



# MISSING PERSONS

A hidden tragedy



ICRC



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# Missing persons

## A hidden tragedy

People have gone missing as long as men have been fighting wars. They might be victims of mass executions thrown into unmarked graves, as in the Balkans. They might be captured or abducted, like the current sweep of young men taken off the streets in Sri Lanka. They might be arrested at their homes and then die in custody or be held incommunicado in secret locations. Sometimes they are civilians fleeing combat, or children separated from their families, as happened often in the Congo. Soldiers might be killed during fighting and their remains improperly managed, such as in the Ethiopian/Eritrean war, where there were reports of bodies being left on the battlefield for years.

It is a tragedy for the person who disappears, but the other victims are the families suspended in limbo, suspecting their loved ones are dead, yet unable to mourn, and in the absence of proof constantly tormented by the possibility of a

miracle – a secret prison, a new life in a foreign land. Many spend years, and their life savings, in a fruitless search. Stories are rife of racketeers posing as lawyers, taking money from desperate families in return for help they never deliver.

The pain is not just emotional; it can be financially crippling. Many times it is the breadwinner who goes missing. Left to support the family, wives and mothers often face a life of poverty. And the situation can be an administrative nightmare, since some countries allow years to pass before declaring a person officially dead or absent. This delay can seem like an eternity, as family members are unable to move on, sell property, remarry, or simply hold funeral rites.

Not enough is being done to address this pressing humanitarian issue and help families clarify the fate of their loved ones.





### The legal right to know

*The right to know the fate of a relative is a fundamental concern of international humanitarian law and human rights law and it must be respected. The legal obligations are laid out in the Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols, along with the new International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. International law is clear: it is illegal to make people disappear, and next-of-kin must be informed about captured, wounded or deceased relatives without delay. The challenge is to ensure that States adopt and implement such rules. "If everyone respected international humanitarian law there would be no missing persons in armed conflicts," points out María Teresa Dutli, head of the ICRC's Advisory Service on IHL.*

*"Even if I find a skeleton  
I don't care,  
I just want my son back."*

On the eastern outskirts of Tbilisi, Guliko Ekizashvili welcomes visitors into the small bedroom that also serves as her living room. Earthquake fissures crisscross the ceiling above her head. Fifty-seven years old, she's a matronly figure in black, with clear blue eyes and greying hair pulled into a neat bun. On a facing wall hangs an assortment of pictures of her son, a handsome young man with dark wavy hair and an intense regard. In some he looks serious, seated in a classic portrait pose, while in others he's showing off, doing martial arts kicks on the lawn.

She recalls how the 1992-1993 war between Georgia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia took him out of her life without a trace.

"My son Besarioni was born on 19 July 1971, in Tbilisi. He was a pilot engineer. He wasn't an excellent student, but he used to paint and practice karate. He was very strong; he had a black belt.

He wanted to go to the battlefield. He told me 'I have to fight for my country.' He left for Abkhazia on 4 July 1993. On 15 July we heard most of his battalion had been killed, and that Besarioni was in hospital with an injured knee. The next day my husband and I took a plane to see him. We went to the hospital, but he was no longer there.

We didn't have much money, so I went back to Tbilisi to sell my gold fillings. Then I returned to Abkhazia to search for him. My husband joined the fighting, while I walked from village to village showing pictures of my son, asking 'Have you seen him? He's tall and very good-looking.' I searched through corpses in the forest. There was a rumour that some men were thrown over a cliff in Tsugurovka. It's the

only place I wasn't able to go. Sometimes I slept at a military camp, other times I slept on benches at bus stops. I ate fruit from trees.

In September the fighting grew fierce, and I had to go back to Tbilisi to prepare my daughter for school. I managed to get a place on board an overcrowded plane. All the soldiers knew me by then. They asked me, 'Did you find your handsome boy?'

Just before my husband died seven years ago, he was slipping in and out of consciousness and suddenly he said 'I see my son, he's alive'. 'Where is he?' I asked, but he couldn't answer."

She breaks off in sobs.

"He was only twenty-two years old. He was so kind, so talented. I spent all my money, I went to see fortune-tellers in Azerbaijan, each time they said he was alive.

