

Serbia: Families of Missing Losing Hope

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Efforts to establish the fate of missing members of Kosovo's minority communities may have come too late.

Improved relations between Belgrade and the international community has finally enabled the latter to take steps to shed light on the fate of Serbs, Roma and Bosniaks who disappeared during and after the Kosovo war.

However, the families of the missing say that so much time has been wasted that their hopes of finding them alive are fading fast.

The Hague tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla Del Ponte, announced on April 19 that her office was investigating cases involving three former members of the disbanded Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, a move interpreted by the relatives of the missing as a belated start to their search for justice.

Serbs, Roma and Bosniaks began to disappear in the province as soon as the first clashes between the KLA and Serbian forces took place in spring 1998. But the number of civilian kidnappings dramatically increased following NATO air strikes and the withdrawal of Serbian troops from Kosovo, when the international community assumed control.

The exact number of missing and murdered members of Kosovo's ethnic minorities is disputed.

According to International Red Cross figures, 1,035 disappeared: 646 Serbs, 67 Montenegrins, 219 Roma and 103 Bosniaks; the rest include Goranci, a small ethnic group from the Sar Mountains in Kosovo. It says 2915 cases of missing Albanians have not yet been solved.

Yugoslav officials claim 1,154 persons went missing or were kidnapped from June 1999 to November 2001, of whom 709 were Serb or Montenegrin civilians, 67 were Albanians and 71 member of other ethnic groups.

But the Belgrade-based Association of Families of Kidnapped and Missing Persons in Kosovo and Metohija puts the figure at 1,518. Its secretary, Olivera Budimir, says they have more missing Serbs on their lists because they accept reports submitted by distant relatives and neighbours. "In some villages, whole families were abducted, some had no descendants so that no one could report their disappearance," she said.

For 16 months after the arrival of international troops in Kosovo, Slobodan Milosevic refused to cooperate with the international community, which meant that precious time was lost.

The families of missing persons, many of whom had to flee their homes, have endured great hardship since. They feel exhausted by the fruitless search for their relatives. Many fell prey to opportunistic self-styled "investigators", handing over money for useless information.

Things only changed when the Coordination Centre for Kosovo and Metohija was established under Serbia's deputy prime minister, Nebojsa Covic. His pro-active approach led to the creation of the Missing

and Kidnapped Persons Bureau under Gvozden Gagic.

An agreement between the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, UNMIK, and Yugoslavia signed on November 5, 2001 stipulated that both parties should cooperate to determine the fate of around 4,000 missing persons from all ethnic communities.

UNMIK agreed to exhume the remaining mass graves and to disinter known remains in an effort to identify 1,250 unidentified corpses in Kosovo and return them to their families for burial. International, Albanian and Serbian pathologists and forensic experts joined forces to complete the task.

Cooperation with The Hague tribunal was also intensified. In March, following his fourth visit to Del Ponte, Gagic said, "The [Serbian] public could expect a more balanced approach from The Hague investigators."

On the eve of Del Ponte's visit to Belgrade and Pristina in April, the families of missing and abducted persons were asked to identify 350 personal items, mostly clothing samples, found on corpses exhumed from several mass graves in the province.

It was the first time that the relatives, now displaced across Serbia and Montenegro, had been asked to make such identification outside Kosovo. Between April 13 and April 16 at Kursumlija in southern Serbia, 614 relatives of missing persons took part. Fifty-three family members made positive identifications, while 267 relatives gave blood samples for DNA analysis.

"This is a positive and important step forward in shedding some light on the fate of those kidnapped and missing because the truth is what all their families are keen to find out," said Gagic. He added that 44 family members also had an opportunity to talk to tribunal investigators.

But the relatives of missing Kosovo Serbs remain highly dissatisfied. The government's decision in late March to transfer 180 Albanian prisoners from Serbian jails to Kosovo provoked protests, especially when 80 of them were allegedly released on arrival. Many relatives of missing Serbs wanted the Albanians held back until progress was made towards establishing the fate of their relatives.

Some live in hope that their loved ones are still held in "ad-hoc" jails in Kosovo. Covic blamed the Milosevic regime for deceiving them with such illusions. "Disinformation and rumours were circulated that about 2,000 Albanian prisoners in Serbia proper were some sort of hostages for some sort of prisoner exchange," he said.

Budimir said the families could not understand why Albanian prisoners were being released when not one missing Kosovo Serb had been found and only 40 cases solved.

The relatives want The Hague tribunal's mandate extended to cover crimes committed after June 12, 1999 when international troops were deployed in the province. Budimir said that over 90 per cent of all kidnappings took place after this date.

"We are also hurt by the fact that this identification process had been delayed for two years. Much of the evidence was destroyed or decayed," she said. "Albanian families were allowed to identify the personal belongings of their victims immediately after the exhumations of mass graves."

Gagic and Covic agree the families have good reason for resentment. "Their discontent regarding the

search for survivors and delayed identifications is entirely justified," Gagic said. "Our requests and reports are regularly processed, but my impression is that some of the reports about private jails in some villages are not checked out as seriously as they should be."

Gagic said that when UNMIK visited suspected villages, they did not conduct searches but simply asked questions. In the meantime, hopes are fading of survivors among the missing Serbs. "I believe that those people are dead," Rada Trajkovic, leader of Kosovo Serb Povratak coalition, told a Belgrade news magazine, "and that some representatives of the international community are well aware of the fact."

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