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7,000 LIVES STILL MISSING

**FAMILIES OF MISSING PERSONS IN
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

THE MISSING
end the silence



Memories: the only connection to the missing life. Brčko, 2004.

Tens of thousands of people went missing as result of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992–1995). According to ICRC data based on tracing requests submitted by families, **6,126 families** are still waiting for information about the fate of their **6,586 missing** relatives.

This means that

- over **700 mothers and fathers** still long to know what happened to their children
- close to **1,200 sisters and brothers** still hope to find their siblings
- more than **1,000 children** have grown up waiting for information about the fate or return of one or both of their parents
- over **1,000 wives and husbands** have raised their children on their own, not knowing whether they are widows/ widowers or not
- close to **700 cousins, nieces and nephews, grandchildren** and other relatives carry on the family duty to trace those who have not been yet found
- at least **1,250 family members** left Bosnia and Herzegovina, without knowing the fate of their loved ones.

UNCERTAINTY — THE EVERYDAY STRUGGLE OF THE FAMILIES

Is s/he dead or alive? If dead, how did s/he died and where is the body? If alive, what happened and where is s/he now? Did s/he suffer? Will I ever know? Will I ever meet him/her again? Will I ever bury his/her body and say a prayer at his/her grave?

These questions are an everyday reality for those who have missing family members.

As long as there is no credible information about the fate of relatives or their identification and burial, the families cannot find closure. They are left between the harsh prospects and hope, imagination and reality. The uncertainty about their loss may bring prolonged and exhausting suffering which takes its toll on the wellbeing of a person.

Our worst fear is that we may not be able to find our missing relatives. The burden increases with the death of other family members, plus the feeling of guilt. My mother and father died not knowing what happened to my brother...

Focus group, Prijedor, 2016

TRACING — THE EVERYDAY STRENGTH OF THE FAMILIES

The families have made sense of their suffering by fighting for information about the fate of their missing relatives and helping each other. They have organized themselves in family associations, actively participating and contributing to the tracing of their loved ones.

Nearly every month many families in Bosnia and Herzegovina commemorate dates and events that led to the disappearance of their relatives. Preserving memories about those still missing and exhorting the authorities to come up with answers are two main components of the families' mission.

Families of missing persons marking the International Day of the Disappeared, Bijeljina, 2018.





One rose for every missing life in the local community. Prijedor, 2018.

WHAT CHALLENGES DO THE FAMILIES FACE?

The ICRC has been providing psychosocial support for families of missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina for two decades. In 2016, we conducted five focus groups with 65 relatives of missing persons, paying specific attention to the changing situation of the families twenty years after the war. The challenges and needs articulated during the focus groups have been re-confirmed during numerous events with families and authorities, supported and attended by the ICRC in the following two years. Furthermore, these were complemented by information from 54 reports on psychosocial support projects, supported by the ICRC, as well as in reports by psychologists and psychotherapists who conducted seminars for families of missing persons from 2016 to 2018.

They, the public and authorities, are focusing on the two issues – the missing and the exhumed – but it is so much more. Every family story is special. It is about more than bodies. The families are devastated and this influences generations.

Focus group, Prijedor, 2016



A missing life captured in embroidery by a mother's hands. Bijeljina, 2018.

Coping with the long-term ambiguous loss

The hardest to cope with is that they have not yet been found. We know they are dead, but it is important to have at least two bones. Although this is very hard for us, it would at least mean we can bury these and find some peace.

Family member, Bijeljina, 2017

Psychological support is needed. Everyone is on their own with the burden. There is no understanding in the community. In the end all that we can do for them is to grieve...

Focus group, Brčko, 2016.

Mothers feel alone, not physically, but psychologically. They need to feel that they are not alone.

Focus group, Sarajevo, 2016.

I have a missing brother. He has two children. As a man, I had to take over the responsibility for tracing him on behalf of the family. The hardest thing for me is to watch the suffering of my brother's children. Both are withdrawn, the son worse than the daughter. He went to a psychologist through the public mental health system, but the situation is still difficult.