"In 2003 I went back to Sochi – a region between Abkhazia and Russia – where I paid a friend of a friend to search the prisons. I didn't tell my daughter, she never would have let me go. My main goal in life now is to go to Tsugurovka, to the bottom of that cliff. Even if I find a skeleton I don't care, I just want my son back."

Guliko's loss is fourteen years old, and yet her wound is as raw as if it had taken place yesterday. Around the world, there are hundreds of thousands of stories like hers. They are told by people whose family members have disappeared during conflicts in regions as far-flung as the North and South Caucasus, the Balkans, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Iraq, Indonesia, much of Africa, and almost every country in Latin America.

## An imperative to act

*“We have to face reality”*

Until recently the international community largely neglected the problem of missing people. “For a long time, people looked at the issue as totally hopeless,” says Pierre Krähenbühl, director of operations for the ICRC in Geneva. But then in the 1990s the Balkans imploded, and more than 20,000 people disappeared. When families reacted with unexpected vehemence, humanitarian workers were confronted with something new. Patricia Danzi, Krähenbühl’s political adviser, recalls being in the field at the time. “The families pressured us. They were organized. They wanted to know what we had done, the progress, the outcome of our meetings. They demonstrated in front of our offices to make sure we did not forget the issue.”

The ICRC redoubled its efforts to tackle the concern on a global scale, to prove that something could – and must – be done. In missions throughout the world it is currently handling tens of thousands of cases. Yet it is impossible to know exactly how many people have disappeared worldwide. The organization defines missing people as those who are unaccounted for as a result of armed conflict, whether international or internal. They might be military or civilian; anyone whose family has no information on their fate or whereabouts.



The absence of political will among those directly concerned and the lack of cooperation on the part of those who might persuade them to act often make the prevention and clarification of disappearances related to armed conflict or internal violence an arduous task. Data is withheld as a weapon against enemies or opponents. Leaders whose power is based on hate for another community obstruct any attempt to resolve the issue of missing persons, in order to maintain their control. And in many instances – in particular when disappearances result from massacres or deliberate attacks against civilians – leaders and authority figures may be unable or unwilling to provide answers, because they fear they will be held accountable.

According to the ICRC's Pierre Krähenbühl, the timeline for action starts "from the very first moment of conflict," with prevention. In an international war, bureaux must be established on both sides to furnish information about prisoners, internees or the deceased, and endeavour to return remains to their home country. The most vulnerable civilians – such as children in orphanages or displaced persons – can be registered. Soldiers are encouraged to wear identity tags at all times.

### **The ICRC's commitment**

*In 2002, the ICRC began studying ways of better helping people who go missing as a result of armed conflict or internal violence – and their relatives. The aim was to review methods of preventing disappearances, processing cases and helping the families. Subsequently, the ICRC agreed on a programme of common practices and started working to move the issue up the international agenda.*

*An international conference was held in 2003, bringing together approximately 120 participants from government bodies, human rights and humanitarian organizations, members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, experts and the families of missing persons. Following this conference, the 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent adopted the Agenda for Humanitarian Action, which sets out clear objectives for States and for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. At its heart is the assumption that families have the right to know the fate of their missing relatives.*

*Since then, the ICRC has continued to expand its activities related to missing persons and their families. This has included participating in the drafting committee that wrote the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 December 2006. The Convention includes the declaration that nobody may be subjected to enforced disappearance, that the systematic practice thereof is a crime against humanity, that no one may be held in secret detention, that victims include the disappeared person and anyone who has suffered harm as a direct result of the act, that each family has the right to know the truth regarding the circumstances of the enforced disappearance and that victims have the right to reparation and compensation.*

*In a speech to mark the signing of the Convention in February 2007, ICRC president Jakob Kellenberger emphasized "the importance of the punitive framework put in place by the Convention" and the urgency of States' signing and ratifying it as a contribution to stamping out the practice.*

In the heat of a conflict, the priority is finding people who are alive and preventing them from going missing, rather than looking for those who are most likely dead. The ICRC, along with other humanitarian organizations, aims to have access to civilians and to sick, wounded or captured members of armed forces/armed groups whose lives are in peril. ICRC teams assess needs resulting from the violence and collect information about events that have led to people going missing, or which may yet do so. Then they contact the authorities concerned and discuss measures to be taken by them, by the ICRC or by other humanitarian organizations.

