

FINAL ACTS: PRESERVING THE RECORDS OF TRUTH COMMISSIONS

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They were dancing in the streets of Port-au-Prince last Thursday, February 16, 2006, as news spread that Rene Preval had been declared the next president. This is the latest government to take power in Haiti, which has had a woeful 20 years of political instability. In the middle of this period Haiti had a truth commission.

Here is a brief review to help us all remember the sequence of recent Haitian governments.

The reign of the Duvaliers ended in 1986.

Between 1986 and 1991 the country went through a series of governments.

In 1991 Jean-Baptiste Aristede was elected, but he was overthrown in a coup shortly thereafter.

In 1994, Jean-Baptiste Aristede returned to power. In December of that year he issued an executive order creating the National Commission for Truth and Justice. Its mandate was to investigate human rights abuses from the 30 September 1991 coup that overthrew President Aristide until his restoration to power in September 1994. It presented its report in February 1996.

Rene Preval succeeded Aristede as president in 1996, and during this period at least part of the Commission's records were in a special room the Ministry of Justice where lawyers as of 1998 were permitted to use them and make copies of them (another part may have been in the Ministry of the Interior).

Aristede returned to power in 2001.

Then, exactly two years ago, rebels again seized the government and the President left the country, and rebels entered the capital, in the most recent coup in a chronic history of instability.

Now Preval is back.

Haiti's truth commission records, including approximately 6000 interviews, morgue records, forensic examinations of mass graves, photographs, and "a dozen area reports, each of which was hundreds of pages long, combining statistics, secondary materials, analysis of interviews, and direct investigations," contained evidence of the prior activities of at least some of the leaders of the rebel movement that took over the government in 2004. What happened to the records during the past two years? Are they still intact? Where are they now? What will Preval's new government find?

Why am I talking about Haiti? Because the history of its truth commission records exemplify a number of different problems quite common to truth commissions: the records are not in archival custody; the records may be split between two custodians; at least some of the records may still be in use for law enforcement purposes; the location and extent of the records is not known to the public and therefore to potential users; which laws govern the records is unknown; given the mix of physical types within the records, they probably need conservation attention; but most important, the contents of the records jeopardizes their very existence.

This afternoon I will first discuss what I found when I surveyed 20 governments to ask where their truth commission records were preserved and under what conditions. Then I will talk about the international archival community's position on the inalienability of public records. Finally I will suggest some assistance that can be provided by actors outside a country where a truth commission operated.

Before I begin, however, I want to make sure we are all talking about the same thing. I define truth commissions as

--temporary bodies

--established to look at and report on a pattern of abuses

--by a previous repressive regime

--usually during or immediately after regime change

While some truth commissions have been established by non-governmental organizations and have played important parts in precipitating regime change, their records are private, not public, property. The truth commissions that are established by governments, however, create records that are government property, and citizens have the right to demand preservation of and access to these records. Those are the ones I will be discussing today.

The survey results

During late 2003 and early 2004 I tried to locate the records of completed governmental truth commissions in twenty countries. Nine were in Latin America and the Caribbean (Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Panama, Peru, Uruguay); six in Africa (Burundi, Chad, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zimbabwe); four in Asia (Nepal, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka); and one in Europe (Germany). I limited my survey to commissions that (a) were established by the government as a whole (by the chief of state or by the legislature) and (b) considered broad historical events.

The first lesson of the study was how hard it is to learn what had happened to the records. I contacted the Washington embassies of all the countries in the study and I wrote to all the national archives. While some embassies were extremely helpful, others were not interested in talking with me. About half of the national archives answered, most of whom told me that the records were not in their custody. Several people whom I interviewed, both inside and outside of government, asked me not to use their names in any report. Former commissioners, commission staffers, and consultants all gave me leads. Human rights activists often provided pointers to people who might know where the records were located, but few of them had seen or used them since the records commission closed.

I wanted to know what types of records were created. Not surprisingly, as in the Haitian commission described above, I found that commissions create records of every physical type: paper, electronic, audiovisual. Databases are heavily used; some commissions also have objects submitted as evidence. The records are administrative, programmatic, and investigative, with the latter often the most voluminous. The total quantity of records of a commission is substantial and growing; for example, Argentina, one of the earlier commissions, reports 130 meters (about 423 feet) of records, while Peru, which completed its work in 2003, reports 200 meters (about 600 feet) of records.