Brother of a missing person,
Brčko, 2016

We are extremely dissatisfied with the slow tracing process. There are so many unidentified exhumed bodies in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Many have been identified, but as long as you do not have the information to bury the body, the struggle continues.

Father of a missing person, 2017

Coping with the identification and the actual seeing of the human remains of loved ones

Those moments when a family is notified of positive DNA for the identification purpose are the hardest moments in the family's life. Much support is needed from all who can help.

Focus group, Sarajevo, 2016

After getting the phone call confirming the DNA identification of my father, it was as hard as if he had been killed on that very day, as if I had just lost him.

Daughter of a missing person, 2016

Generally, identifications are extremely stressful for the families, especially when they are informed about the DNA and invited to confirm the missing person's identity. Someone [a supporter] should be with the family during such moments.

Representative
of a family association, 2016

Coping with the identification based on partial human remains and their burial

There are cases when some bones have to be replaced with the right ones or when, after some time, they find other body parts that have to be buried too. It is extremely difficult for the family. Should we bury them or not? Does it make sense? But, we have to, morally and legally. This disturbs us.

Brother of a missing person, 2017

Partial identifications and burials are very disturbing [e.g. a son's skull was found without the body] as it puts families in an even worse situation of imagining what happened before and after the death of the loved one.

Representative
of a family association, 2017

Even after an identification, the hardest thing to cope with is the torture and suffering of a missing person, as well as with the denial of the crimes committed. It is as if missing persons did not exist and as if their deaths did not happen at all. Facing the truth by everybody and compassion on the part of civil society is essential.

Representative
of a family association, 2017

Commemorations and burials of identified family members

Many people do not understand the importance of keeping the memories alive and returning to the place of origin. The families need this and have to maintain it. Everywhere, where we live now or where we return to, we are outsiders and newcomers.

Representative of a family association,
Kotor Varoš, 2018

When it is all over, an immense burden is taken off our shoulders. A combination of feelings takes place. After identification and burial, you are both happy and sad.

Father who identified his son,
Sarajevo, 2016

After years of working with women and men who have missing family members, I remain impressed and humbled by their strength and their stamina.