Sometimes little or nothing can be done. This is the current scenario in Iraq where, according to the roughest of estimates, hundreds of thousands of people are missing following years of strife – including the Iran/Iraq war, the regime of Saddam Hussein and the current conflict. Béatrice Mégevand-Roggo, the ICRC's head of operations for the Middle East and North Africa, says "Iraq is a very special situation. Security-wise it's the most difficult. There have been other times when we haven't actively worked on the issue of missing persons, but never for such a prolonged period. We have to face reality – right now, apart from supporting the legal institute with some equipment and training, it's nearly impossible."

*“From the moment they’re registered, it’s much less likely they’ll be executed.”*

When security concerns are less acute, the vigilance of humanitarian and human rights organizations often reduces the number of enforced disappearances. If somebody goes missing, the ICRC and National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies have a system of tracing requests that family members can fill in, with information such as the person’s identity, circumstances of the disappearance, eyewitnesses, and as many relevant details as possible.

Krähenbühl explains, “Tomorrow morning you might go to a prison with two names on a checklist, reported by their relatives as missing. You look at the registry, find the people, there’s a match. You bring a message back to the families. Now there’s a protection effect for these two people. From the moment they’re registered, it’s much less likely they’ll be executed. Over time it’s less likely there will be widespread disappearances.”

“The impact of a field presence on preventing disappearances can be quite significant,” agrees Sandra Beidas, chief of protection for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Nepal, where the OHCHR currently has its largest field operation. “As we started visiting army

## Prevention

Measures to prevent people going missing:

- respect and protect civilians, plus sick, wounded or captured members of armed forces/armed groups;
- respect and protect people deprived of their liberty;
- make sure people can exchange family news;
- identify and account for people reported missing as a result of armed conflict or internal violence;
- manage information properly.



barracks it became more difficult, and incommunicado detentions got shorter as well. It partly contributed to ending disappearances in 2005.”

Indeed, tracing efforts and the registering of prisoners were a relative success in Nepal, where civilians were caught up in a bloody ten-year insurgency pitting Maoist rebels against government forces. Many villagers suspected of supporting the enemy on either side were captured or arrested, and hundreds disappeared. “We visited some 6,700 detainees during the war. Most of them survived,” says Jean-Paul Corboz, the ICRC protection coordinator in Kathmandu.

One of the lucky ones was Janak Pandey, a wiry, twenty-four-year-old business management student living in Nepalgunj, the main city in the Banke district of the Terai lowlands. He says he was detained twice during the war. The first time was by the Maoists, who held him for a day. A year later, in 2001, he was detained by the police. They kept him in custody for six months, during which his family had no idea of his whereabouts. He was finally transferred to a prison, where ICRC delegates first met him nearly a year after his arrest. “They assigned me a number, and I thought – now I’m not likely

to go missing. And even if I do, someone will search for me. The ICRC was like a god to me, they saved my life.”

The names of those who did go missing went into an extensive database. Records were collected by ICRC staff who walked across the country, door to door, talking to families, gathering and cross-referencing information. Last February the ICRC published a list of 812 missing people in a Nepalese newspaper and on its own website, which spurred other families to come forward. Many kept the paper as a memento, says Corboz. “Plenty of families have come to us saying ‘Thank you, thank you for acknowledging it. It’s proof that it’s true.’”

And yet no organization can be everywhere at once. A peace agreement was signed in Nepal last November, but today close to a thousand people are still missing. Nearly a quarter disappeared in the impoverished rural Bardiya district, in midwestern Nepal on the border with India. Most of these victims are members of the lower-caste Tharu ethnic group, indigenous to the region. When the hostilities subsided, a handful of families created an association for missing persons. With assistance from the ICRC, this has grown into a district-wide committee comprising more than 200 families, called the Conflict Victims’ Committee (CVC). The president is Krishna Chaudhary, a thirty-one-year-old schoolteacher with a quietly dignified air and ballpoint pens in the pocket of his shirt.

In November 2001, Chaudhary’s father, also a teacher, was pedalling home from work when armed forces arrested him on the road, tossing his bicycle into a ditch. Ten days later they arrested Krishna himself, in the morning, at his home. He saw his father at the barracks and managed to give him 150 rupees in pocket money. After a few days Krishna was released with a warning to stay at home. He never received news of his father again, and he – like many others – was terrorized into silence. “The fear was so prevalent, if the dogs barked we were afraid.”

