

Situated in the middle of Lahore's busiest business locality, the Mayo Hospital's mortuary hardly offers the dead the respect they deserve

By Asim Mateen

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issue

Lahore's mortuary presents a scene that you will only see in the most horrible of horror movies. Here you see charred, bruised bodies; there a few human organs; and here and there bones, hair and nails. On its roof lie barrels full of body parts dissolved in chemicals. The whole place is full of stench, the stench of the dead.

True to its name, Murda Khana may be the scariest place in the city. You may not want to pass by it in the dread of the night or want your children to see it. And yet it is situated in the middle of Lahore's busiest Anarkali on Ewing Road, adjacent to the Mayo.

Murda Khana is the place where unclaimed bodies end up in the city. Most of them are from untraced accidents, murders and other crimes. Some are those of beggars found dead on the streets. Others are the bodies of forgotten destitute from jails, hospitals, even the Mental Hospital. Still others are the remains of poor people whose relatives refused to identify them because they cannot afford to give them a decent burial.

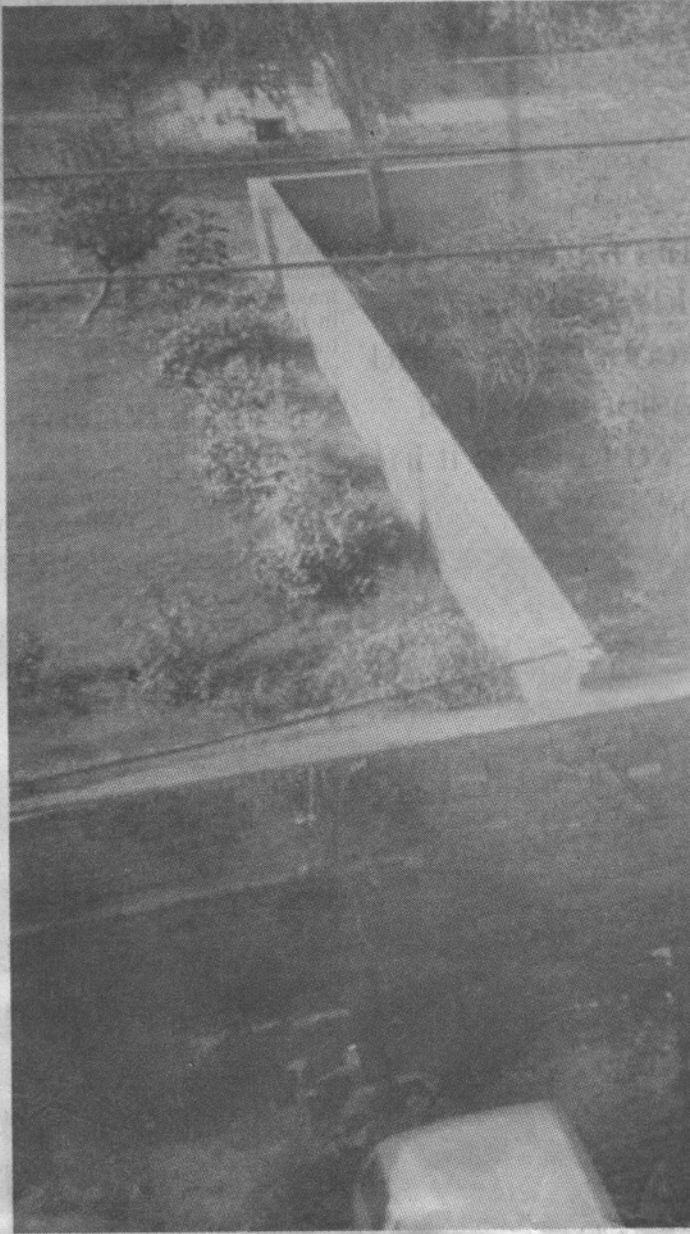
In some cases, bodies never make it to their families because the police do not make effort to identify them. At other times, there have been charges that people who die of torture or in fake encounters get conveniently disposed off at the mortuary.