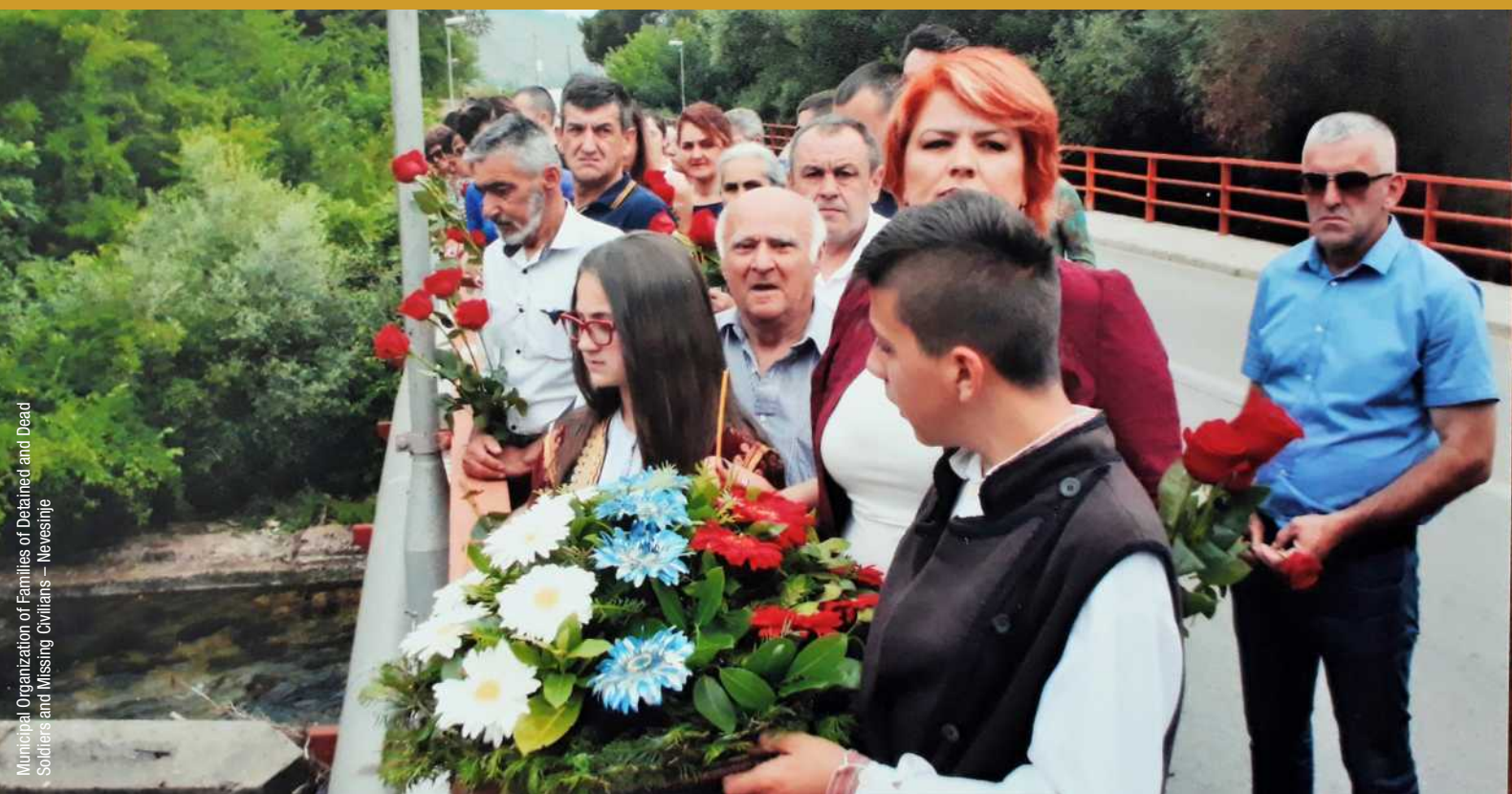
Despite the circumstances and uncertainty of their loss, they have built or rebuilt their homes, continued to live a productive life, work, study, raise children and grandchildren, and care for each other. Yet throughout this, they never stop tracing their loved ones and never stop reminding all actors of their right to know. Many of them, even after they identify their missing relatives, stay close to those who have not and continue to help and support them.

People often perceive the families of the missing as victims only – passive recipients of information about fate of a person or a body – but they rise far beyond that role. They are true survivors, active members of society and active agents of the tracing process.

We can learn so much from them. In return, the least they deserve is our understanding and support.

Dijanela Rajkić, ICRC

Families of missing persons commemorating the day of their disappearance. Nevesinje, 2017.



