



WHY IT MATTERS

Anyone can understand the grief and desolation felt when a loved one dies. But what about the crushing hurt and uncertainty when somebody just disappears?

Hundreds of thousands of people are currently missing around the world from armed conflicts, violence, natural disasters, or migration.

Whether it is combatants missing in action, children separated from their families when they flee or are forced into armed groups, detainees unable to contact their families, or internally displaced people and migrants who have lost touch with their loved ones, many are at risk and disappear every year. The full scale of the problem is unknown and chronically unacknowledged.

If alive, missing people need to be located and protected. If dead, remains must be searched for, properly handled, identified where possible and returned to their loved ones. But the political will to properly document and tackle these issues, and to support the families in their plight, is often sorely lacking.

No one can doubt the pain felt by relatives. Not knowing if their loved ones are dead or alive, they are left in limbo. Many search in vain for answers for years, unable to resume their lives.

And besides the emotional trauma, there are very practical consequences for those left behind. Can members of the family access social benefits, sell property, or remarry, without legal recognition of status? If the missing person was the breadwinner of the family, how will the family now earn an income?

The ICRC does what it can to help. But it is vital that governments and others step up their efforts to relieve the suffering of so many people and to address one of the most complex, challenging and under-reported humanitarian problems in the world today.

"The most difficult thing to overcome is this constant state of nervousness that does not leave you, that any moment he could be knocking on the door. During the night, I listen intently and each time I hear a small noise, the first thing that comes to my mind is that my son is back."

Father of a missing person in the South Caucasus



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Z. Magomedova/ICRC

HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM? SOME FACTS

Virtually every country in the world is affected by the tragedy of people who have gone missing during past or ongoing armed conflicts and other situations of violence. While it is difficult to provide exact figures, especially in countries with ongoing conflicts, these are some statistics relating to the number of people missing because of armed conflict or violence:



1
In the **SOUTHERN CAUCASUS** region¹ 7,500 people have been reported missing in different armed conflicts

2
In the **WESTERN BALKANS**² (Albania and the former Yugoslavia) more than 14,000 people remain unaccounted for since the 1990s

3
In **COLOMBIA**³ at least 79,000 people are estimated to be missing as a result of the armed conflict and other circumstances

4
In **GUATEMALA** 45,000⁴ people went missing as a result of the internal armed conflict, of which about 40,000 are still unaccounted for

5
The number of missing persons in **IRAQ**⁵ from 2003 to 2013 ranges from 250,000 to up to one million according to different public sources

6
The conflict in **LEBANON**⁶ saw 17,000 people go missing from 1975 to 1990, according to the Lebanese government

7
In **MEXICO**⁷ over 28,000 people were unaccounted for by late 2015, according to the Mexican government

8
During the decade-long non-international armed conflict in **NEPAL** (1996-2006) thousands of people were killed, and 1,337 individuals remain unaccounted for

9
In **PERU**⁸ 15,731 persons are still missing as a result of the conflict from 1980 to 2000

10
In **SOUTH SUDAN** over 10,000⁹ children have been registered as unaccompanied, separated or missing

11
In **SRI LANKA**¹⁰ the ICRC has registered 16,000 people missing as a result of the conflict

¹ Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, *Missing persons and victims of enforced disappearance in Europe*, March 2016, <https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=2929909&SecMode=1&DocId=2376300&Usage=2>

² *Ibid.*

³ ICRC, <https://www.icrc.org/es/document/desaparicion-en-colombia-situacion-humanitaria-y-retos-del-2016>

⁴ Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico, *Guatemala: Memoria del silencio* (Guatemala: Memory of the Silence), 1999, <http://www.centrodehistoria.gov.gt/descargas/guatemala-memoria-silencio/guatemala-memoria-del-silencio.pdf>

⁵ UN Human Rights Council, A/HRC/22/NGO/157

⁶ International Center for Transitional Justice, *The Missing in Lebanon*, January 2016 (based on government data issued in 1992), https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/ICTJ-Report-Lebanon-CommissionMissing-2016_0.pdf

⁷ National Register of the Missing or Disappeared (RNPED), <http://secretariadoejecutivo.gob.mx/rnped/consulta-publica.php>

⁸ Peruvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Documento de trabajo sobre las medidas adoptadas por diferentes sectores en relación a la Resolución AG/RES (XLI-O/11) «Las personas desaparecidas y la asistencia a sus familiares»*, Lima, 2012.

