



by Brigitte Perreault



ANDRAS VAMOS-GOLDMAN A MAN WITH A CAUSE

JUSTICE RAPID RESPONSE, or JRR as it is most often called, is a unique and innovative multi-stakeholder facility dedicated to the investigation of mass atrocity crimes. It is a non-profit that works to bring justice to survivors of the worst crimes known to humanity, and by making it possible to hold those responsible to account, helps deter would-be future offenders.

Professional - Impartial - Prompt

These are the words that inspire Andras Vamos-Goldman, JRR's Executive Director.

Andras Vamos-Goldman is on a mission to help end impunity for crimes such as genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, wherever they occur. Andras' 30 years in diplomacy and law gave him the background, and the world's focus on international criminal justice in the last 20 years gave him his opportunity. Through a strong sense of justice and fairness, and with plenty of perseverance, **Justice Rapid Response** was born.

Since it became operational in October 2009, JRR has had more than 90 inquiries for assistance and has been able to help in 41 investigative missions in most regions of the world. Established by an intergovernmental forum, JRR's flexible, innovative structure enables States, international institutions, and organizations to work together to make investigations of mass atrocity crimes the rule, not the exception.

"It is unacceptable that while we demand prompt, professional investigations of crimes in our neighbourhoods, we have to accept a much lower standard for the worst crimes known to humanity. Justice Rapid Response exists because the investigation of crimes like genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity have to be done right in order to get justice for victims and deter future offenders."

- Andras Vamos-Goldman

After five years, JRR has 76 participating States, more than 30 institutions and organizations and a specially trained roster of over 450 criminal justice and related professionals from almost 90 countries and every region of the world. With the strategic guidance and oversight of an Executive Board of countries currently consisting of Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Finland, The Netherlands, Sierra Leone, Sweden, Switzerland and Uganda, JRR continues to work to improve the investigation of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and serious human rights violations.

JRR has been able to demonstrate that it is possible to have professional, specifically trained, impartial investigators available promptly every time and anywhere there is a need to investigate these atrocities. This standard gives hope that one day the investigation of the worst crimes known to humanity will be as automatically expected as the investigation of any domestic crime.

BP: Andras, you have said that essentially JRR exists "to make very bad people nervous". What do you mean by that?

AVG: If you ask yourself who the worst people you can imagine are, I am pretty sure you would include those who plan and commit genocide; who order or condone large-scale murder of civilians; those who ruthlessly order their soldiers to use rape as a tool of war to spread fear and misery. It is these people that we, at JRR want to make nervous. How do we do

that? By making sure that they can be held to account for their crimes. We focus on getting the investigations right – something that too often has been neglected. Without evidence that is properly collected and preserved, the truth will not come out, and the perpetrators are likely to get away with these crimes. Without such accountability goes any chance of justice being done for the victims, or demonstrating that would-be future perpetrators that international justice has real credibility. And any chance of stopping the cycle of violence that repeatedly plagues societies that ignore the need for justice.

It should be common sense that you cannot wait until these crimes take place to start looking for people who can do the investigation, hope they have appropriate training, and pray that there is some way to send them quickly to where they are needed. You have to have all this in place up-front, like we have in domestic criminal justice systems. It is what JRR does, making it possible to respond quickly and professionally whenever there is a need to investigate mass atrocities. So we can start to see the tables turn on those ordering or condoning the atrocities we often helplessly watch on television. It means that those really responsible will stop getting away with it with greater frequency. This is what I mean by making very bad people nervous: we want those in power to know that if they spread horror and misery, trained professionals from all over the world are poised to help bring you to account.

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Justice Rapid Response (JRR) is a global facility providing highly specialized and specifically trained criminal justice professionals for rapid deployment to assist with investigations of mass atrocities. Operational since only 2009, JRR already has 76 participating states, and more than 30 participating organizations.

BP: That is quite some goal. What has brought you to this? How did you get involved in Justice Rapid Response and why?

AVG: This is truly an extraordinary journey, driven by my sometimes awkwardly strong sense of justice and fairness. I can remember always it being there. Maybe it also has to do with being a child of Holocaust survivors. My father was 14, my mother 11 when they were herded into cattle-cars and sent off to concentration camps. They were among the lucky ones who survived. Growing up in Hungary in the 1950s and 60s, my family dealt with this the only way they knew how - by not talking about it. We immigrated to Canada when I was 11 years old where conceivably it would have been easier to speak about these events - yet still, very little was said. With what I know now, I realize that it is probably impossible to open such doors just a little - once you open them, there is no telling how much comes out, or if it ever stops. So the effects of such trauma are exhibited in different ways. One has a more guarded, careful, risk-averse, even sceptical view of the world. This is a view that affects everyone around a survivor - something that I have learned is part of what sometimes is called "second-generation survivor syndrome".