Krishna Chaudhary’s home is in the Bardiya district, in the village of Baidi, an hour’s drive from Nepalgunj on a road filled with bicycles, stray cows, gaily painted trucks, UN vehicles, and pedestrians carrying umbrellas to protect them from the scorching sun. The fields beside the road are flat and dusty green, planted with crops of rice, maize and barley ploughed by mud-caked buffalo. An unpaved route off the main road leads past a settlement of baked-mud hovels no bigger than large cupboards.



A family of goats is tied up in front of the Chaudhary house, a comparatively luxurious cube made of grey concrete rather than mud. It is here that nearly a dozen people, mostly women, have travelled from their respective villages, dressed in their best – brightly coloured saris, plastic beads and rhinestones. They've gathered to tell their stories for the umpteenth time, each time in the hope that it will make a difference.

Their tales are so repetitive they're almost numbing. It was the middle of the night. We were asleep. A truck pulled up, they called my husband's name. They beat him and took him away. I never saw him again. At times the army came to the door. Other times it was the rebels. Many wives begged to be taken along with their husbands. Some asked to be killed in his place so that their children would be provided for.

Sabita Nepali, an attractive young woman from an "untouchable" caste, says she watched as a group of men took away her husband, blindfolded, arms spread and tied to a stick, beaten so badly he could barely walk as they led him

into the jungle. The men threatened that if she talked, they would return and kill the whole family. Traumatized, her body stopped producing milk and her baby son died of starvation. She now lives in one of the dirt shacks at the edge of the village with her mother and one remaining child. "If this is my karma so be it," she says, wiping tears from her eyes. "At least I'd like some financial compensation to help bring up my daughter."

In a poverty-ridden country, these are the poorest of the poor. It's a region where indentured servitude was only recently outlawed. State schools are free, but families still have to pay for books and stationery, which comes to about three dollars a month - too much for many families. In almost every case it's the family breadwinner who has disappeared, and though the wives are willing to labour in the fields there's not enough work to go round. Their primary obsession right now is not human remains or justice, but simply money to feed their children. Until now they have received not a rupee in government compensation.



**IHL**

*International humanitarian law includes several provisions that prohibit forced disappearances. They include the following:*

- *Families have the right to be informed about the fate of missing relatives.*
- *The parties to a conflict must search for persons reported missing and facilitate enquiries made by family members.*
- *Lists must be exchanged showing the exact locations and markings of graves, together with particulars of the people buried in them.*
- *Parties to international armed conflicts must provide information on the wounded, sick, shipwrecked, prisoners of war, other protected persons deprived of their freedom and the dead, as quickly as possible and without adverse distinction.*
- *Captured combatants and civilians under the authority of an adverse party are entitled to respect for their lives, dignity, personal rights and convictions. They must be protected against all acts of violence and reprisals. They have the right to correspond with their families and to receive relief.*

They wait. They feel like nothing is happening.

They put their names on lists, make regular visits to the offices of national and international organizations. Last January, High Commissioner Louise Arbour of the OHCHR visited this very same house, promising to publicize their plight. In May, members of the CVC family association travelled twenty hours by bus to Kathmandu to hold a press conference attended by several human rights defenders but very little press and nobody from the government.

In Kathmandu, the ICRC admits that any progress on missing persons is made up of small steps and back room negotiations. It's "a matter that evolves slowly and lasts for years," says Jean-Paul Corboz.

In Bardiya district, the ICRC has financed a radio mini-series broadcast in the minority Tharu language. Seven-minute dramas portray real-life situations involving disappearances. The programmes show the legal and social implications, and emphasize the importance of registering with the ICRC. Journalist Ekraj Chaudhary (no relation to Krishna) produced the series. He believes this region was so gravely affected during the war because "FM stations devote very little airtime to the Tharu language. During the conflict the Tharu people were uninformed. They didn't know about registering their missing until it was much too late." Krishna Chaudhary agrees the people were unaware. "At the time, we didn't know that there were institutions who could help us."