⁹ UNOCHA, *South Sudan Humanitarian Needs Overview 2016*, http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/2016_HNO_South%20Sudan.pdf

¹⁰ ICRC, *Living with Uncertainty: Needs of the Families of Missing Persons in Sri Lanka*, July 2016, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/sri-lanka-families-missing-persons>

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

- States and parties involved in conflicts must **acknowledge** the seriousness of the issue and the suffering it causes. They must take every measure necessary to **prevent** the disappearance of people and, when it occurs, do everything possible to **address** the problem.
- States must **develop legal frameworks** specifically geared towards identifying and accounting for people reported missing and towards responding to the many **needs of their families**.
- States need to adopt **effective and centralized management systems** for all **information** related to missing persons.
- States and relevant institutions must **coordinate** their activities to effectively address the issue and **provide** necessary **responses**.
- Organizations and government bodies should follow specific **procedures and standards** when **searching** for the missing and when **managing** and **identifying** the dead. Families should be included in the process. They must ensure that human remains are treated with **dignity and respect**, in line with international and local laws and customs.

“When dark began to fall, I went to see where my family was. I found 27 people dead, but the bodies of my daughter and my grandchildren weren't there. I felt that my family had been wiped out. [...] I am 82 and I don't want to die without knowing what happened to them.”

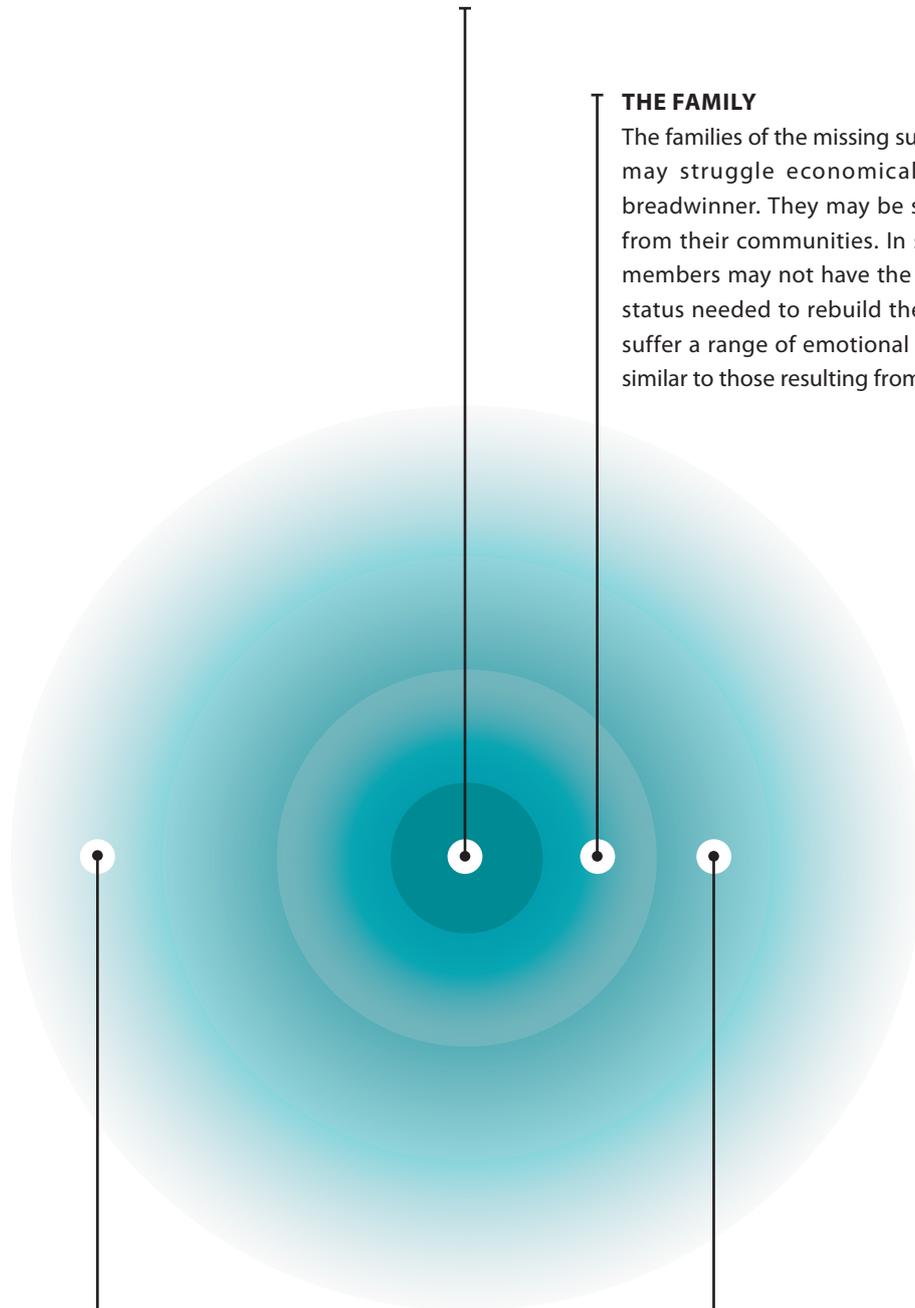
Father and grandfather of missing persons from Ixcán, Quiché department, Guatemala

