

New Hope for Relatives of Disappeared

Author: [Nermina Durmic-Kahrovic](#)

DNA analysis techniques could help to identify many victims of the Srebrenica massacres.

Sixty-year-old Almasa Alihodzic is still looking for her three sons who disappeared after Serb troops seized Srebrenica in July 1995.

They were among some 8,000 people declared missing following the capture of the UN-protected town in northeastern Bosnia. Most are believed to have been murdered.

To date, just 2,000 massacre victims have been found, however, there's been little progress in identifying their remains. Now a new project, a collaboration between international and local organisations, may provide a breakthrough.

Scientists are to use DNA analysis techniques to try to put names to the thousands of victims. The new approach has brought hope to the relatives of the disappeared.

"Deep inside, I feel they're probably among the exhumed bodies. If so, I want to be informed, so that I can give them a proper burial," said Almasa, her eyes betraying nothing of the years of pain she has been through.

Since 1996, 2,000 bodies have been exhumed from numerous mass and individual graves in the nearby villages of Kravica, Pilica, Lazeta and Nova Kasaba, while human remains have been found in the vicinity of the villages of Vrtaca, Suljici, Jelah and Pobudje.

The authorities have placed both the corpses and the human remains in tunnels at a commemoration centre in Tuzla. The arrangement has outraged relatives of the disappeared.

It was said that identifying the remains of the Srebrenica victims would be beyond the capabilities of both local and international experts. It was estimated that the cost of putting names to fragments of bone would run to hundreds of millions of dollars and take over 50 years to complete.

Even when investigators found personal documents close to the bodies, such as in the exhumation of a mass grave in near the village of Kravica in 1996, none could be identified.

Scientists had hoped that's the discovery of bodies with distinctive characteristics would assist the identification process. But this was not always the case.

In one case, for instance, investigators found the body of one man with a false leg and teeth. They imagined that the identification would be straightforward, but the discovery of two more bodies with exactly the same features complicated the task.

The case was only solved when a relative managed to accurately describe the victim's false teeth.

Problems were made worse when 'secondary graves' were discovered in 1998. With the aid of bulldozers, the executioners had tried to cover up their crimes by relocating the bodies. The heavy machinery broke up the corpses, making it even harder to connect body parts together.

Almasa Alihodzic and thousands of mothers like her have organized into various associations to campaign for names to be given to bodies and for them to receive a proper burial. They want the bodies, which lie in bags, to be removed from the commemoration centre tunnels which, they say, are an insult to human dignity.

The joint project between The International Commission on Missing Persons, ICMP, and the Bosnian authorities has recently raised hopes of a breakthrough in the identification process.

The ICMP, headed by the former US senator Robert Dole, is supporting attempts by international and local scientist to use DNA analysis - comparing the DNA of corpses and human remains with blood samples of relatives of missing people - to put names to the Srebrenica victims

Every member of the families of missing persons - around 100,000 people - will soon be giving blood samples, to be analyzed abroad. The less-equipped Bosnian laboratories will concentrate on the exhumed remains. The joint project is expected to take between 5 and 7 years. In the meantime, the bodies can be buried.

Dr Rifat Kesetovic, who heads the team working on Srebrenica victims, says when he started the job he was overwhelmed by the challenge, but is now optimistic. "I believe for the first time that we can bring this process to an end."

Nermina Durmic-Kahrovic is assistant professor of journalism at the University of Tuzla.

Location: Bosnia and
Herzegovina

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/new-hope-relatives-disappeared>