Meanwhile, in Kathmandu, ICRC staff meet repeatedly with their government contacts, pushing them to ratify or accede to laws and treaties, including the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court and the new UN Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance. They make recommendations on how Nepal can strengthen its domestic legislation. They strive to make authorities and security forces aware of international humanitarian law (IHL). Inspector Manoj Kumar KC of the Nepal Police Human Rights Cell says one problem during the conflict was "to some extent there was ignorance of the law." The ICRC organizes regular training sessions on IHL for officers in the army.

*" Many wives begged to be taken along with their husbands. Some asked to be killed in his place so that their children would be provided for. "*

## The importance of justice

*“Behind the building,  
a nearly empty cemetery  
waits to be filled.”*

### **The ICRC’s objective**

*The objective is to heighten awareness among governments, the military, the general public, international organizations and national organizations (including the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement) about the tragedy of people who disappear during armed conflict or internal violence and the anguish of their families.*

*Uncertainty about the fate of a relative is a harsh reality for countless families around the world. Parents, siblings, spouses and children are desperately seeking lost relatives. Families and communities, not knowing whether their loved ones are alive or dead, are unable to put behind them the violent events that disrupted their lives. Their anxiety continues for years after the fighting ends. They cannot move on to rehabilitation and reconciliation, either as individuals or as communities. Such festering wounds can harm the fabric of society and undermine relations between groups and nations, sometimes decades after the original events.*

In many countries, some of the people in power after the fighting are the same as those who committed – or permitted – atrocities, and they have much to lose. This creates a delicate situation for the ICRC and other organizations.

Last May in Nepal the ICRC hosted three days of round-table meetings on international humanitarian law and the issue of missing persons, attended separately by government officials, civil society and parliamentarians. On the first day, the atmosphere grew heated when the subject of missing persons came up. When ICRC staff claimed that over 900 people were still unaccounted for, a few officials questioned the numbers. They cited cases of fraud, mentioned that a thousand Nepalese leave the country every month to work abroad. How could it be proven that all these people were made to disappear?

“It won’t help your country to deny this problem,” responded Mary Wertz, the ICRC’s head of delegation in Nepal. “It will give the authorities moral standing to provide answers to the families.”

The ICRC is advocating that the Nepalese authorities establish a Commission on Missing Persons with a long-term mandate to clarify the fate of people who have disappeared, and to address the families’ material, legal and psychological needs. To avoid a protracted stalemate, the commission should not get involved in any political action or judicial proceedings. “If the issue is politicized the families will never get an answer,” says Corboz.

Because of its mandate and experience, the ICRC sticks to exclusively humanitarian concerns. Justice is better dealt with by organizations such as the OHCHR, which is also lobbying hard for the establishment of a Missing Persons Commission in Nepal. Working closely with the Supreme Court, the UN organization’s focus, “ending impunity,” is different from that of the ICRC. Sandra Beidas explains: “We do it from a human rights point of view, not only pushing for clarification of whereabouts, but establishment of responsibility and reparation.”

This priority is echoed by the International Commission of Jurists. Susan Appleyard, programme officer for the Asia-Pacific region, spoke at a press conference for families of missing persons in Kathmandu. She insisted that all prosecutions – even of military personnel – should be held in civilian courts. She mentioned the example of Sri Lanka. “In the late 1980s there were 12,000 disappearances, and these were documented by a commission established in Sri Lanka



in the mid 1990s. However, two things did not take place: there were very few prosecutions, and enforced disappearance was not made a crime. Now disappearances are re-emerging in Sri Lanka. I don't want to see a return of this practice in Nepal."

International organizations play an important role in the process, but they all agree that national authorities must ultimately lead the way to reconciliation if a society's wounds are to be healed. As ICRC head of delegation in Sarajevo during the war in ex-Yugoslavia, Béatrice Mégevand-Roggo had first-hand experience of that conflict. "The page is not being turned in Bosnia," she says. "Lots of bodies have been identified, but this doesn't mean there has been a real commitment by those with knowledge to initiate a truth and reconciliation process. That's why we attribute importance to mechanisms involving the authorities. They have to acknowledge this as their own problem as well."

The numbers of people affected can be staggering. In Bosnia, 13,000 people are still missing, but that figure must be multiplied by ten or even twenty to take into account the distant cousins and other family members who find it difficult to forgive and move on.