But if the physical and functional types of records are relatively uniform, what happens to the records when the commission closes is not. In four countries (Argentina, Chad, Chile, and Haiti) the records went to the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of the Interior, where they are available for subsequent actions, including possible prosecutions. In one country, Peru, the records went to the ombudsman's office. In three countries the President's Office or the Cabinet Secretariat controls the records, while in two countries a successor committee or commission has them. In two countries the records are in or destined for the national archives, and in another they are in an archives established by Parliament for the purpose and subject to the same rules as records in the national archives. Three commissions have their records with the United Nations, one commission still has its records, and I was unable to determine the location of the records in three other countries.

What accounts for this variety of post-commission custodians? I considered a number of factors: creator, status of final report, whether the country has a freedom of information or privacy or data protection act, and how the country ranked on Transparency International's 2003 rating of the openness of government. Creator seems to make some difference: the records of the two commissions created by the legislature (Germany and South Africa) are both in archival custody (special archives and national archives, respectively). The three commissions established by or with the central participation of the United Nations all ended up in the custody of the United Nations in New York. The remainder, those established by

presidents and prime ministers, ended up in the variety of hands noted above. The status of the final report also makes some difference: Bolivia's report was never completed and the fate of its records is unknown. In Nigeria and Zimbabwe the report was completed but not published; the custodian of the Nigerian records is unknown, while Zimbabwe's are believed to be among the records of the President's office stored in the records center run by the National Archives. In Uganda and Haiti the commission's report was published but its distribution was severely limited; the Ugandan records are believed to be either with the President (most likely) or with the Uganda Human Rights Commission, while Haiti's are at least in part in the Ministry of Justice.

Comparing the disposition of the records with legislation was more useful. Seven of the twenty countries had freedom of information acts: Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, South Korea, and Zimbabwe, with Uganda's pending at the end of 2003. (It is a separate question whether the freedom of information act covers the records of the commission in each of these countries, but it is at least a theoretical possibility.) Here we see some consistency: the commissions in South Africa and South Korea designated the National Archives as the successor repository, while in Panama and the Philippines the records are in a successor commission and in Peru they are in the Ombudsman's office. These are institutions whose responsibility includes making information available to the public. Nigeria and Zimbabwe do not fit this pattern of transfer to a designated successor.

Six of the countries have privacy or data protection acts: Chile, Germany, Peru, Philippines, South Africa, and South Korea. This is much like the pattern with the freedom of information acts, and it includes all three of the countries where an archival repository was chosen as the successor for records purposes (Germany, South Africa, and South Korea).

Finally I considered the Transparency International scale, which in 2003 ranked 102 countries for their open government practices. Two of the twenty countries (Burundi and Chad) were not ranked. Of the rest, the highest score was Chile (17) followed by Germany (18), Uruguay (32), South Africa (36), South Korea (40), and Peru (45). The remainder ranked in the lower half. All three countries using an archival repository were in the top half of the open government listing, as was one (Peru) that considered an archival solution but was required by the commission's legislation to turn the records over to the ombudsman. Chile's records are still in the Ministry of Justice for use in prosecution, while Uruguay's commission has extended its life and still has its records.

The conclusion is that the stronger the open government climate, including the enactment of laws such as freedom of information acts, the more likely that the records of a truth commission will be placed with a government entity that has, as part of its regular work, the responsibility of providing access to information.

The question of destruction, dispersal, and duplication of truth commission records was extremely difficult to answer. The most memorable response was from the Philippines, who reported that some records are in the central office of the Commission on Human Rights, while other records were "forwarded to CHR regional offices." The records sent to the regions included investigation reports of regional offices; unfortunately, "some got lost while in transit" and others were "destroyed by termites." Chile reported, in its Memory of the World application for the Presidential records relating to the Commission, that once "the Commission's mandate concluded, the documentation it had gathered and analyzed was transferred to other agencies, many of which have added or eliminated information." In Argentina, some material seems to have been added to the original files. The German records were divided, with the archives created for them holding the majority of the records but the administrative records retained by the Parliamentary archives. In the remaining countries the records either remain complete or no information could be obtained.

Another dispersal takes place as commissioners, staff members, consultants, and contractors leave the employ of the commission. Distinguishing records from personal papers is not easy in the best of circumstances, and commissions work under great pressure and far from ideal

conditions. Furthermore, commissions employ contractors and consultants from many countries, and these specialists may do their work in their home laboratories or on their home computer systems. People would not talk on the record about documents and data that found their way outside the control of the commission's successors, but I am aware of a number of these instances.

