GIS/Mapping

Case Study: Human Rights Watch

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OSI – GIS/Mapping Project
Case Study: Human Rights Watch *Off Target* project
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ISSUE: *Human Rights Watch has cultivated a powerful reputation in the activist world, but governments who claim their data are "a campaign of slander based on pure fantasy and imagination"* [1] *rarely take its reports seriously.*
SOLUTION: *Recruit a skilled military and GIS expert with significant experience and contacts within the US Department of Defense to employ maps and bolster HRW's reports and analysis.*

(adapted from interviews with Marc Garlasco, HRW's Senior Military Analyst and John Emerson, graphic artist and activist)

Human Rights Watch, the independent, international nongovernmental organization, set out in 2003 to examine potential violations of international human rights law committed during the Iraq War. Considering violations perpetrated by US, British and Iraqi military units alike, HRW did not intend to pass judgment on the causes or justifications for the war itself, but focused on the progress made by both sides of the conflict to mitigate civilian casualties. After having documented US military tactics in both the Afghanistan and Yugoslavian armed conflicts, HRW hoped to consider whether the US had lessened its use of cluster bombs in civilian-populated areas, or whether increases in these cluster munitions actually corroborated lay reports of killings and injuries to Iraqi civilians.

As most HRW reports are commissioned in-house, they wanted to be able to go beyond publishing a text-based report, and create an impacting visual representation of the findings of its reports. Its catalyst for change, then, came in the guise of Senior Researcher Marc Garlasco. In early 2003 Garlasco had been in the last of his seven years at the Pentagon, where as a Senior Intelligence Analyst he covered Iraq and oversaw high-value targeting during the Iraq War. Having also recommended thousands of aimpoints on targets during Iraqi and Serbian operations during his tenure with the US military, Garlasco had intimate knowledge on the subject. Through the Department of Defense, Garlasco had been assisting the HRW report with data that enabled them to pinpoint the locations of the airstrikes, and in April 2003 left his work at the Government to join Human Rights Watch full-time.

Garlasco had relied on GIS programs and satellite imagery at the Pentagon, and introduced the technology to his new

[1] From http://hrw.org/about/what_they_say.hml, excerpting the Angolan Government's response to an HRW report on Angola.

colleagues at HRW, who were a little reluctant to spend such great amounts of money for ArcView program licenses. Yet, as Garlasco notes, “They were amenable [to using ArcView] once I showed them it would have a huge impact. Once I got their buy-in, [we decided to show] other people within the organization – to show them and convince them.” Speaking with HRW’s Asia Division, and convincing them that GIS software would prove helpful for their deforestation projects, Garlasco says he felt like “the champion of this cause within the organization,” but also knew that HRW’s interest in mapping software might ultimately extend beyond his own use in the Iraq study.

For the study, entitled “Off Target: The Conduct of the War and Civilian Casualties in Iraq,” HRW cited two objectives:

1. To identify and investigate potential violations of international humanitarian law (IHL) by the parties to the conflict, and

2. To identify patterns of combat by those parties which may have caused civilian casualties and suffering that could have been avoided if additional precautions had been taken. (page 15)

Garlasco and colleagues traveled to Iraq and visited several sites in and around Baghdad and Fallujah. Using a GPS handheld device, the HRW crew marked locations of bomb craters, cluster bomb drops and other collateral damage and interviewed both Iraqis and US military personnel for additional battle damage assessments. Back in New York, Garlasco mapped this data and drew conclusions for the report, which he co-authored, about the impact of the attacks on the civilian population. He had hired graphic artist John Emerson to help diagram some of the findings from pre-war satellite photos and shared his first-hand data collection as well. According to Emerson, “In many cases, US targeting was clearly oriented to avoid hospitals, schools and other non-military targets. However, in some cases the targeting was quite deliberate – in the case of attacks on civilian media and infrastructure. In other cases, the military targeting was just off completely – with devastating consequences.”

Garlasco cites the employment of US military data as key to their findings. Data, Garlasco says, is the “most important” element of the report, and without such incontrovertible data, the findings would have been much less powerful. With the Military’s list of geodata of cluster bomb targets, HRW entered the coordinates into ArcView and compared the data with that of landing sites. Making their own maps and using satellite imagery to show specifically where a bomb landed – both destructive and ‘dud’ bombs – Garlasco was able to paint a visual tale of the military’s strategy. Mapping airstrikes and how they related to civilian areas generated a powerful tool, one that HRW understood

could be used in advocacy purposes, to return to the government and show how the use of public satellite imagery supports claims of Human Rights abuses.

Garlasco discussed other projects he has undertaken with HRW, including one mapping land home demolitions and tunnels in Gaza and another documenting searches for secret CIA prisons. Aware that he has been the primary proponent of mapping and GIS tools within HRW, Garlasco and colleague John Emerson agree, “Most of the researchers are not really aware of how it can help… It’s a shift in methodology from the traditional, personal interviews with victims and government officials approach… That’s a big conceptual leap.”

“I think we’re only scratching the surface,” says Garlasco. “Only a few of us [at HRW] are using it to any extent, and it’s almost as if [my colleagues were] suffering from a lack of vision. How can I use this on my work with HIV/AIDS? I don’t know what the potential is. I try to tell people what locational data will do to help. I think that the people in the Human Rights community simply need to be educated.”

“GIS,” Garlasco continues, “is great, and helps in a lot of different ways. But you need to have some sort of a vision.” Otherwise, GIS is just a very expensive, unused tool. Perhaps a benefit to the smaller budgets of non-profit organizations is the need to ask the very important question, “What’s the value added here?” something that may not be asked when funding is less of an issue.

Figure 2: Baghdad: Attacks on State Media

Figure 2: Basra, Iraq: UK Cluster Munition Strikes on Hay al-Zaitun