These unclaimed 'bodies' are also the raw material on which young doctors practice their skills; laboratories and hospitals get their experimental 'spare-parts' from the mortuary.

All of this raises many questions, legal, religious and moral. But the people who get directly affected by this butchering of human body, as well of soul, are neighbours. The place has become hell for those who live in front of it.

For them, it's a living nightmare. The stench from the bodies is so bad that most of them have to use incense day in day out. "Sometimes, it's so bad that one could hardly breathe. The most irritating time is when an ambulance carrying a dead body supposed to be brought for autopsy parks outside the building in front of us. During the long paper work requiring up to 2 to 3 hours to complete, the stench spreads all over the place and becomes unbearable. It not only affects our health but also ruins our business" says Sheikh Tahir Shafi, a trader whose shop is situated just opposite to the Mayo's Anatomy Department, right next to the mortuary.

Burial



'Disposal Area,' the open space in front of the Murda Khana building is used to dissolve bodies in chemicals to dispose them off after they become redundant for under-training doctors. Sufficient evidence that bodies which survive in other land in the mortuary are subjected to morally doubtful practices. For the area, it's a living nightmare.

The single-storey Murda Khana is surrounded by high-rise buildings from where the neighbours can see everything happening right in front of them — body parts being dissolved in chemical drums. "They are doing openly what the 'child dissolver' Javed Iqbal did in hiding," says

Shahid Waheed, one of the people residing in the area.

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so openly is disgusting to say
the least. Many residents of
the area have already left their
houses to settle somewhere
else only because these horri-
ble acts became too much for
them to bear," says Ibrahim,
another local resident.

Many in the neighbour-
hood say they have seen stray

dogs carrying human organs
and bones taken from a dump
in the mortuary where some-
times bodies are put before
dissolution. Others accuse the
hospital authorities of burning
the bodies to dispose them of.

But Muhammad Ramzan,
Murda Khana's caretaker, says
they don't burn the bodies at
all. "We dissolve them in
chemicals," he adds.

The question remains. Is it
allowed to dissolve human
bodies in chemicals?
"Absolutely not," says Dr
Sarfraz Naeemi, Principal of
Jamia Naeemia. "Bodies in
Islam are as sacred as living
beings," he says. "It's an insult
to humanity."

Legally, too, the practice is
questionable, though there is
some confusion about the
'rights of the dead' in
Pakistani law books.

Dr Attiya Mubarak, head of
King Edward Medical
College's Anatomy

Department and also respon-
sible for the mortuary's
affairs, says most of the bod-
ies her department receives
are handed over by police.
"We allow students to carry
out experimentation only after
the legally mandatory period
of one month passes after we
receive a body," she says. Dr
Attia says there is nothing
wrong with the dissection per
se. "Dissection is a normal
legal practice everywhere in
the world."

She does not deny that dis-
sected bodies are dissolved
for disposal. "We would rather
have the government provide
us space where we could bury
them properly," she says. But
before that is done, she says,
we should better keep the bar-
rels containing chemicals for
dissolution out of people's
sight."

But it is not as simple as
removing a couple of barrels
from one place to the other.

There is sufficient evidence
that bodies which somehow or
the other land in the mortuary
are subjected to a variety of
morally doubtful practices.
For example, there have been
organised rackets in the past
found exporting human bones
from the morgue.

Similar, and sometimes
more horrible, stories abound
about the mortuary and the
bodies brought and kept here.
One of them goes something
like this: The relatives of a
dead person approached the
mortuary officials to get the
body which in the meanwhile
has been dissected. The offi-
cials stitched together a com-
plete body from whatever
organs were available with
them and handed it over to
the relatives who, to their
utter horror, noticed many
organs hardly matching. But
as they say, asking questions
about the dead is nothing but
sacrilege.