Much more worrisome than the dispersals by persons connected with the commission are the raids by officials. The worst example is in Panama. The Commission delivered its report in April 2002, but continued to work unofficially for the next year and a half. During that time, on 18 June 2003, agents of the Attorney General raided the Truth Commission's offices in Balboa and seized "skeletal remains, evidence files and financial records" after a criminal complaint was filed by an opponent of the Commission. The Commission in turn filed criminal charges against him. Then, on 15 August 2003, the home of Alberto Almanza, who was the director general of the Commission and president of the follow-up committee, was burglarized. The thieves:

stole three hard drives from computers at a private office he maintains in his home. The hard drives contained information related to the commission's investigation into human rights abuses that took place during the dictatorship. [Almanza] said the intruders also rifled through paper files and took a notebook computer.

An unconfirmed story spread through Zimbabwe that the commission report, unpublished, was stolen from the records center operated by the national archives. Observers in Uruguay worry that that commission's records will not survive intact. And, as I noted at the beginning of this talk, the current state of the records in Haiti is unknown.

Some commissions have tried to take proactive security steps to protect certain sensitive records. The commission in Argentina microfilmed part of its records and put the microfilm in a safety deposit box. The commission in Peru asked the United Nations if it would hold copies of some of its records, but the United Nations refused, apparently because the United Nations had played no part in the establishment of the Peruvian commission.

The crux of the issue of the disposition of the records of truth commissions is the problem of future access to the records. Some commissions worked very publicly, while others did not. Some commissions named names, others did not. But in all cases a commission acquires information that is highly important to living persons: victims and their heirs, alleged perpetrators, lawyers and journalists and scholars.

Access regimes for records of truth commissions range from no access at all for anyone, through access by the government for official business, to access by the public in accordance with access laws. The best single predictor of how access will be handled seems to be how confident the public, including government officials, is that the change toward a more democratic government and away from the abuses documented by the commission is irreversible. South Africa does not believe that the apartheid regime will return. The East Germans are not going to have another SED dictatorship. South Korea does not think that military rule is coming back. And in these three countries, existing records laws apply to the commission records, providing the possibility of access as well as the obligation to protect the privacy interests of individuals, and all these records have gone (South Africa and Germany) or are going (South Korea) to archival custody.

At the other end of the spectrum are countries where the democracy is manifestly insecure. In addition to Haiti, two instructive examples are El Salvador and Guatemala. The commissions in El Salvador and Guatemala were both facilitated by the United Nations, and ultimately they deposited their records with the United Nations in New York, although not in the United Nations Archives. The El Salvador Commission specifically recognized the importance of its archives. Part I of the Introduction to its report described the documentation the Commission accumulated, and concluded that "all of this material constitutes an invaluable resource—a part of El Salvador's heritage because (despite the painful reality it records) a part of the

country's contemporary history—for historians and analysts of this most distressing period and for those who wish to study this painful reality in order to reinforce the effort to spread the message 'never again'." The Commission then asked:

What is to be done with this wealth of material in order to make it available to those around the world who are seeking peace, to bring these personal experiences to the attention of those who defend human rights? What is to be done when one is bound by the requirement of confidentiality for documents and testimony? What use is to be made of this example of the creativity of the United Nations at a time in contemporary history which is fraught with conflict and turmoil and for which the parallels and the answers found in the Salvadorian conflict may be of some relevance?

What happened, ironically, is that the records are closed indefinitely, in New York, a location far from the reach of most El Salvadorians.

The situation with the Guatemala Commission's records is scarcely better.¹ All materials transferred to the United Nations in New York are sealed, except any records "specifically designated in writing by the Coordinator of the Commission as being for the public domain" (no such designation appears to have been made). Written authorization of the Secretary-General "signed by the Secretary-General in person" is required to open a sealed container prior to 1 January 2050 "or until such date thereafter as the Secretary-General may specify." The decision to open the records requires the Secretary-General to consider the stipulation in the 1994 agreement that "[t]he Commission's proceedings shall be confidential so as to guarantee the secrecy of the sources and the safety of witnesses and informants²." As currently interpreted, this agreement prevents any preservation activity from being taken by the UN archives, with the result that no preventive maintenance is happening, no description is being completed, and the deterioration of the physical objects continues. (The records of the El Salvador commission are likewise not given preservation or description.)

The idea of removing records created in a country and directly pertinent to the history of that country is troubling. Several prominent human rights activists concurred with that disposition in El Salvador and Guatemala, however. They pointed out that the situation in both countries was too dangerous to keep the materials there and safe. And they believed that the records left in the country could be destroyed with complete impunity.