Click on image for more information



THE WIDER IMPACT

THE MISSING PERSON



THE FAMILY

The families of the missing suffer in many ways. They may struggle economically without the main breadwinner. They may be stigmatized or isolated from their communities. In some countries, family members may not have the legal or administrative status needed to rebuild their lives. They may also suffer a range of emotional and physical problems similar to those resulting from a traumatic event.

THE SOCIETY

Beyond the communities concerned, disappearances can affect broader society. This impact might last for decades and eventually harm peace and reconciliation initiatives in the long term.

THE COMMUNITY

Since a missing person belongs to various communities – ethnic, religious, political – the impact of their disappearance will be felt beyond the family.

WHAT THE ICRC DOES



A. Anzués/ICRC

PREVENTING PEOPLE FROM GOING MISSING

- We remind authorities about their obligations in clarifying the fate and whereabouts of missing people
- We promote the development, and support the adoption and implementation, of laws and regulations concerning missing people and their families
- We work in prisons to help ensure detainees have contact with relatives and are allowed family visits
- We work along migratory routes to explain how to prevent family separation
- We provide training to help ensure the proper and dignified management of the dead

SEARCHING FOR THE MISSING

TRACING EFFORTS

- We persuade the authorities to fulfil their obligations to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing persons, and help people get back in contact with their families
- We help people who have lost touch with their families stay in contact with them, working with 190 Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide
- We reunite people (particularly children) with their families

RESPECTFUL TREATMENT OF HUMAN REMAINS

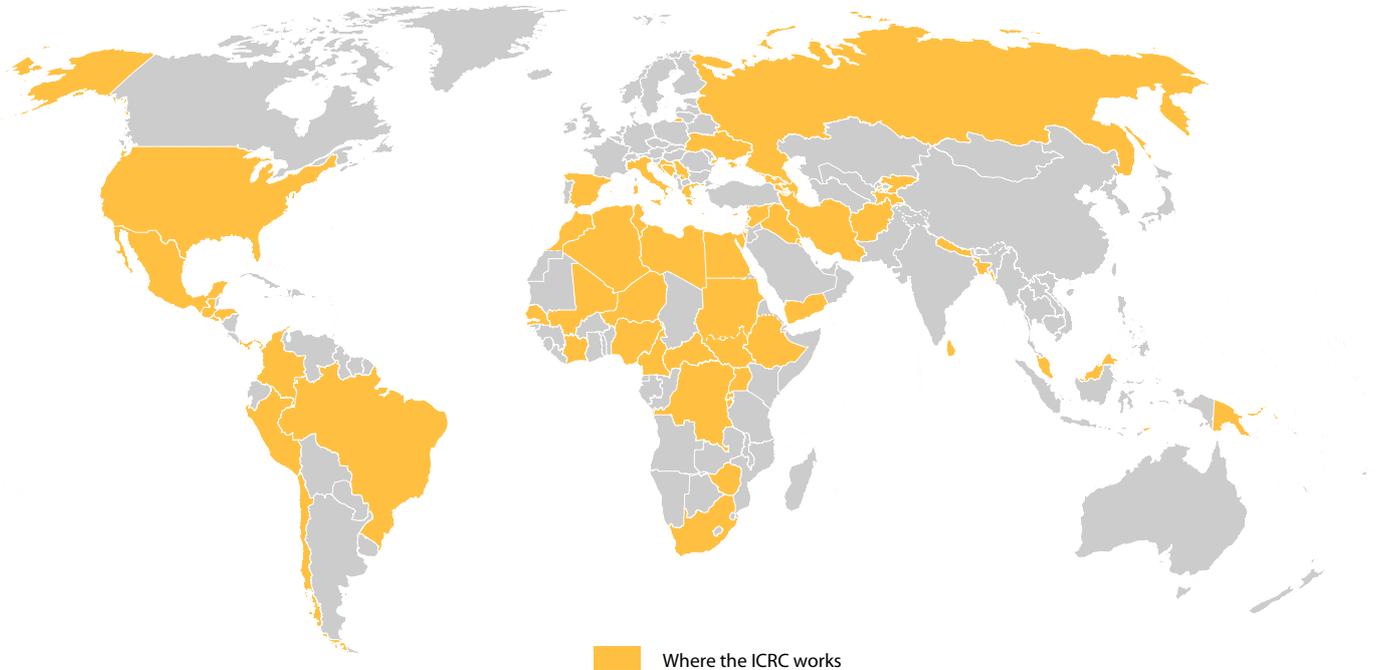
- We help authorities to follow steps to search for, recover, and identify human remains in a way that respects their dignity
- We support national forensic systems to clarify the fate of missing people and better respond to the needs of families