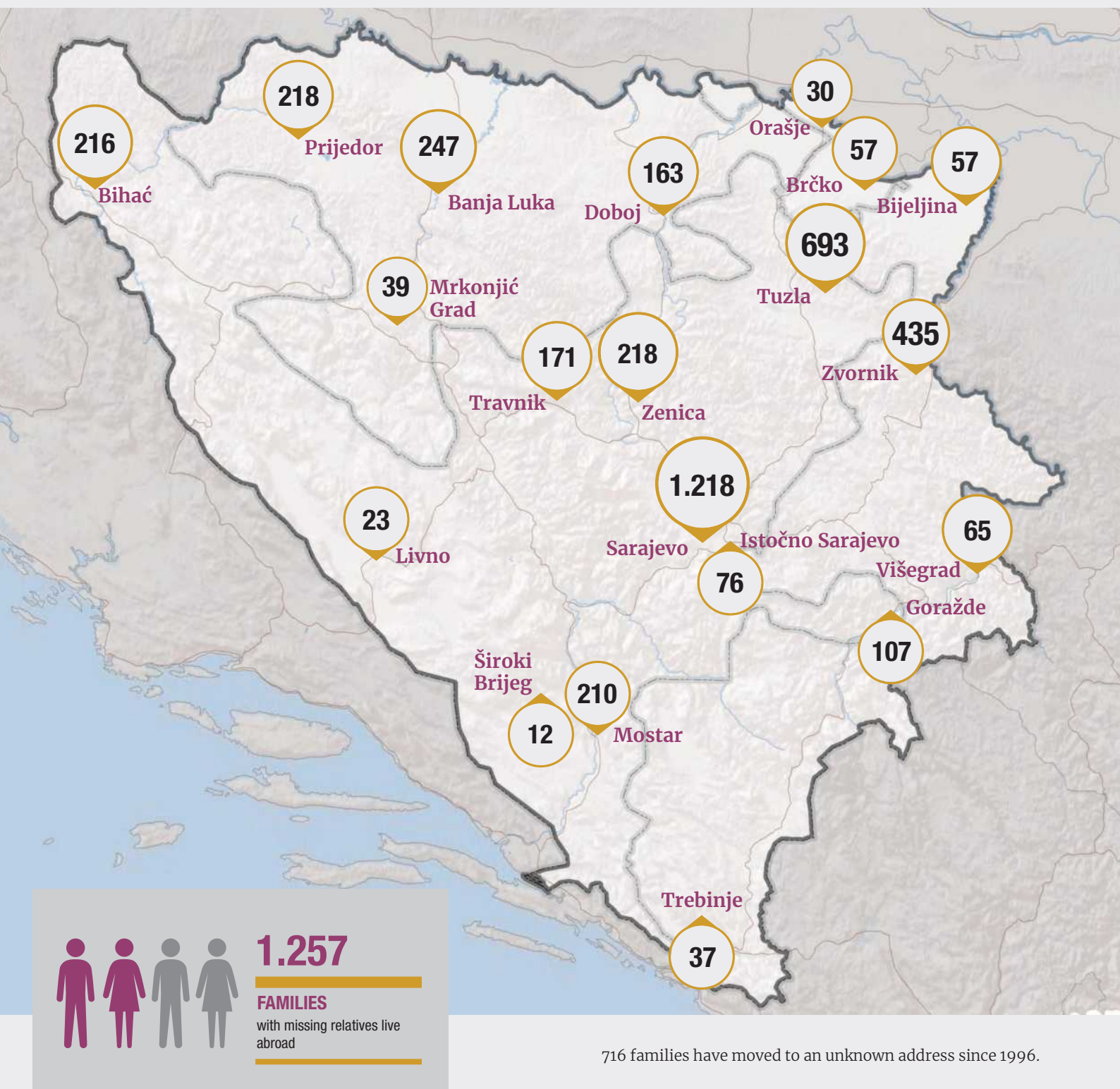
WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

The families do not live separately from us. They live among and with us. They are our neighbours, colleagues, fellow students, friends etc. Their struggle and engagement contributes to the reconciliation process of the entire society in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Tracing, socializing, care for other members, a human approach and support during identifications, particularly to the parents of the missing who live alone. These are our priority needs.

Focus group, Travnik, 2016

Based on ICRC records, **THE MAP DISPLAYS NUMBERS OF FAMILIES** of missing persons according to their cantons/regions of residence (this does not necessarily mean that their relatives disappeared there):



716 families have moved to an unknown address since 1996.



The ICRC campaign “Where are they?”. Sarajevo, 2018.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

The families need community and each one of us to be aware of their fight and the specificity of their loss. For them, as long as they do not have reliable answers or a body to bury, their missing family members are not dead despite the harsh realities. **Showing solidarity during commemorations makes the families feel accepted and understood.**

“The awareness and compassion of citizens, for example in Tuzla, is changing for the better. At the beginning, for every 11th day in the month [when we commemorate] passers-by showed no understanding and spoke negatively. Now they join us.”

Representative of a family association, Tuzla, 2017

Compassion, empathy, explanations, information, talking about the family member as a person and not just as a body, comfort in their grief during the identification procedure – all this makes a great difference in the lives of the families.

