

Syria: How Many People Have Been Killed? The Procurement of “UN Figures”

UN's Syria Study Contractor Benetech Has "Anonymous" Funder, State Dept Funds Affiliate

By [Global Research News](#)

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In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

By Matthew Russell Lee

UNITED NATIONS, January 2 — How many people have been killed in Syria? The day after New Years the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said the figure has reached 60,000.

A major UK newspaper — [The Independent](#) — said these were “UN figures.”

Then at the US State Department’s briefing, spokesperson Victoria Nuland said, “we’ve seen this report by UN Rights Commissioner Navi Pillay.”

Not so fast. The number is from an outside contractor chosen and presumably paid by the OHCHR, Benetech.

As Inner City Press [reported earlier in the day](#), on [Benetech’s website](#), following the only link for “Human Rights,” there are eight funders listed, including the National Endowment for Democracy and, yes, the US Department of State.

Inner City Press immediately asked [Pillay’s spokesperson Rupert Colville](#) to “please describe when and how it was decided to commission [this study](#), how much was paid, and how the selection / procurement process settled on Benetech.

“And please comment on the idea that choosing a firm which lists the US State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy among its eight funders might call into question its impartiality or objectivity.”

One would think the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights would answer this question, would want to address this question. But eight hours later, no response had been received.

Inner City Press asked Benetech, “how was Benetech selected to do this work? When? Was there a Request for Proposals? What other work has Benetech done for the UN system in the past? Are the eight funders listed

Benetech's only eight funder? Eight largest funders?

"Were these all grants, or payment for work done? Separately, and if you can say, is Benetech currently at work on any comparable study, whether for example about the DR Congo, Sri Lanka, Libya, Colombia, etc?"

The question was referred around within Benetech and finally this answer arrived, from Patrick Ball of Benetech:

Subject: Inner City Press questions
From: Patrick Ball [at] benetech.org
Date: Wed, Jan 2, 2013 at 6:26 PM
To: Matthew Russell Lee [at] innercitypress.com
Cc: Megan Price [at] benetech.org, Ann Harrison [at] benetech.org

Hello Matthew, to your questions:

— The Human Rights Data Analysis Group (HRDAG) is the part of Benetech that did this report. HRDAG's donors are the Sigrid Rausing Trust, the Oak Foundation, an anonymous private foundation, and the Open Society Foundations.

— There are a number of smaller HRDAG projects that get project-specific funding, for example our work with the Historical Archive of the National Police in Guatemala is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy.

— None of HRDAG's (or Benetech's) donors knew of this project (except OHCHR) knew of this project until today. It has been strictly embargoed.

— Other parts of Benetech receive funding from many other places, including the Skoll Foundation and the Omidyar Network; the Department of Education supports the Bookshare project; the MacArthur Foundation, the Department of State, and Radio Free Asia support the Martus project.

— Yes, there was an RFP for this project. For the specific selection mechanism, you should contact OHCHR who can provide the details.

— We have worked for the UN system as individual consultants (via UNDP) in several capacities. I spent most of 2010 designing new information systems for the MONUSCO mission in the DRC, for example.

— Perhaps more relevantly, we've provided software and statistical support — at no cost, I want to point out — to a number of UN-sponsored truth commissions, most importantly, the Commission for Historical Clarification in Guatemala, and to UN criminal tribunals, including the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

— Over the last 13 years, we've done analysis like this for projects in Guatemala, Peru, Kosovo, Colombia, and Timor-Leste... There are a few ongoing projects, but they're confidential until we release them.

The detailed answer is appreciated. Ball states that "Yes, there was an RFP for this project. For the specific selection mechanism, you should contact OHCHR who can provide the details."

But in the eight hours since OHCHR was asked, on the morning they released “their” report, no answer has been provided.

Is the “Data Analysis Group” really so separate that the US State Department / Radio Free Asia funding is not relevant? Given the issues at stake here, what of OHCHR’s contractor being funded by an “ anonymous private foundation”?

And, rather than Benetech, isn’t it the OHCHR and the UN which should be answering these questions?

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