And yet the needs of the families are rarely given priority, meaning general paralysis can drag on for decades. Change might require a complete administrative upheaval, or a practically motivated desire to burnish a country's image. In Cyprus it took forty years before a bi-communal team of forensic scientists finally started to excavate mass graves. Even in Spain, seventy years after the civil war, the unmarked burial grounds of tens of thousands have only begun to be opened.

In Georgia, the deadlock continues. On a scruffy hilltop overlooking Tbilisi a museum for missing persons stands in a simple three-room building. At the entrance a sign says "Molodini," Georgian for "waiting." Inside, the walls are covered with black and white photos of young men, while miscellaneous belongings – boxing gloves, black ballet slippers, diplomas – are exhibited on a tabletop. Behind the building, a nearly empty cemetery waits to be filled, the grass growing long where tombstones are meant to be. Next to it is a partially-built church with exposed concrete and rusting steel girders. Intended to honour missing persons, its construction stalled ten years ago due to a lack of funds. It's an apt metaphor for the current situation in this country.

*“Half of the group lit candles  
at the place for the dead, and half  
went to the place for the living.”*



The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia flared up in 1992, ending in a ceasefire in 1993. The peace is uneasy, the hostilities not truly resolved. Today there are an estimated 1,800 Georgians missing and 135 Abkhazians, half military and half civilian. Practically all the bodies are believed to be in Abkhazia, where the fighting took place – where exactly the bodies lie is at the heart of the problem now. Each side has a missing persons commission but they are beholden to their governments and barely communicate. Fourteen years after the conflict the ICRC is practically the only international organization here still working on the issue.

“We can’t say it’s at the top of the agenda for the authorities,” says ICRC protection coordinator Samuel Emonet. “The consequence is that there’s no dialogue between the parties, and without dialogue on where the grave sites are, it’s impossible to solve missing persons cases.”

In Georgia, most of the missing are sons, not husbands, and it’s especially painful to face the death of a child. Ketii Apridonidze, a Georgian who works in the Tbilisi office of the ICRC, recalls one time when she accompanied twenty families of missing persons to pray. “In the Orthodox church there are two places where you light candles, depending on whether a person is alive or dead. Half of the group lit candles at the place for the dead, and half went to the place for the living.”

It has come to the point where most of the missing persons are probably dead. Authorities on both sides of the dividing line have declared that there are no secret detention sites. What the families need now is confirmation and closure, even to see a single bone in a coffin.

In the village of Khashuri, a two-hour drive from Tbilisi, a woman named Nino Sulaberidze serves sweet Turkish coffee, then pulls out photos of her son, who joined the Georgian

Special Forces at age nineteen. A stocky youth with slicked back hair, he poses proudly with a couple of buddies, his rifle slung over one shoulder, a cigarette dangling from his hand. After only six months of learning basic military skills, he boarded a train to Abkhazia in November 1992 and was never heard from again. Sulaberidze’s husband travelled around the region for a year searching for the boy, sleeping in his former bed at the barracks, following up on every rumour. “I need to know the truth,” says the grieving mother. “Even if it would be too bitter for me, it would be the end of my suffering.”

Her neighbour, Nina Kortiasvili, also saw her child for the last time the day he left for the battlefield. She recalls that men later came to her house bearing a coffin they claimed held his remains. They asked for money and told her not to open it, as the boy’s face was badly damaged. She did, and it was empty. “I still believe he’s alive,” she says. “Every time I hear the front gate I’m sure it’s him.”

Meanwhile, the ICRC coaxes the authorities from both sides to negotiate with each other, and prepares the groundwork for an eventual breakthrough. It has financed the collection of ante-mortem data such as dental records, clothing and personal items from the families, to be compared to post-mortem data for identification when bodies are exhumed.

Under Shuala Drawdy, the ICRC regional forensic adviser, the organization held workshops to train local forensic specialists in the investigation, recovery and analysis of human remains. “There are experts here,” she says. “Like in most countries in the world, they’re not used to dealing with large numbers of skeletal remains. The training we offer gives them a broader background, putting their expertise into the context of missing persons.”