Each commission is unique and so are the records that it generates. Consequently, there can be no single pattern for handling the records after a commission ceases to exist. The public must trust in the integrity of the successor repository and must accept the uses to which the records will be put. Particularly in governments where reforms are just beginning to take hold, the issue of trust is very difficult to resolve. As Rudolfo Mattarollo, the former Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Civilian Mission in Haiti, writes, "Safeguarding the evidence of the acts committed—one of the primary objectives of a truth commission—means safeguarding the circumstantial, documentary and material evidence, as well as testimony obtained from victims and witnesses³."

If the records are going to be used for future prosecutions, they must be in a repository where the prosecutors and the defense counsels can have access. If the records of particular cases are to be available to the victims or their families, the repository must have facilities to make that possible and should not be intimidating to these people who have already been traumatized by the actions of the state. And if any part of the records is to be available for

¹ Some data created by the Commission was made publicly available on the internet; see Audrey R. Chapman and Patrick Bell, "The Truth of Truth Commissions: Comparative Lessons from Haiti, South Africa, and Guatemala." *Human Rights Quarterly*, 23.1 (2001), pp. 1-43

² United Nations Secretary-General's Bulletin ST/SGB/1999/6, 8 June 1999.

³ Rodolfo Mattarollo, "Truth Commissions," in M. Cherif Bassiouni, ed., *Post-Conflict Justice*. Ardsley, New York: Transnational Publishers, Inc., 2002. pp. 299.

academic research, now or in the future, they must be in a facility where they can be described and made available as well as preserved.

In a democratic country, where rights of access prevail, an archival repository provides preservation and reference service for the most sensitive records of the government. Some commissions have considered placing the records with a custodian outside the government but inside the country, either an existing institution or one created specifically to handle the records of the commission. Other countries have decided to establish archives within the government but outside the national archives. While these may be solutions if the entire government or the national archives is deemed untrustworthy, international opinion, as Graham Dominy of South Africa notes, “is swinging towards the view that sensitive records of repressive regimes should be kept by the national archives of the successor democratic states, not in special institutions⁴.”

Placing the records in a national archives has three important benefits. First, it helps ensure consistency in applying restrictions and access rules to archival records. If truth commission records are in one institution and the national archives is in another, coordinating access policies will be difficult, with the likely result that the public will be able to have access to certain types of documents in one institution and not in the other. This makes the government’s access policy inconsistent, if not inept. Democracy is best served by a public, clear, consistent application of access policy. Second, by placing sensitive bodies of records in the national archives, over time the national archives builds a body of precedent in the handling of these records. Such capacity building in the national archives staff enables them to gain confidence in their ability to handle difficult access problems, and as each succeeding body is deposited, the staff’s expertise increases. This is to the benefit of both the current and future governments. Finally, it is less expensive to manage a single national archives than to operate two institutions. In countries where little money is available for archival institutions (and that includes many of the countries where truth commissions operate) this is a practical consideration.

Whatever repository is ultimately chosen, the fundamental requirements are security for the records, clear access rules, and a trustworthy custodian.

The view of the international archival community on the ownership rights in public records

The international archival community, acting through the International Council on Archives, asserts two basic principles with regard to records of governments.

First, public records are inalienable and imprescriptible. Alienation, in archival terms, is the transfer or loss of custody of records or archives by their custodian or owner to someone not legally entitled to them; imprescriptible is simply absolute, without limitation. (It is worth noting that custody does not always include legal ownership; it is instead the legal responsibility to care for records based on their physical possession.) In a 1995 restatement, the ICA Executive Committee said, “National laws agree in conferring the status of inalienable and imprescriptible public property on public records. The transfer of ownership of public archives . . . can therefore only occur through a legislative act of the State which created them.”

Second, provenance and respect for the integrity of archival fonds are the basis for archival management. In the 1995 statement, ICA declared:

⁴ Graham Dominy, “A Delicate Balancing Act at the National Archives,” [ThisDay](#), 2002-11-17.

Archives are not groups of documents assembled at the whim of collectors, but instead are accumulated through the operation of their creating institutions. Their definitive place of preservation is determined by the national law of each country.

Archival doctrine, which is founded on the principle of provenance, therefore excludes, on the one hand, the possibility of dismembering fonds, and on the other hand, the acquisition by any archive institution of fonds which do not fall within its jurisdiction.