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

RESPONDING TO SPECIFIC NEEDS

- We support and encourage authorities to better respond to the needs of the families of missing people
- We provide direct support to families of missing people, for example by helping them become financially stable or to navigate the legal system, as well as psychological and psychosocial support

WHERE THE ICRC WORKS TO HELP MISSING PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES



- Afghanistan
- Algeria
- Armenia
- Azerbaijan
- Bangladesh
- Bosnia-Herzegovina
- Brazil
- Burundi
- Cameroon
- Central African Republic
- Chile
- Colombia
- Côte d'Ivoire
- Croatia
- Cyprus
- Democratic Republic of the Congo
- Egypt
- El Salvador
- Ethiopia
- Georgia
- Greece
- Guatemala
- Honduras
- Iran
- Iraq
- Israel and the occupied territories
- Italy
- Kosovo*
- Kuwait
- Kyrgyzstan
- Lebanon
- Libya
- Malaysia
- Mali
- Malta
- Mexico
- Morocco
- Nepal
- Niger
- Nigeria
- Panama
- Papua New Guinea
- Peru
- Russia
- Rwanda
- Senegal
- Serbia
- South Africa
- South Sudan
- Spain
- Sri Lanka
- Sudan
- Syria
- Tajikistan
- Timor-Leste
- Tunisia
- Uganda
- Ukraine
- United States of America
- Yemen
- Zimbabwe

* UN Security Council Resolution 1244

HOW THE ICRC MADE A DIFFERENCE IN 2015

1,000

CHILDREN were reunited with their families



3,650

FAMILIES with missing loved ones were provided with psychological and psychosocial support in 21 countries



479,000

FAMILY MEMBERS were able to re-establish contact through free phone calls



25,700

DETAINEES were visited and monitored individually



53

Delivered humanitarian **FORENSIC SERVICES** in 53 countries around the world



19

States were supported in the development of national **LAWS** and measures related to missing persons and their families



[Click on images for more information](#)

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The legal framework that protects missing persons and their families:

- **Missing Persons and their Families - Factsheet**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/missing-persons-and-their-families-factsheet>
- **Guiding Principles / Model Law on the Missing**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/document/guiding-principles-model-law-missing-model-law>

Links to other relevant ICRC material:

- **Missing Persons: A Hidden Tragedy**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/0929-missing-persons-hidden-tragedy>
- **Living with Absence: Helping the Families of the Missing**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4152-living-absence-helping-families-missing>
- **The Need to Know: Restoring Links between Dispersed Family Members**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4037-need-know-restoring-links-between-dispersed-family-members>
- **Forensic Identification of Human Remains**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4154-forensic-identification-human-remains>
- **Accompanying the Families of Missing Persons: A Practical Handbook**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/publication/4110-accompanying-families-missing-persons-practical-handbook>

"I'm looking for my son and will never give up, I'm trying to find him with the help of our family association. Many of us are in the same situation. We have all lost a family member. We are tired but we keep hoping that one day, thanks to our efforts, all of us will find out what happened to our loved ones."

**Mother of a missing migrant
in Senegal**

Click on image for more information



J. Cendon/ICRC



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