## **Family associations**

*Family networks or associations are groups of families brought together because they share the common tragedy of a missing relative.*

*They can play an important role at several levels:*

- *providing mutual support and helping to meet socioeconomic and psychological needs;*
- *emphasizing the role of families as activists on the missing persons issue, not just victims;*
- *exerting pressure on policy makers;*
- *raising awareness of the issue and how it affects families;*
- *ensuring that the authorities responsible do not neglect their duties towards missing persons.*

## Forensics: a crucial step in finding answers

*“There was a hole, bones, skulls, pieces of clothing, silence all around, forensic people.”*

It is imperative that human remains be properly handled in order to protect valuable information. Otherwise bodies can be misplaced, crucial evidence scattered. These days there is a forensic component to every missing persons file. And yet the ICRC’s forensics department is relatively young, created in 2003. The organization doesn’t do any hands-on exhumations, but offers guidelines and trains local experts. At times it helps to coordinate methodologies. Currently it is constructing a standardized ante-mortem/post-mortem database for general use.

In Geneva, the organization’s forensic coordinator is Dr Morris Tidball-Binz, an Argentinian who was one of the founders of the pioneering Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) in the 1980s. He explains how an association of grandmothers, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, helped forensics develop into a tool to find missing children during the military dictatorship. “In Argentina, when young adults were abducted or parents killed, their children were often given in adoption to the military or supporters. The grandmothers wondered, ‘How can I identify a child I’ve never seen?’ They travelled the world trying to find scientists – geneticists, forensic anthropologists.” In 1983, the government changed and those scientists were invited to Argentina, where they set up the first procedures for haemogenetics, comparing the genetics of blood samples between children and their putative relatives.

Meanwhile, mass graves holding victims of the military junta were being emptied indiscriminately, often with bulldozers, destroying the evidence they contained. The families demanded independent investigators, so a delegation of the world’s top forensic experts travelled to Argentina and trained a group of young scientists who became the

### **Around the world**

*The ICRC is currently working on the missing persons issue in dozens of countries, in all regions, including the following:*

***Africa:** Angola, Côte d’Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Namibia, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe.*

***Asia and the Pacific:** East Timor, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka.*

***Europe:** Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Russian Federation, Georgia and Serbia (Kosovo).*

***The Americas:** Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti and Peru.*

***Middle East and North Africa:** Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco.*

Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team. The EAAF ensured proper exhumation and identification procedures in their own country, then went on to apply their expertise in more than thirty other countries in Latin America, Asia, Africa and Europe.

In the Balkans, where the most resource-intensive forensic effort in history is taking place, the early emphasis was on criminal investigation. As Tidball-Binz explains, procedural errors occurred because at the time the International Criminal Tribunal was “mostly concerned with how they died, not who they were.” Since then, identifications have become a priority. And the bodies of the deceased are finally receiving the dignity they were denied at the end of their lives. Béatrice Mégevand-Roggo relates: “I visited a recently unearthed site in Srebrenica, and it made a deep impression on me to see skeletons in unnatural positions, like when you throw a body. I had been dealing with missing persons for years and then there I was. There was a hole, bones, skulls, pieces of clothing, silence all around, forensic people. It was very moving.”

The unfortunate reality is that careful exhumation is a slow process. Even in Latin America, with its numerous forensic experts and overall respect for proper guidelines, many families will have to find further reserves of patience. “In Argentina, by the end of the military dictatorships there were roughly ten thousand people missing,” says forensic adviser Shuala Drawdy. “Two thousand have been exhumed and 400 identified and returned. The Argentine team expects to work for another twenty years.”

And that’s the thing about the problem of missing persons – it’s a long-term challenge at every stage. As Mégevand-Roggo points out, “One has to be modest.” The ICRC’s Samuel Emonet has also learned to temper his expectations since arriving in Tbilisi two years ago. “I realized that working on the issue of the missing is nothing like setting up a war wounded surgery unit in one week. It will take years in any case, and in this regard you have to be a bit humble about your own contribution, how much of a difference you can make.”



## Far-reaching commitment

It is urgent and vital that the issue of disappearances be seriously addressed and that the families' right to know the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones be upheld. A difference can be made, as long as a far-reaching commitment exists. Though it might take a generation, it is vital to persevere, for families of missing people everywhere who deserve at least an answer.

"Confirmation is better than an ambiguous loss," says Nino Sulaberidze in Georgia, regarding the mysterious fate of her boy. "I would willingly swap places with a mother who has a grave for her son."



## MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of war and internal violence and to provide them with assistance. It directs and coordinates the international relief activities conducted by the Movement in situations of conflict. It also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

# THE MISSING

the right to know



ICRC