

# Witness for social justice

The Martus Project is a free software and open source technology tool, launched in 2003 with the potential to dramatically improve global human rights. It aims to bring efficiency and security to the documentation and reporting of abuses, thus developing the social justice sector.

Martus is the Greek word for witness. Timely and accurate delivery of information is one of the most powerful weapons in the battle against human rights violations. The need for secure storage and backup to counter possible attacks on saved information is a vital component of the Martus solution. By carefully making the tools usable to someone with basic experience with electronic mail, the technology currently available to more powerful entities will be made accessible to the grassroots activist community.

Martus offers a system and infrastructure that addresses the specific technological needs of the human rights community. The Martus system encourages easy code review to foster an atmosphere of trust and collaboration. The features of Martus systems are as follows:

- It uses built-in encryption to safeguard data;
- It enables text-based bulletins about violations to be created easily and quickly;
- It securely backs up this information and replicates it in multiple locations to protect against loss;
- It provides grassroots groups with power over their own information, allowing them to decide what to make public and what should be kept securely private;
- It offers consumers of human rights information access to the non-confidential portions of bulletins, enabling activists, prosecutors, press and the public to have direct access to the voices of those affected by human rights violations.

By employing a ‘train the trainers’ method of training, the community of Martus users will grow rapidly each year and the reliance on professional outreach by Martus staff will decrease. With records of abuses preserved and protected, human rights groups worldwide will be able to bring greater attention to human rights violations.

Martus is involved in projects to support human rights and it advocates the use of Martus software in thirteen countries. These include Afghanistan, Peru, Colombia, Guatemala, Hungary, the Philippines, Russia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Zimbabwe and the United States. There are three active Martus backup servers located in Seattle (Washington), Manila (Philippines), and Budapest (Hungary). Benetech has made partnership with the Asia Foundation to bring Martus to NGOs in Asian countries.

Martus was installed in the main office of the Human Rights Commission (HRC) in Sri Lanka which has historically relied mainly on faxes, mail, in-person meetings and paper files to collect, transmit and secure its data. The main purpose was to assist the HRC in monitoring the media and Internet coverage of human rights violations under the ceasefire and subsequent agreements.

In January 2003, Martus was introduced in Philippines in coordination with the Asia Foundation. It has been installed in the office of the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR). Effort is made to bring the Martus Human Rights Bulletin System to civil society organisations in the Philippines. The objective of this project is to strengthen the capacity of the CHR and the domestic human rights community to

monitor the abuse of human rights and to decrease the number of abuses.

In United States, the higher rate of mortality in domestic violence disputes in Arizona distinguishes it from most other states. In response to these tragedies, the Arizona Coalition Against Domestic Violence (ACADV) began to compile reports of murder-suicides in such disputes. ACADV chose to test Martus software to help the organisation manage the hundreds of incident records necessary to write the report. By using Martus, ACADV was able to manage a vast amount of information and



supply important feedback on the software.

Martus is being developed by Benetech as an information and documentation management system based on client software and Internet-based infrastructure. Benetech is now working strategically with grassroots NGOs around the world to offer outreach, training and support. These tools will ensure that the documentation of human rights violations is safeguarded and disseminated. This, in turn, will strengthen reporting of violations, and in some cases, prevent additional abuses. ■

Source: <http://www.martus.org/index.shtml>

Saswati Paik

[saswati@csdms.in](mailto:saswati@csdms.in)