Challenging impunity for atrocity crimes through secure, verifiable photos and videos

PRESS PACK

We have all seen the videos. The ones with burnt villages, parents carrying their lifeless child, covered in dust, out from the rubble. They have gone viral. They have millions of online views. So why is it so difficult to hold perpetrators accountable?

Digital photos and videos are easy to manipulate and misrepresent. Consequently, footage that cannot be verified and authenticated may be of little use to legal authorities investigating the crimes, even if it shows the terrible events that took place. If a case does make it to trial, it is likely the footage will either not be admitted or will be given little weight.

our mission

By combining legal expertise with technology, the NGO eyeWitness to Atrocities (eyeWitness for short) helps human rights defenders capture digital images of atrocities that can be used as evidence.

The eyeWitness to Atrocities mobile camera app ensures photos and videos can be used to seek justice by making it easier to verify the footage for media, advocacy, and courts of justice.

Moreover, the eyeWitness legal team works with investigators and documenters to submit footage to national, regional and international accountability mechanisms.

60+
PARTNERSHIPS GLOBALLY

60,000+
PHOTOS AND VIDEOS RECEIVED

53+
DOSSIERS OF ALLEGED CRIMES SUBMITTED
Who are eyeWitness?

eyeWitness is an organisation registered in the United Kingdom, founded in 2013 by the International Bar Association. Its headquarters are in London, but it deploys staff worldwide to engage with activists and local legal communities.

The official launch of eyeWitness in 2015 was widely covered by news publications around the world, including The Guardian, BBC, NBC, CNN, La Tribune, and Iraq Business News.

The story behind eyeWitness was most recently covered in 2021 by RELX.

How does the eyeWitness to Atrocities app work?

Photos captured with a regular camera app are easy to manipulate. Not only can you edit their appearance, but you can also change the time and place they were reportedly captured. As a result, courts often find it difficult to verify images taken with regular camera apps, and therefore may not admit these images as evidence.

In contrast, the eyeWitness to Atrocities app is a free mobile camera app that captures verifiable photos, videos and audio of atrocities and human rights abuses. Easily downloadable on Android, it comes in Arabic, English, French, Spanish, and Russian, among others. When you record with eyeWitness, the app automatically stamps the footage with the location, date and time. The files and their metadata are saved to a secure gallery where they cannot be edited. App users then upload the files to eyeWitness’ encrypted server - hosted by LexisNexis Legal & Professional - for further verification and safe storage. These elements are key to proving to judges that the footage is authentic, thereby increasing its value as evidence.

Although there are other verifiable camera apps on the market, eyeWitness is the only one created by legal experts in consultation with activists. The app is also usable offline and comes with technical support.

Who is the eyeWitness to Atrocities app for?

eyeWitness is for civil society groups, journalists and civilians who use photos and videos to document human rights abuses. It is designed specifically for those operating in high-risk areas with poor internet and cellular connections.

Watch our ‘eyeWitness in Action’ video series to learn more about the human rights defenders using the app. Our latest episode features National Geographic photojournalist, Anastasia Taylor-Lind capturing evidence of alleged war crimes in Ukraine.
What about safety concerns?
The footage collected by eyeWitness is often from highly dangerous contexts, and individuals often risk their lives to capture footage. Because their safety is paramount, the app also has security features to mitigate the inherent risks of documenting human rights abuses. These features include the ability to disguise the app on the device, a hidden password-protected gallery, emergency delete, and encryption.

How else does eyeWitness help achieve justice?

- eyeWitness works in partnerships with the activists using the app. Partners are provided with comprehensive photo and video documentation training.

- eyeWitness' lawyers tag, process and catalogue the data received via the app. This ensures that footage is searchable and thus usable to the investigators, lawyers and international bodies who can act upon this information.

- All footage is encrypted and archived. Justice can take a long time, so it is important that footage is stored safely for when it can be used.

- eyeWitness’ legal team works to identify the international, regional, or national bodies best placed to act on uploaded footage. eyeWitness has submitted 22 dossiers to various institutions, including the United Nations and the International Criminal Court.

Want to know more? Watch this short video explaining exactly how eyeWitness works.

You can also read our Services page which comes in Arabic, English, French, Spanish and Russian.
Two of our success stories from the frontlines

1  Confirming locations of major incidents in Palestine

In 2018, thousands of Palestinians came to protest at the fence separating Gaza and Israel. News quickly spread that the Israeli Security Forces (ISF) were allegedly shooting unarmed protestors. In turn, the ISF claimed that the demonstrators were a security threat. Consequently, in May 2018, the United Nations created a commission to investigate all alleged crimes.

One of eyeWitness’ partners – Palestinian human rights organisation, Al Haq – captured hundreds of images that were relevant to the Commission’s mandate using the eyeWitness to Atrocities app. At Al Haq’s request, eyeWitness’ legal team submitted 235 verified images to the UN investigators. These images helped investigators determine the locations of major incidents.

Learn more about the United Nation’s final report and eyeWitness’ role in the investigation.

2  Securing the conviction of two warlords in DRC

Since the 1990s, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) has experienced mass crimes at the hands of local militias. In the high-profile case against two local militia commanders, eyeWitness and its partners helped Congolese lawyers collect incriminating visual evidence.

During the trial of the two commanders, 92 photos captured with the eyeWitness to Atrocities app helped prove the crimes of murder and torture. This evidence had a direct impact in the verdict that came a few weeks later: both suspects were found guilty of crimes against humanity and condemned to life sentences.

The case was the first time that a court of law admitted digital footage captured with a mobile device as evidence of core international crimes.

Find out more about the case.

"When the footage was shown, the atmosphere in court switched dramatically."

Guy Mushiata, DRC Human Rights Coordinator for TRIAL International

Judges, prosecutors and lawyers watch the incriminating footage
(DRC, 2018 © TRIAL International)
Sharing eyeWitness' expertise

eyeWitness is a leading expert in the role of digital photos and videos in the pursuit of justice. Our team frequently contributes to high-profile reports, organisations, talks and working groups. Some examples of our latest contributions include:

- International Criminal Court Assembly of States Parties virtual side event – The Role of Photos and Videos as Evidence of Human Rights Abuses
- International Coalition to End Transplant Abuse in China (ETAC) – The Role of Photos and Videos as Evidence of Human Rights Abuses
- Wayamo Foundation – Complex Casework Group
- Public International Law & Policy Group (PILPG) – Human Rights Documentation Solutions
- Human Rights Watch Report – “Video Unavailable” Social Media Platforms Remove Evidence of War Crimes
- Leiden Law School – Digitally Derived Evidence Research Project
- University of Oxford - How is technology impacting international justice? Challenges and opportunities of digital evidence in international criminal prosecutions

We are available for comment on subjects such as digital evidence, best practices for ensuring that footage is verifiable, and use of footage in case building. Please note that we cannot comment on specific pieces of footage and confirm whether it is or is not evidence of a crime. The eyeWitness app ensures that footage captured via the app is verifiable; it cannot verify footage taken with another device.

Want to know more about eyeWitness' work?

- Contact us. Our staff is available for interviews in English, French and Spanish.
- Visit www.eyewitness.global for more details about our mission and impact.
- Follow us on Twitter (@eyewitnessorg) and Facebook (/eyewitnesstoatrocities)
- Download the eyeWitness to Atrocities app from Google Play. It is completely free and you can test its unique features yourself.