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### Reports

# Forensics: DNA fills gaps of history

By Christian Jennings

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The technology behind just two words, or three capital letters, has helped a Sarajevo-based international organisation to advance from the gloomy work of excavating mass graves to the highest levels of forensic detective work.

Deoxyribonucleic acid, better known as DNA, is a nucleic acid that contains the genetic information for all living organisms. Using this precise guide, the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) has identified the remains of more than 12,000 victims of the 1990s wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Kosovo.

By using DNA, the organisation has identified bodies found in mass graves – some missing for more than a decade.

“ICMP is one of the main pillars of truth and justice in the country,” says Nerma Jelacic, director for the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (Birn) in Bosnia-Herzegovina. “The facts determined by them are scientifically indisputable, and this makes them the most reliable source on the victims of the war.

“Thousands of citizens have found some peace of mind only because ICMP helped them find their loved ones and put them to rest.”

Having pioneered the use of DNA profiling to identify the victims of massacres in the former Yugoslavia, ICMP has emerged as a world leader in human identification. Interpol’s secretary-general, Ronald Noble, said on a recent visit to Bosnia: “In cases of natural disasters, aircraft crashes or – God forbid – terrorist attacks, Interpol will ask ICMP to assist.”

One such Interpol request was for help with the investigation into the death of Rafik Hariri, the former Lebanese prime minister, assassinated by a car bomb in Beirut in February 2005.

Other pleas for ICMP’s technical expertise have come from Iraq, Columbia, Chile, Cameroon, the Maldives and Thailand.

From an ICMP laboratory in Tuzla, north Bosnia, the mostly Bosnian forensic specialists helped identify some 900 missing victims of the December 2004 tsunami in south-east Asia. Bone samples were sent to Bosnia in German diplomatic pouches, and the resulting DNA matches were sent to Thailand electronically.

The organisation assisted this year in the aftermath of an aircraft crash in Cameroon and is shortly to deploy an assessment team to Columbia, possibly to identify the remains of people missing from that country's guerrilla war. Iraqi forensic analysts are now undergoing training at ICMP labs in Bosnia.

"Our analysis facility in Tuzla is the biggest high-throughput identification laboratory in the world," says Kathrynne Bomberger, ICMP's director general.

Ms Bomberger has been made a Chevalier of the Order of the Legion d'Honneur, in recognition of ICMP's work. Additionally, the organisation was granted an ISO 17025, the hallmark of international professional standards in the field of laboratory testing, and has just signed a Disaster Victim Identification agreement with Interpol.

Ms Bomberger, an American of partly French-Lebanese origin, manages ICMP jointly with Adam Boys, a former chartered accountant from Scotland's east coast who has spent 14 years in Bosnia. While she was preparing to travel to Columbia, he was on his way to the foreign office in the UK, with a possible ICMP deployment to the Caucasus on the agenda.

Their sought-after expertise springs mainly from the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, and particularly from the massacre by Bosnian Serb forces of around 8,000 Muslim men and boys at Srebrenica during the final months of fighting. Around half of those victims are still missing, scattered in mass graves across eastern Bosnia. ICMP leads the process of excavating these sites, after which the remains go to Tuzla for lab work.

"Piecing together the mess of Srebrenica is a quarter of the case-load and over half the cost of our organisation," says Mr Boys.

More than 4,000 DNA-assisted identifications have been made from Srebrenica.

The matches done so far, combined with scientific projections about other known mass graves still to be excavated, have borne out estimates of around 8,000 victims killed in the July 1995 massacre – leaving no room for denial, ICMP's directors say.

ICMP's budget is around €6.5m (\$9.6m) per annum, mainly supported by international donor agencies from the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany and Canada. With international interest in the Balkans region waning since the war, attracting enough funds has sometimes been a struggle, Ms Bomberger and Mr Boys say.

However, DNA identification can be a highly cost-effective element in post-conflict justice and social healing.

"There is this wrong notion that DNA identification is incredibly expensive," says Ms Bomberger. "But through the use of bone sample collection kits, which cost a few dollars each and which a police officer can be trained to use in two weeks, DNA can be collected at low cost and short notice."

Out of the worst of the 1990s wars, ICMP has ironically become the best and biggest in the world at what it does – picking up the pieces and putting the past to bed. The staff, who are 93 per cent Bosnian, demonstrate the former war-ravaged country's mostly untapped capabilities, the two directors say.

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