“Some of us have had an opportunity to participate in educational seminars about surviving a trauma, but still the situation from moment to moment varies, sometimes good and sometimes bad. Prosecutors, doctors and pathologists are the most important persons in the approach to the families.”

Representative of a family association, Tuzla, 2016

According to the families, psychological and social support in everyday life and at specific moments, provided by different governmental and non-governmental organizations and, above all, by family associations which enable family members to support each other, are all highly beneficial.

“Many families have children who are students, who are on minimal incomes or who are unemployed. This represents a harsh life, although the socio-economic situation of others in Bosnia and Herzegovina is equally challenging. Family associations have helped the children of missing persons get scholarships, which has been highly appreciated.”

A woman whose husband is missing
and who has raised two children, Sarajevo, 2016

“Sometimes we talk [to someone who is not aware], but often we don’t. The support we get from the family associations, even if it is only conversation, is very important for us.”

Members of families
from Istočno Sarajevo and Bijeljina, 2017

WHAT IS THE TRACING PROCESS? HOW DOES IT WORK?

The search for missing persons is a complex and demanding process, best known to most people for its two primary, but not only, tasks: exhumations and identifications.

The tracing process entails the intensive co-operation of various institutions and support organizations. It requires reliable information about the fate of missing persons, and on the locations of potential mass or individual graves, provided either by eyewitnesses or by the relevant authorities.

The Missing Persons Institute (MPI) and its 18 investigators work throughout the country on the collection and processing of information from different sources and on potential locations of body disposals, and to ensure sufficient, verified and relevant data are provided within the request for an exhumation. They rely on the analysis of information about missing persons, and circumstances of their disappearance provided in tracing requests submitted by the families, and information given by willing eyewitnesses or found in various archives.

Memories: proof of life after exhumations. Srebrenica





This information is compared and verified through their field work and included in the request for exhumation that the MPI submits to the BiH Prosecutor's Office.

The BiH Prosecutor's Office, in cooperation with other institutions such as State Intelligence and Protection Agency (SIPA), then undertakes steps to petition the Court of BiH for an exhumation order.

THE MISSING PERSONS INSTITUTE (MPI)

The MPI is a state-level institution tasked with resolving all cases of missing persons from the past conflict, regardless of ethnicity, religious affiliation, gender or any other characteristics or status. It is composed of five regional offices (Bihać, Banja Luka, Istočno Sarajevo, Mostar and Tuzla) and ten field offices throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition, the MPI was tasked with establishing and managing the Central Records on Missing Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEN), created by compiling individual records on missing persons from various national and international sources and which include relevant data on reported missing persons and their disappearances. The CEN verification process, which is currently in the final phase, aims to have an accurate register of the number of missing persons and all relevant information on their disappearances, exhumations and identifications.

In order to support the MPI in this endeavour, the ICRC has been cooperating with the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals. The ICRC specialists research the former Hague Tribunal's archives for information that could shed light on the fate of a missing persons. If and when found, the information is analysed and shared with the MPI.

The ICRC has also approached the NATO-members countries whose contingents were deployed in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the conflict, asking for access to information relevant for the tracing of missing persons.



Organization of Families of Shuhids, Dead Soldiers and Missing Persons, Vrhbanja, Kotor Varoš

Annual commemoration organized by families of missing persons. Korićanske stijene, 2018.

EXHUMATIONS AND IDENTIFICATIONS

Exhumations are undertaken in coordinated action by numerous institutions, crime investigation and forensic experts, and are led by the competent BiH Prosecutor's Office. Upon recovery, human remains are kept in one of the twelve mortuaries or ossuaries for examination. Nevertheless, not every exhumation leads to uncovering human remains.

The court-appointed forensic experts examine human remains to determine the basic biological profile of the remains (including an estimation of age, height, sex, and the recording of identifying characteristics, dental status and signs of trauma), determining the cause of death, and recording any personal belongings recovered with the remains during the autopsy.