Which could also explain why at university I was drawn to international affairs and law, initially probably for the wrong reasons. I was not confident enough to commit to literature and the theatre - which were then my passions. I eventually joined the diplomatic service and served in Africa, practiced international law and navigated the corridors of the United Nations. It was through this work that I learned the possibilities and limitations of the international system.

When the negotiations began in earnest on what is now the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court (ICC) - the permanent international criminal court in The Hague - I found my calling. I found what I wanted to do, and when I embraced it I began to shake off the "second generation survivor syndrome". You see, the world had turned an enormous corner in the early 1990s. The end of the cold war provided a rare political climate that enabled the international community not to turn a blind eye on the atrocities committed in the former Yugoslavia and the genocide committed in Rwanda.

This momentum swept me up and suddenly, almost for the first time in my life, I knew what I wanted to do. Taking part in setting up this new international criminal justice system, allowed us to see some of the "gaps" that were limiting the international community's ability to bring justice for these heinous crimes. It was to fill the first and in my view the most important of those gaps that Justice Rapid Response (JRR) was created. I was there at JRR's beginning, I have been there consistently there throughout JRR's development, and I was fortunate enough to have the chance to make JRR operational in 2009. I nurtured from an idea into something that is already changing the standard of how mass atrocity crimes can be investigated.

BP: Are you saying that after all these changes, the system does not work?

AVG: I am saying that, when faced with the worst of what humanity is capable of, we must make sure we meet it with the best we have. There is no time for excuses, bureaucratic delays or inefficiencies.



Bones - Mali © JRR

We cannot wait to start to look for, train and create a mechanism to send the right people to investigate atrocities - after they happen. All this must already be in place, so that when there is genocide or when war crimes happen, we can respond as soon as possible. We already have to intervene in very difficult circumstances - such crimes take place in the midst of conflict and crumbling infrastructures - so we cannot make it even more difficult to investigate these crimes by not being ready.

Nor will the people of the world settle for anything less. We may be working in an international system whose structures

were conceived sixty years ago, but we are also living in a world where almost everyone has a mobile phone. The world is connected, and there is no pulling the plug. And since the early 1990s the international community has been promising the people of the world that perpetrators of mass atrocity crimes will not be permitted to get away with it.

But we are far from delivering on this promise. In order to do so, in addition to thinking like diplomats, lawyers and investigators we also have to think like entrepreneurs.

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JRR has held 27 training courses in every region of the world to build an active roster of almost 450 experts from 89 countries speaking 73 languages. JRR has to date deployed experts on 41 investigative missions to bring mass criminals to justice.

If it is not possible to modernize the international systems quickly enough, then we need innovative solutions to make good on our promise – or see the credibility of the system drop. We at JRR have found that with imagination, flexibility, much determination and old fashioned hard work, we are able to combine the strengths of the various international actors: States, UN agencies, civil society, and others to plug some of these “gaps”.

BP: So what is the most important “gap” that you are trying to fill with Justice Rapid Response?

AVG: Our basic premise is that without a proper investigation, there is no chance of justice being done –whether justice takes the form of prosecutions or other accountability processes such as truth and reconciliation commissions. It is not the only condition required for successfully holding perpetrators accountable but without a good case, without establishing the facts and preserving the evidence properly, there is no realistic chance for justice and deterrence.

If an investigation is not done by people who have the needed expertise and are specifically trained to carry it out under international law and international conditions; if there is no way to ensure that they can start the investigation as soon as possible, then chances are that the most relevant evidence will not be collected. Or it may be handled in a way that cannot be used in a court. Worse – leaving this “gap” unfilled has meant that possibly others who are not trained for it will try to do this work. No matter how well meaning, the results of these efforts for the survivors and witnesses of these horrendous crimes are often devastating. Not only through re-traumatization, but

also because under-skilled investigators are unlikely to know how to protect witnesses from reprisals. And in the case of victims of sexual violence – also from being ostracized by their own communities. So the downside of not getting the investigation “right” is huge – not only in what fails to be done right, but also in the harm it inevitably brings to the very people who need help the most.

BP: Is this happening? How can JRR improve on this?

AVG: It has happened, and it is still happening, especially as more and more of these atrocities are being committed every day. And yes, JRR has and can do quite a bit, by making sure that investigations are done right, and done rapidly.

Our rapid response is made possible by the way we are organized. JRR has an innovative flexible structure that allows every form of organization from States, international institutions, civil society, as well as others like universities and forensic institutes – from every part of the world to participate. This enables JRR to select the best criminal justice professionals by putting them through specialized training courses in international criminal investigations. We develop these courses with our exclusive training partner, the Institute for International Criminal Investigations – the only outfit in the world dedicated to this kind of training.

Our certification process is highly competitive and rigorous to make sure we have the experts with the necessary skills and expertise and who can operate well under stress and in very challenging circumstances.



