

## **Finding the Truth About the Missing**

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Bosnian refugees scattered all over Europe help with efforts identify the nameless dead.

Hasan Saracevic's last view of his house, before it was engulfed in flames, was of his neighbour throwing a grenade through one of the windows.

His bedridden sister, who was too sick to travel when the bulk of the family fled the Serb forces that had seized their hometown of Vlasenica in 1992, lay helpless inside as the flames took hold and spread hungrily. Her son, Hasan's nephew, ran to the house in a desperate attempt to save her - and stepped on a recently laid landmine. He was killed instantly.

In a matter of minutes, Saracevic had lost two dear relatives, his home and the peaceful life he had known.

More than a decade later, on a balmy autumn day in Rotterdam, Saracevic - now aged 70 - sits in the sun-filled attic of a traditional Dutch house as a woman dressed in a white lab coat takes a sample of his blood.

The coats and the sterile medical equipment contrast sharply with the wood-panelled walls and the deep orange carpet that covers the floor of this improvised blood collection station, where many other Bosnian refugees wait patiently in line to donate samples.

Saracevic, who has been living in Holland for the last 11 years, hopes that his blood sample will help the Sarajevo-based International Commission on Missing Persons, ICMP, identify his sister's remains from among the many others found in mass graves around Bosnia.

The DNA "fingerprints" extracted from the donors' blood samples will be compared with those extracted from some of the thousands of bones exhumed from mass graves - putting a name to anonymous remains and giving the relatives a chance to bury their loved ones.

In the first two weeks of October, ICMP's mobile blood collection unit visited cities in six European Union countries - Austria, Denmark, Germany, Slovenia, Switzerland and the Netherlands - conducting forensic exploration on a massive scale.

Until recently, DNA analysis has been used mainly in criminal investigations and usually as a means of last resort. In Bosnia, traditional forensic methods such as fingerprinting, visual identification, circumstantial evidence and analysis were used to identify many of the estimated 44,000 people that were still missing after the war.

But such methods alone are not enough to identify the victims recovered from the mass graves that keep on resurfacing almost every week. As recently as October 5, a new site was located in Rogatica in eastern Bosnia, where some 270 people went missing during the war.

The bodies in these graves have sometimes been dug up and reburied time and again to conceal the crimes, and others have been covered with lime in an attempt to destroy them.

These violent efforts usually result in bodies being broken down into a series of body parts which are almost impossible to identify without sophisticated DNA analysis.

An estimated 25,000 people are still missing in Bosnia. Since the year 2000, ICMP has collected more than 61,000 blood samples and approximately 17,000 bone samples. That combination has led to just under 6,000 positive matches.

The organisation has met with resistance from some sections of Balkan society, most notable from Bosnian Serb officials who have accused the organisation of being biased towards the Muslim population.

Katherine Bomberger, ICMP chief of staff, told IWPR that when the organisation first started its work in 1996, radio broadcasts in the Serb-controlled area of Bosnia asked the population not to give blood samples, claiming that these would be tested for “genocidal tendencies”.

At that time, international security forces were needed to guard newly-uncovered mass grave sites in Serb-controlled areas, to prevent evidence from mysteriously disappearing overnight, and to stop fights breaking out among onlookers.

“Although it is not as profound as it used to be, an element of that is still there,” Bomberger added.

The ICMP was again accused of “unfairness” in a September 2004 article in Bosnian Serb newspaper Glas Srpski, which claimed that the organisation had made nearly ten times as many blood and bone sample matches in the Federation as in Republika Srpska.

The ICMP notes that this discrepancy is because the number of bone samples received from the Federation is simply higher, as the proportion of missing persons of Bosnian Muslim ethnicity, which stands at 85 per cent, far outweighs the 12 per cent of disappeared Serbs and the three per cent of Croats still unaccounted for.

In addition to finding and identifying the remains of these missing people, the ICMP is also striving to bring governments to account for the crimes committed during the wars that tore the former Yugoslavia apart.

“But still, on a societal level, there is a lot of denial,” Bomberger added.

Hasan Saracevic and his fellow refugees feel that such denial can only be countered by determining what happened, and accepting the horrors of the past. “I came here today because I want to know the truth,” he said simply.

Asta Zinbo, director of ICMP’s civil society initiatives programme, told IWPR that such a process was vital for post-conflict reconciliation in the region.

“Thousands of unanswered questions create lasting wounds in a society. If they remain un-addressed, there is a greater likelihood for conflict to reoccur,” she said.

ICMP blood collection organiser Samir Delic, hearing the stories of refugees who lined up to donate blood in the Dutch town of Utrecht, agrees. “Until people find their loved ones, they don’t have peace inside,” he

said.

“And without that, you can’t live in peace with your neighbour.”

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**Location:** Balkans  
Bosnia and  
Herzegovina

**Focus:** International Criminal Tribunal for the former  
Yugoslavia

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/finding-truth-about-missing>