Bone or tooth samples for DNA analysis are collected and submitted to the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) for processing. The DNA profile obtained is compared to DNA profiles from reference blood samples provided by family members.

The majority of final identifications are based on a positive DNA match between DNA profiles from bone or tooth samples and the DNA profiles of blood reference samples of family members, confirmed in the form of a DNA matching report issued by the ICMP.

According to MPI data of November 2018, the human remains of 25,500 persons have been exhumed so far, of which 23,247 have been identified (15,216 based on DNA analysis-supported by ICMP and 8,031 by traditional methods of body and personal belongings recognition). These have been handed over to their families to be buried with dignity, while at least 7,227 persons are still unaccounted for.

POTENTIAL MISIDENTIFICATIONS

Any human remains exhumed through this tracing process are kept in mortuaries and ossuaries until their official identification. After reviewing unidentified (NN) human remains stored there, the ICMP reported in 2018 that 1,614 cases have DNA profiles that do not match any blood reference samples collected from families.

It is presumed that the majority of NN human remains are related to potential misidentification of human remains from the early days after the conflict and before the use of DNA-based identifications. Families of missing persons identified without DNA would not have given their biological reference samples for potential DNA identifications as they believed that their relative was found and identified. In order to address the issue of remaining NN human remains, these families have been approached by MPI and the ICMP to provide their reference samples for potential DNA identifications of the NN human remains held in mortuaries and ossuaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



Focus group with members of the family association “Women of Srebrenica”. Tuzla, 2017.

FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS (FAs)

Family associations have mostly formed on the basis of a war related specific event which led to the disappearance of their loved ones (e.g. Women of Srebrenica) or to the place of residence of families (e.g. The Association of Families of Missing Soldiers and Civilians of Banja Luka Region). Although the FAs typically represent families of one national background, they have developed close and intensive cooperation, unifying their requests for answers about the fate of their loved ones.

The primary objectives of all FAs are, in their own words, “truth and justice” which are, for them, inseparably connected to the tracing of missing persons and support to the families. They regard their personal responsibilities as survivors to provide assistance to the authorities in bringing answers to the families and bringing those who committed war crimes to justice.

Different aspects of their work include: solving the status-related issues of the families, building up and maintaining memorial centres, accompanying the families during identifications, organizing collective burials of the identified, taking care of the missing persons’ children attending schools (enrolments, scholarships, taxes etc.), raising awareness of their issues in local communities, advocating for the families’ rights with local authorities, filing criminal charges, collecting data from eye-witnesses, and finding and helping those who testify at courts.

Based on the ICRC’s contacts, communication and cooperation since 1996, more than 30 FAs in Bosnia and Herzegovina are still very active and distinguished in their dedication, willingness and proactive approach in supporting the families, representing their interests and advocating for their rights.

Besides individual associations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are two platforms created by FAs, one within the MPI and one at the regional level gathering FAs from former Yugoslavia, important for the representation of the interest of the families in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

THE MPI ADVISORY BOARD

The Advisory Board is a part of the MPI's organizational structure. It consists of six members representing Bosniak, Serb and Croat families, proposed by FAs from all over Bosnia and Herzegovina and elected by the MPI Steering Board for a four-year mandate.

Its responsibilities are to follow up the MPI's work, advise the MPI management on families' concerns, promote the tracing and identification processes with the authorities, and propose projects and initiatives relevant for the MPI's work.

As a part of its initiatives in 2018, the Advisory Board organized six round tables, at the local level, in Mostar, Bugojno, Tuzla, Derventa, Brčko and Sarajevo, gathering the families, authorities and international organizations involved. In this way, it facilitated the cooperation of relevant actors and increased the families' understanding of the current processes, and also enabled an exchange of information about the stage of the tracing of individual family members.

THE REGIONAL COORDINATION OF FAMILY ASSOCIATIONS (RCFA)

The Regional Coordination of Family Associations (RCFA) was registered as an impartial, non-governmental, not-for-profit, human rights organization with the Ministry of Justice of BiH in 2011. It brings together 18 family associations and/or their unions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo, regardless of ethnicity.