IVORY COAST MASS GRAVE © Julie Kinuthia/Demotix 2012

We provide the training free of charge, so everyone put through the training courses takes this knowledge and experience back to their places of employment at no cost to them or their organization. In exchange, we ask that the expert be made available for an investigation in a matter of days. This one innovation alone has resulted in whole new standard for getting investigators into the field.

I have emphasized that these experts come from around the world. An investigation is much more likely to be done right if the experts have the appropriate legal, cultural and linguistic background. By focusing on this as much as possible we are actually bringing wholesale change. Unfortunately, it is still common to send any warm body – often without any investigations training or the understanding of local customs and languages to interview victims of crimes such as rape. By having the diversity of expertise, cultures languages and

training to tackle an investigation properly anywhere, the JRR roster is making this practice a thing of the past.

BP: Can you give me some examples of where JRR has made a difference?

AVG: Yes. JRR is relatively new – we became operational five years ago, yet we have already built up an international criminal investigations roster of almost 450 experts – half of whom are women – who come from 89 countries and represent 60 professional categories. These include crime scene investigators, forensic scientists of all kinds, witness protection specialists, police and military analysts all the way to human rights investigators and psychosocial trauma counsellors.

In the 21st century, 90% of all conflicts are re-occurring conflicts. These cycles of violence continue because what happens – including the mass crimes that are committed – is not adequately addressed.

We are very proud to have a partnership with UN Women, the part of the UN System charged with women's welfare, to specifically target sexual and gender based violence crimes – like rape being used as a tool of war. Thus far, JRR has already sent experts to assist with investigations 41 times. One of these is that of the Congolese warlord Bosco Ntaganda, who has just had 17 of the 18 charges against him confirmed by the ICC – six of these being crimes of sexual violence.

Others of our investigators have participated in inquiries set up in the aftermath of conflict in Côte d'Ivoire, Libya, Syria, investigations into the brutal dictatorship of North Korea, and the civil wars of Colombia and Guatemala. JRR experts were deployed in Haiti to help investigate a prison massacre, the result of which convicted eight police officials. Recently, JRR forensic teams went to Mali to identify and determine the cause of death of bodies found in two mass graves. Thanks to their work, the local judge was able to build up his case against a former military leader and a trial is soon to take place.

BP: I can see where your work makes a difference in individual cases. But Andras, your stated goal of bringing expectations of international investigations to the same level as under our domestic system is much, much bigger. Surely this is not all smooth sailing. What are the obstacles? How are you going to achieve making all such "very bad people nervous"?

Even one successful case can give a very powerful message that impunity for mass atrocities will no longer be tolerated and that victims matter.

This is an essential part of a country's post conflict healing process. This matters more than you think. According to the World Bank World Development Report 2011, in the 21st century so far, 90% of all conflicts are re-occurring conflicts. These cycles of violence continue because what happens – including the mass crimes that are committed – is not adequately addressed. A recurring sense of injustice is one of the main motivations given by people for taking up arms. So when it comes to atrocities, even a single conviction, sometimes even a report that acknowledges what happened and assigns responsibilities, has been known to have a huge impact in breaking the cycle of violence.

But individual cases alone will not see the kind of breakthrough that we want to achieve as quickly as we want to achieve it. We also want to influence by example how international justice can be faster and more professional. By demonstrating that experts can be recruited and trained properly and made available quickly, we hope to shift the thinking about what is possible, including how much it all costs.

The prevailing view is that international justice is expensive (for example, the Yugoslavia and Rwanda tribunals used to cost as much as a hundred million dollars a year each). Yet we at JRR have been able to demonstrate that getting the international investigations part right does not need to cost a lot – and you don't need a huge bureaucracy to achieve it. JRR has a very small secretariat of just a few dedicated people, and with that we have been recruiting, training, managing a roster, sending experts to investigate cases on a shoestring budget. And what seems to be most time consuming - trying to raise that modest budget.



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As our workload grows – and by the third quarter of 2014 we already had more missions this year than in 2013, which had more than twice as many missions as 2012 - so grows our need to meet this demand. I would say that trying to find the means to meet this growing demand is our main challenge. So my other motto is: we do not need a lot, and we can do a lot, if we have what we need! And we can make such a huge difference – justice for victims, a real chance for peace for their societies, and a future more likely to be free from mass atrocities!

It sounds like a fantastic endeavour, Andras. If people who read this article want to help, what should they do?

We have just launched a new website, to better explain our work and its importance. We are trying to reach people who care about ending the cycle of atrocities and who, beyond their outrage

for these crimes, understand that if these are only met with indifference and passivity, more violence will inevitably follow. The website is called www.supportjustice.org. I hope your readers can visit it and give us feedback, as this is a very new step for us. And, of course, if they feel moved by JRR's vision, I hope they will choose to support our work.

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www.supportjustice.org