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By Graeme Smith, The Globe and Mail

MOSCOW -- It's hard to look at the tiny corpses unearthed from the graveyard near Hospital No. 6. Forensic photographs show bodies apparently mutilated before they were dumped into a mass grave in Kharkiv, a city in eastern Ukraine.

In one photo, a man wearing surgical gloves holds several pieces of flesh, arranging the fragments to resemble what might have been an infant before it was dismembered.

Hospital officials say these gruesome images reveal nothing except the biological waste from dozens of routine abortions. But relatives of women who gave birth at Hospital No. 6 say they are part of growing evidence suggesting something sinister: newborns taken from their mothers, disappearing in a region known for trafficking in harvested organs and human tissue.

"It's really hard to find the truth," said Zinaida Dromashko, whose daughter-in-law, Svetlana Puzikova, was too upset to talk about her missing baby. "It's like you strike your head against the brick wall. You strike more and more, but the wall stays untouched."

Allegations about stolen babies first surfaced in Kharkiv about three years ago. Mothers of two newborns complained that hospital staff took away their babies immediately after birth, later claiming that they were born dead.

Local investigators dug up the hospital's graveyard and could not find the infants, but did uncover an unexpectedly large number of remains from fetuses and newborns.

The case was closed, despite questions that kept nagging at the babies' relatives: Why were so many of the bodies missing vital organs? If their children weren't in the grave,

where did they go?

For years, they did not have much hope of finding answers. Activists publicized the story in a few European media outlets and complained to the Council of Europe, but did not attract much interest in their own country. But the situation changed after the Orange Revolution swept the former Soviet republic, and Ukraine started cleaning up its reputation in the hope of joining the European Union. The Prosecutor-General of Ukraine reopened the investigation, and President Viktor Yushchenko invited the Council of Europe's parliamentary assembly to examine the issue.

Neither investigation has published results. However, Ruth-Gaby Vermot-Mangold, the Swiss parliamentarian sent by the Council of Europe to the region this month, said she has already seen evidence that at least four, and possibly five, newborns went missing.

Even more disturbing, Ms. Vermot-Mangold said, is the evidence that infants were treated so casually in Ukraine that the true number of children missing across the country may never be known. "Whatever the number of disappearances, just one case is one too many," she said.

After visiting Hospital No. 6. and hearing the story of mothers who were never allowed to see their babies, Ms. Vermot-Mangold met with the regional prosecutor who first investigated the complaints. The prosecutor did not give clear answers about how his office handled the issue, she said, and did not offer much reassurance about the "many contradictions and irregularities" of the cases.

The parliamentarian did not speculate about what might have happened to the missing children.

Ms. Dromashko said she still hopes that her daughter-in-law's child might be alive, maybe sold for an illegal adoption.

But Tatyana Zakharova, chairwoman of the All-Ukrainian Federation of Families With Many Children, said she fears that the newborns may have been sold for their valuable tissue to unprincipled researchers or to clinics making beauty injections with stem cells. "They ignore all professional and human laws," Ms. Zakharova said.

It is not far-fetched to imagine that newborns could be killed for their body parts, said Vadym Lazariev, a doctor turned activist who is campaigning to improve Ukraine's medical ethics. He said he does not have any proof, only rumours about doctors drowning babies in amniotic fluid, declaring them stillborn and selling their bodies.

But when his small group of activists visited clinics in Kharkiv, Donetsk and other

Ukrainian cities last year, they found evidence of an underground market in fetus parts.

Posing as buyers, Dr. Lazariiev's team asked whether the clinics could supply them with living brain cells from fetuses 15 to 27 weeks old. Suppliers were easy to find, he said; one clinic even gave him an invoice for the product, signed and stamped, offering an undefined quantity of the brain material for 7,750 hryvnya (about \$1,800).

Such tissue commands high prices because it is used for stem-cell injections by cosmetic clinics, activists say. Some women believe that the injections can rejuvenate their faces; men have extracts from fetal testicles injected into their genitals, hoping to improve their prowess.

The money involved proves tempting in a country where annual salaries amount to \$1,000 or \$2,000. "They will do whatever is necessary for the demands of the client," Dr. Lazariiev said.

Graeme Smith is The Globe and Mail's Moscow correspondent.



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