

On February 16, 2007 the Center hosted Jennifer Leaning, M.D., S.M.H, in a luncheon talk attended by 25 members of the Boston College community, including undergraduate and graduate students in political science, law, psychology, and history as well as professors from the departments of theology, psychology, and political science. Leaning is a professor of the Practice of International Health at Harvard School of Public Health, Co-Director of the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, Director of the Inter-University Initiative on Humanitarian Studies and Field Practice, a Senior Advisor in International and Policy Studies at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and an Associate Professor of Medicine at Harvard Medical School. She has field experience in problems of disaster response and human rights and has written widely on these issues; her research interests bridge international human rights and humanitarian law, clinical medicine, and public health. As such, Leaning's work exemplifies the sort of interdisciplinary and applied inquiry that the Center strives to achieve.

Leaning discussed an investigation she undertook with Physicians for Human Rights (www.phrusa.org) in Afghanistan in January of 2002, as an example of her research on atrocity and mortality in war (see full text of report at <http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/documents/reports/report-massgraves-afghanistan.pdf>). She began by addressing the recent history of conflict in the country, including the decade of fighting between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, as the backdrop for their work conducting investigation on the effects of the post-9/11 U.S. invasion. The research team began with three questions: (1) Are there problems with U.S. targeting of civilians in what was largely an air war? (2) What issues exist with U.S. placement of landmines and cluster bombs, as contrary to international

norms? and (3) What is the treatment of prisoners of war in Afghanistan? This third question proved to be the most salient, contrary to the expectations of the team.

In speaking with representatives at the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan and the International Committee of the Red Cross they confirmed that, with the tragic exception of accidental bombing of a United Nations de-mining team camp, U.S. pilots were “meticulous” in their targeting and almost “100% accurate” in their targeting in the Kabul area at that time. They similarly discovered that concern about U.S. use of landmines was not an active issue at the time, although landmines from previous conflicts still scattered the landscape. However, in their investigation of prison conditions, they discovered deplorable conditions for Taliban and Pakistani prisoners held by Northern Alliance forces at Shebarghan Prison, including severe overcrowding, exposure, inadequate food and no medical supplies, in violation of international standards for the treatment of prisoners (<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/news-2002-01-28.html>). Additionally, by speaking with a British photojournalist, they discovered what appeared to be a mass grave near Mazar-I-Sharif; this was confirmed by Physicians for Human Rights forensic anthropologists who conducted a follow-up investigation in February of 2002. As a result of their work, UN representatives were brought to the site, but Leaning noted that today, 5 years later, the site remains unprotected.

Leaning concluded her talk by encouraging students and faculty to use their resources to conduct field research, stating that “by going into peri-war zones [one] can uncover issues [that] parties hope to keep covered” and reminding the audience that much room exists for people who wish to do human rights field research. Leaning also graciously fielded questions from attendees.