Through the organization of conferences and meetings in the region, especially on the International Day of the Disappeared and International Day of Human Rights, the RCFA raises public awareness about the issue of missing persons and advocates for the rights of victims and their families. It closely follows the work of the authorities and tracing process in each of the concerned countries in the region. Through its engagement, the RCFA requests and contributes to better cooperation of all state actors and ensures up to date information for the families.

Commemoration organized by families of missing persons. Ilijaš, 2018.





Red Cross collects additional data on missing persons from the Foča area, 2004.

THE ICRC SUPPORT

The ICRC has been engaged in the tracing process and support to the families from the beginning of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within our mandate, set forth in the Dayton Peace Accord, we deal with the issue of missing persons and support their families in exercising their right to know what has happened to their loved ones. Among other actions, the ICRC has chaired the Working Group on the Missing Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and together with the local Red Cross collected and submitted to the relevant authorities tracing requests and ante-mortem data, and published photo books of personal belongings found with exhumed human remains. We continue to support the MPI and family associations, along with the Red Cross Society of BiH.

STRENGTHENING DOMESTIC INSTITUTIONS

The ICRC strives to strengthen domestic institutions and organizations in resolving the issue of missing persons. To accelerate the tracing process, the ICRC has transferred its data on missing persons and enquirers to the MPI. In the process, the Red Cross has contacted 6,000 families of missing persons and informed them about the transfer of data, while information about missing persons and their enquirers have been updated.

Since 2016, the ICRC has handed over 25,000 pages of documentation obtained from the archives of The Hague Tribunal to the authorities for potential action. The collected documents have contributed to locating the human remains of hundreds of people so far. In addition, the ICRC is increasing its efforts to build up local forensic capacities as a part of its five-year strategy to accelerate the stalled tracing process.

RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF THE FAMILIES

The needs of the families require a wide range of different measures: financial support, legal and administrative support, psychological and psychosocial support, while a holistic approach includes actions at all levels of society (family, community, municipal, entity and the state-level authorities).

In the past two years, the ICRC has re-assessed the psychosocial support activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, comparing them to the needs articulated by FAs and families. The primary goal of the subsequent enhanced support, along with communication and follow-up activities, is an adequate strengthening of social and community support to the families over a mid-term period of 2018–2022.

By closely working with FAs, other organizations and the broader community, our goal is to strengthen the ability of individuals and families to cope with difficulties related to ambiguous loss.

CONSOLIDATING A PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORK

Raising awareness and enabling the consolidation of knowledge about the psychosocial aspects of ambiguous loss and tracing efforts has been intensified through cooperation with academic communities, NGOs, local Red Cross branches and FAs. This is expected to increase social solidarity and the quality of services to the families. So far, the ICRC has organized three workshops with academics from relevant faculties, enabling the exchange of experiences and knowledge about work on the missing persons issue and support to the families.

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT PROJECTS

From 2016 to 2018, alone, the ICRC provided financial and expert support for 54 projects of psychosocial support to families of missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, conducted by family associations and the local Red Cross. According to their reports, over 10,200 relatives of missing persons directly or indirectly have benefited from these projects.

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT SEMINARS

From 2016 to 2018, the ICRC organized five educational seminars for over 70 representatives of family associations and the MPI field staff. The seminars were conducted by experienced psychologists and psychotherapists with an aim of strengthening their skills for everyday communication with families of the missing persons, and self-protection.

SCHOLARSHIPS FOR MA AND PHD STUDENTS

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the ICRC sponsors MA/MSc and PhD candidates at state faculties of humanities, law and medicine who deal with addressing the consequences of disappearance, the psychosocial problems and needs of families, as well as individual or social responses to them. Three such research projects were approved in 2018.



The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) helps people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything it can to protect their dignity and relieve their suffering, often with its Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. We also seek to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

People know they can count on us to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. Our experience and expertise enable us to respond quickly, effectively and without taking sides.