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## Volunteer Doctors Aid Asylum Seekers

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The Associated Press  
Thursday, July 20, 2006; 2:11 PM

ATLANTA -- When they meet with their patients, medical student Brandon Kohrt and doctors with the Atlanta Asylum Network never wear a white coat or carry instruments. They want to look as little like doctors as possible.

They don't want to remind the men and women who have fled persecution in their native countries of the doctors who often accompany torturers to make sure their victims do not die and the torture leaves few marks.

But if these volunteer doctors can find and document those marks \_ healed fractures, dead muscle in the soles of the feet, cigarette burns, nerve damage from being suspended by the wrists for hours \_ the chances that their patients will be able to find permanent refuge in the U.S. increase drastically.

"We look at the body as testimony," said Kohrt, who co-founded the network through Emory University with training from the Physicians for Human Rights, which is based in Cambridge, Mass., and coordinates more than 500 medical volunteers across the country.

Foreigners can be granted asylum in the U.S., and a chance at citizenship, if they can prove persecution or a well-founded fear of it in their native land. Some immigration attorneys contend many asylum seekers have been tortured, and volunteer networks of doctors have sprung up around the country to help foreigners document their injuries.

More than 25,000 people, or 38 percent of all applicants, were granted asylum in the U.S. by an immigration court in 2005, slightly less than in past years, according to the government's Executive Office for Immigration Review. The agency said it had no figures on how many won asylum on the grounds that they were tortured.

The approval rate in asylum cases varies greatly across the country. It is 85 percent in the immigration court in Tucson, Ariz., while in several other courts, including some in New York and California, no asylum at all was granted in 2005.

Physicians for Human Rights said that based on the 300 applications they work on each year, the chances of approval jump to 90 percent when a medical evaluation shows torture.

In Atlanta, nearly half of the 60 applications in which network doctors provided documentation of torture have been approved, Kohrt said.

"Asylum has an incredible amount of discretion involved," said Washington attorney Anya Sykes, who has worked with poor African immigrants for 18 years. "Some judges think (torture) is not plausible. Well, it is in the Congo. They just can't imagine. I feel you have to document everything."

But the hurdles are often daunting. Physical evidence of beating and rape, the most common torture against women, has often disappeared by the time torture victims are well enough to travel to the U.S.

from faraway places like Zimbabwe and Nepal.

The medical exams can also be traumatic, with doctors looking for evidence of mutilation, electric shocks, broken bones and teeth, as well as severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

One of Sykes' clients, an African woman who got asylum in February and lives in the Washington area, sobbed as she recalled having to show proof of being raped and tortured in what she said was retaliation for her political involvement.

"I had eight men raping me, and they hit me and left me to die, and they're out there walking around \_ and they wanted lions to finish me," said the 34-year-old woman from Zimbabwe. "I need a place to hide. I will not go home."

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On the Net:

Physicians for Human Rights: <http://www.phrusa.org>

Atlanta Asylum Network: <http://www.sph.emory.edu/asylum>

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