In a separate statement, also from 1995, the ICA noted:

All countries recognize the principle that public archives, by their nature and from the moment of their creation, form part of the movable public property of the state concerned. The passage of records to the archives does not result from a process of acquisition under common law, as is the case in museums or libraries, but through compulsory transfer by public administrations to the archive service, with or without the transfer of property to the latter.

In sum, the international archival view is that the government's right to its records is absolute; that only the government, acting in its official capacity, can transfer the ownership of public records; and that the government determines where the public records are to be preserved.

Following these two principles, a truth commission established by a government creates records that are government property. This includes the documents in any physical form, both those created by the commission itself and those received in the course of its business. When a commission closes, its records do not have to be transferred to the government for preservation—they already are the government's movable public property.

The decisions the government has to make about the records are substantial, however. It must decide whether the records laws (including the public records laws, a freedom of information law, a privacy or data protection law, and so on) apply to the commission records. It must decide what institution will take custody of the records, what process will be followed to decide what records to save and what records to throw away, and what access provisions will govern the commission's records and who will determine the application.

And what can outsiders do

Money. Very few countries where truth commissions work can find the resources to manage the commission's records without outside financial support. Of the twenty I surveyed, only Germany and South Korea fall clearly within that category. If we look at some of the more recent commissions—East Timor, Sierra Leone, even Morocco—the situation is no better. Yes, if governments make it a high priority they can direct resources to a preservation and access program for commission, but the likelihood is low. And because truth commissions are relatively high profile activities (unlike national archives programs which governments often put at the bottom of their foreign funding list) it is just possible that countries will be willing to ask for assistance, at least in the immediate post-commission period.

Money is needed for everything from description and control work to preservation to screening projects to making available both the description of the records and the records themselves. Money can be provided government-to-government, private bodies to governments, even private bodies to individuals to governments. In one of the most unusual recent cases, a British charitable fund gave a grant of over 45,000 British pounds to a private individual to copy publicly available records of the truth commission in East Timor.

Duplication and deposit. One obvious way to protect the information contained in a commission's records is to make a duplicate copy and store that copy separately from the

originals. Argentina, as I mentioned above, made a microfilm copy of part of the records and stored the microfilm in a bank safety deposit box. In quite other contexts, Yale has experience with copies of records from Cambodia and the United Nations Security Council instructed the United Nations to hold a copy of the records of the prosecutor of the Serious Crimes Unit in East Timor.

Duplication raises three immediate questions: what part of the records to copy (given the size of the materials, copying it all is probably not feasible), what copying technique to use (paper, microfilm, scanning), and where to deposit the copy and under what conditions.

Perhaps the most significant assistance that entities outside the country could give to commissions would be to provide the equivalent of a bank's safety deposit box, where the records are under the control of the depositor but are physically secured by another entity. I hope the United Nations would at some time take on this role, but up to the present it has not. The negotiations over handling such a deposit, including the responsibilities for preservation of the deposited copy and the mechanism for providing authorized access are both extremely complicated and unique to each situation. And once again it goes back to my earlier point—if the change in government is secure then there is likely to be less need for an external deposit. In cases where the instability continues, an external deposit is a very important option.

Let me, as an aside, comment on the question that often arises as to whether a copy could be placed for deposit by the commission without the acquiescence of the government and whether that copy could then be made available for use without the approval of the government in the event that the government destroys or prevents access to the commission's records. The theory of government would say no, the commission couldn't act independently of the wishes of the government. But what if the government is likely to destroy, in whole or in part, the commission's records? What then? Or what if the government is simply going to hold them without access by anyone, including prosecutors?

The usual argument for placing such records in the custody of an external entity and making them available is that evidence within the commission's records that would permit the prosecution of violators of human rights should be preserved and used. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, prohibits "any State, group or person" from destroying human rights and freedoms; it is logical, then, to assume that actions taken to prevent such destruction—such as by preserving records that are vital to understanding the violation of human rights—is permitted.

The distinguished legal scholar Louis Joinet wrote an influential report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights on the question of impunity of perpetrators of human rights violations. In it he pointed out that the right to know

is not simply the right of any individual victim or closely related persons to know what happened, a right to the truth. The right to know is also a collective right, drawing upon history to prevent violations from recurring in the future. Its corollary is a "duty to remember," which the State must assume, in order to guard against the perversions of history that go under the names of revisionism or negationism; the knowledge of the oppression it has lived through is part of a people's national heritage and as such much be preserved⁵.

