

Kosovars Demand Progress on Missing

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Belgrade denies stalling identification and return of ethnic Albanian corpses for political reasons.

Grieving Kosovar Albanian families have been angered by Belgrade's admission that it may take another 18 months to identify and return around 500 corpses discovered in a mass grave three years ago.

Members of the missing persons' families met Soren Jessen Petersen, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General, in the Kosovar capital Pristina on September 8 to urge him to place diplomatic pressure on Serbia to speed up the process.

While the Serb authorities maintain that everything possible is being done to formally identify and return hundreds of Kosovo Albanian corpses uncovered in 2001, many in the international protectorate believe that it is taking too long and have accused Belgrade of politically-motivated obstruction.

Flora Brovina, chairperson of the Kosovo assembly's Committee for Missing Persons, told IWPR, "We cannot put international pressure on Serbia as Kosovo is a United Nations protectorate, so it is the UN's responsibility to plead our case and ask for a faster return of the bodies.

"We do not want any dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina to take place without the complete return of the exhumed Albanian corpses," she added, a reference to the ongoing process of negotiation to determine the protectorate's final status.

An estimated 10,000 people - most of them ethnic Albanians - were killed during former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic's 1999 crackdown on Kosovo's rebellion.

According to the UNMIK Office for Missing Persons and Forensics, around 3,400 people remain missing following the conflict. Nearly 800 Serbs and other minorities are numbered among the disappeared.

Accounting for them remains one of the most sensitive tasks facing the former foes.

In 2001, 836 bodies were discovered buried in a mass grave in the grounds of a police training centre in Batajnica, near Belgrade, as well as sites in Petrovo Selo in eastern Serbia and Lake Perucac, close to the western border with Bosnia. It is believed that they were mostly civilians, killed by Serb forces during the 78-day NATO bombardment that ended the war.

The exhumation of the remains was completed in 2002, and while the Belgrade authorities have already identified and returned around a third of the corpses to their families in Kosovo, efforts to identify the remaining victims are still ongoing.

Serbian officials see this as proof that the task is being carried out efficiently, but Kosovars view things differently, describing the process as "unacceptably slow".

Kosovar analysts point to the example of the Bytyci brothers - Agron, Ylli and Mehmet. Americans of

Kosovo Albanian origin, they went missing after being transferred from a Serbian prison into the custody of unidentified police officers in 1999.

Two years later, US officials and the Federal Bureau of Investigation pressured the Serbian authorities into fast-tracking the identification of the American citizens' remains. The process was completed in three months, compared to the two years' wait that the majority of Kosovar families have already had to endure.

However, Serbia and Montenegro's committee for missing persons has dismissed allegations that the identification process is taking unnecessarily long. Its chairman Gvozden Gagic told IWPR that the majority of the corpses found on Serbian territory will be identified and returned to their families within 18 months.

Around a hundred bodies were close to being identified and should be sent back to Kosovo by the end of the year, he added. But he warned that a further hundred might remain unidentified, as in many instances, no living family members have been available to give the teams a DNA sample for comparison.

International analysts believe that the process of identification is complicated by various factors, some technical and other political.

The view is shared by the International Commission for Missing Persons in former Yugoslavia, ICMP, which has been involved in the exhumation and identification of victims of the Kosovo conflict.

Ana Kron, ICMP coordinator for international and governmental relations, said that the organisation had gathered DNA samples from each corpse, and had stored this genetic material in the Bosnian town of Tuzla.

Blood samples were also taken from relatives of those who went missing during and after the Kosovo conflict. These were then compared with the DNA extracted from the exhumed corpses in an attempt to establish kinship. However, Kron emphasised that many samples are yet to be taken, mostly from relatives who had fled the area.

Belgrade has received around 600 DNA analyses, including some where no match has been established between the victims and their families. The ICMP insists that DNA analysis is just one step towards the final identification of a missing person. Post-mortem data is vital, as is personal information gleaned from relatives.

A lack of personnel and facilities is also a factor. The majority of pathologists working on the identification process are professors from the Belgrade university school of medicine, and are unavailable to work full time at certain parts of the year, for example during examination periods.

The ICMP told IWPR that it was satisfied with Serb efforts to process and return the remains of the victims, but admitted that the current political climate could be responsible for slowing things down.

"The process has slowed down a bit since the new government was formed in Belgrade," Kron admitted. "A change in the political climate does influence the dynamics of the process, but there are no delays now and we see no obstruction on the part of the government in Belgrade."

Such statements have done little to mollify the Kosovo Albanians, who still claim that Serbia is dragging its heels for political reasons.

Arsim Gërxhaliu of the UNMIK Office for Missing Persons and Forensics, who has often travelled to Belgrade to work on the remains of the missing, told IWPR that only 333 bodies have been returned to the protectorate to date.

"I know that DNA analyses of a further 300 bodies now lying in Serbia's morgues have been completed so the reason why they have not yet been returned to Kosovo cannot be technical - it must be political," he claimed.

ICPM's Kron insists, however, that there "are no identified bodies which have not been returned to Kosovo, except in those rare cases when the identification of several members of the same family has to be completed so that all the bodies could be returned to Kosovo together.

"I would like to reiterate that the completion of DNA analysis does not necessarily lead to the conclusive identification of a missing person. It is only one stage in the process."

Such remarks are not much of a comfort for the families of the Kosovo missing, now demanding that the fate of their loved ones be revealed as soon as possible.

Nysrete Kumnova of the Mothers Calling non-governmental organisation was one of 25 Albanian protesters arrested in Pristina on August 30 - the International Day of the Disappeared - during a demonstration calling on the local authorities to resolve the issue of the disappeared.

"Serbia has made the return of Albanian bodies conditional on the return of the Kosovo Serbs [living in Serbia proper]," Kumnova insisted.

"Only when some high-profile international official such as [UN Secretary General] Kofi Annan visits Kosovo do they [the Serbian authorities] behave like democrats and return twenty or thirty of our sons' bodies."

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