck led the teams in the northern areas, where rebels—from CAR itself or from across the border of Chad—tend to range; Pham's main role was planning and coordinating arrangements in the capital; Neil Hendrick led teams in the south, which is relatively free of rebel activity.

They've run the CAR data—the results of the 1,879 interviews—through multiple analyses, but they're keeping a lid on their findings until they are published in the scientific literature.

But while they're not ready to discuss specifics, they can talk in general terms, and they do so with evident sadness. Of all the countries they've worked in, they say, CAR is the bleakest. "It's the worst in terms of the poverty and the lack of infrastructure," says

Pham. "There are lawless lands; there are no services. Basically there's no state outside the capital; it's a phantom state."

"It's hard to compare places," Vinck adds, "but in CAR, there's something different about the desperation of the people. Things in the Congo are bad, for instance, but in general the Congolese people are very optimistic; they think things are going to get better. In CAR, people don't think that."

Yet paradoxically, he describes CAR as "one of our best research experiences. Bangui seems small and provincial," he adds, "and people told me it would be very difficult to find educated people to work with. But by the end, I felt like we had the most talented team of any we've ever worked with."

Vinck and Pham have a gift for finding the sheen beneath the world's cruel layer of tarnish; for savoring the tender fish and tangy sauce in the bare hut. Despite a decade immersed in poverty, suffering, and danger, they manage to radiate energy and hope. That's not to say they're insensitive or callused; they're clearly not. "When

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—Eric Stover, Faculty Director, Human Rights Center

"I'm in the field, it makes sense," says Vinck, "but when I come back home and think nobody cares about these problems, it's hard."

"For me," says Pham, "it's harder when I'm in the field. In Uganda, in 2005, I would see children walk 10 kilometers into the center of town every night for protection from abduction, then walk back to their camps for school in the morning. They call those children 'night commuters.' It was tragic. And we're so lucky."

"We are," says Vinck. "We always have the choice to come home. Sometimes I feel like I can't take it anymore," he reflects. "But two weeks after I get here, I think 'I have to go back.'"

Freelancer Jon Jefferson is a writer and documentary producer. He has coauthored five books on forensic anthropology.



Rights Timing

In 2006, former Human Rights Center (HRC) advisory board member Nadine Tang introduced Greg and Liz Lutz to Eric Stover, the center's faculty director. Liz joined the advisory board the following year, and since then she and Greg have been closely involved and strongly supportive of HRC's work.

They have been generous donors to

Boalt's International Human Rights Law Clinic (IHRLC) since 2001. Last year, Greg served on the selection committee for the Mobile Challenge, a competition that HRC held for innovative uses of mobile technology in human rights research and advocacy.

The Lutzes recently made a substantial gift to the university that will benefit the center, the clinic, and Cal Performances, where Liz has served as a trustee.

—Andrew Cohen