Joinet proposed two series of measures to protect the right to know. One of the two was to preserve the "archives relating to human rights violations." While Joinet focused on the records of the government during the period of human rights violations, a logical extension of his argument is that the records of the commissions that investigated these violations must also be preserved and made available to succeeding generations.

⁵ "The Administration of Justice and the Human Rights of Detainees: Question of the impunity of perpetrators of human rights violations (civil and political). Revised final report prepared by Mr. Joinet pursuant to Sub-Commission decision 1996/119," United Nations Commission on Human Rights, Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/20/Rev.1, 1997-10-02.

If a government violates fundamental human rights or protects those persons who do so and attempts to keep such violations secret, people of conscience may decide to combat these activities by exposing them in public. One way to do that is to make publicly available the documentation that would provide evidence of what happened. Needless to say, this is a very slippery ethical and legal slope.

Technical assistance and training. Many national archives exist in a state of near poverty. The situation ranges from a national archives that knows how to handle a truth commission's records, has a scanning program, a website, and a plan for maintaining electronic records, and can provide training to other government departments that may hold parts of the records; through a national archives that knows how to do most of those things but does not have the ability to execute most of them; to a national archives that itself needs training and the introduction of technology.

A technical assistance program can be used to bring, for example, scanning equipment to an archives, train the persons on how to use it, and then provide recurrent technical support for preserving the scanned material. There are many examples of this in aid programs around the world. As a low tech example, when I worked in Hungary in the mid-1990s there were no preservation quality archival boxes made anywhere in the country, and no paper maker was willing to make either the boxes or the paperboard that is used. Consequently, the foundation I worked for imported a box making machine and trained local staff to use it. We found a paper company in Slovakia that would make the board and ship it to us flat and we would assemble it. The good news was that the company in Slovakia then became interested in making archival boxes themselves, they imported equipment, too, and they now have a thriving business in central Europe.

Training and technical assistance should strengthen the nation's archival system as a whole if it is to be useful. This is not the place to talk about the issues involved in international training and development assistance to archives, but here are a few things to think about:

Contextual disconnections. Bringing archivists to the US for training puts them in a political and technological context that may have no relevance to their problems. Politically, an archives as a government institution operates in a legal sphere that is quite different from the manuscript collection or archives that operates within a private institution. That suggests that training for government archivists could be carried out most usefully by state or federal archives, with the possible exception of technical training in preservation or automation. Technologically, too, the distance between the United States and the country of the commission may be too large to be useful. When bats swoop over your head in the records storage area or water drips through broken skylights onto the records below, it is hard to think about migrating scanned images over generations of computer systems. Preservation and automation solutions that depend upon sophisticated equipment are interesting for a visiting archivist to view, but practical solutions that work with (for example) limited electricity are what are needed. Sometimes the most useful connections are those between institutions in various countries struggling with the same problems.

Train the few, train the trainers, train the many. These are three options, all of which will work in one or another context. Usually training a few archivists is a matter of bringing them to a training location outside the country for a period of time. Training trainers may be done in a regional setting, where a group of people from neighboring countries focus on one process or issue; for example, a group of Latin American archivists all dealing with truth commission records might usefully discuss access and reference issues. Training the many typically involves taking training into the country where it can be made available to all staff from the archives, all ministry records officials, or all persons handling archives and manuscript collections in the country. None of these has to be exclusive, but each has a different impact that has to be evaluated as the country and the supporting institution decide what to pursue. And in all of these cases, the issue of language and translation must be addressed.

Serve as an information hub. This would be a central source—a Rolodex in the sky—for information about the records of the commissions, a pointer to any online information; and an online source for publicly available material that the commission’s government wants distributed but has no current means to keep online. At present, there is no single source for all final reports, although many of them are on line at a variety of websites (for example, on February 20 I found the entire unreleased East Timor report on two sites and a part of it on a third). There is no single site that points to whatever the country may have up on its electronic site or points to the description of the records that are in the government’s custody.

Conclusion

The records of a truth commission are the records of the government. Any program for preserving the records of the commission and making them available as appropriate must be that of the government. Outside entities can offer assistance, including money, training, technical support, and safekeeping. But these programs must be ones that the government wants, not programs imposed from outside. And they need to ensure that the national patrimony of the country is respected, preserved and protected where the people of the nation can know, as the haunting line from a Maya poem that is used as the epigraph of the El Salvador truth commission’s report, that “all these things happened among us,” both the violations and the attempt by a commission to uncover the truth.