

Supporting Justice Mechanisms Using Declassified Satellite Imagery

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Abstract

Transitional justice in post-conflict societies can often be obstructed by the erasure of evidence or lack of data concerning historical injustices. As witnesses age and landscapes change, it becomes difficult to ensure perpetrators of violence are held to account, posing a risk to the rule of law. In the case of the 1971 Bangladesh Genocide, the rapid urbanisation of Dhaka has led to a number of mass graves and sites of torture being paved over. This study explores the integration of satellite images into the transitional justice framework, focusing on the right to truth, the preservation of collective memory and restitution. It does so by conducting a comparative analysis of declassified satellite imagery from 1965 and 1972 over Dhaka. This is then combined with ground truth, including NGO reports, government documentation and witness testimonies to provide an account of atrocities committed during the genocide. Previous efforts to address the 1971 atrocities, such as truth commissions, have faced criticisms regarding political bias and lack of fairness. Satellite imagery offers unbiased evidence which can be used to corroborate witness accounts and provide an objective historical account of human rights abuses. The work demonstrates practical examples of cases in which historical testimonies and satellite data align, as well as cases in which their comparison helps clarify reported inaccuracies. Not only does this document the past but it strengthens institutional legitimacy and prevents impunity from destabilising democratic institutions.

Keywords: Corona dataset; Evidence Corroboration; Historical Imagery; Transitional Justice; Bangladesh