

SPEECH BY ICMP DIRECTOR-GENERAL, KATHRYNE BOMBERGER

BERLIN PROCESS SPOTLIGHT ON THE MISSING PERSONS GROUP

16 December 2020

Dear Friends and Colleagues,

Let me begin by extending a warm welcome to all of you. We are meeting in the midst of a pandemic and I hope that you and your families have been spared from the worst effects.

Thank you, Minister Morton and Andrew Page for opening today's discussion. I would like to express the International Commission on Missing Persons' (ICMP) thanks to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which has supported ICMP and the missing persons effort in the Western Balkans for more than 24 years. The United Kingdom is an original signatory state of the Agreement on the Status and Functions of the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP Treaty) and we are proud to have the United Kingdom as a member of ICMP's Conference of States Parties and to have the Right Honorable Alistair Burt as a member of our Board of Commissioners.

I would also like to thank Matthias Lüttenberg from the German Federal Chancellery for joining us today and for agreeing to speak at the conclusion of the meeting. Germany has been a longstanding supporter of ICMP in the Western Balkans and around the world, and we are also proud to have Ambassador Brengelmann on our Board of Commissioners.

As we mark 25 years since the signing of the Dayton Peace agreement, I would like to share with you a brief outline of what has been achieved in the Western Balkans in accounting for the missing.

The key words here are **coordination** and **cooperation**.

The Berlin Process has not only provided a much-needed boost to regional cooperation among the Western Balkan countries – and a boost to their European integration efforts – it has reaffirmed international cooperation in support for the region.

As the only treaty-based, inter-governmental organization tasked exclusively with addressing the issue of missing persons from all contexts, including war and human rights abuses, our mandate is to ensure the cooperation of governments and others in locating missing persons. As such, enhancing cooperation among the regional governments has been a key thrust of our work since ICMP was created at a G-7 Summit in Lyon in 1996.

As with all modern conflicts, persons went missing irrespective of national borders. Families of the missing became displaced or became refugees in countries within the region and outside the region. Coordination and cooperation were key to finding missing persons from the beginning.

In Amsterdam in 1999, ICMP hosted the first regional meeting of government commissions on missing persons. Some of the original representatives from that meeting are members of the Missing Persons Group (MPG) and are here with us today. The Amsterdam Conference provided the impetus for what we called the Joint Excavation Process, which allowed government commissions from one country to monitor excavations conducted in the neighboring country. This process continues today.

ICMP's pioneering application of a DNA-based identification process required the cooperation of all governments in the region and of course the participation of 100,000 families of the missing from every part of the Western Balkans, as well as diaspora families living in Europe, North America and Australia.

By 2014, as a result of the combined efforts of the regional governments, the families of the missing and the international community, it was clear that the majority of missing persons had been found. In cooperation with the regional governments, ICMP took stock of these achievements and produced a Declaration that defined the role of States in Accounting for Missing Persons, which was signed in Mostar in 2014.

The Mostar Declaration was the basis of the Joint Declaration in the framework of the Berlin Process, signed by all leaders in London in July 2018. Finally, in November 2018, at ICMP's Headquarters in The Hague, the governments represented here today signed a Framework Plan to account for the remaining missing persons cases, and creating the MPG.

In a parallel track, the families of the missing from across the former Yugoslavia began meeting together as early as 1996. ICMP worked with them to create the Regional Coordination of families of Missing Persons, which registered as an NGO in 2011. At least once a year, beginning in 1998, ICMP has facilitated meetings between the regional governments and the families in order to foster greater trust and confidence and to enhance cooperation.

During this period, more than 70 percent of the 40,000 persons missing from the regional conflicts have been accounted for. This is an unprecedented achievement.

Peace is something that must be built, step by step. The history of the process I have described demonstrates that political will, cooperation and trust are crucial to building peace. Once you have these basic ingredients you can build the institutions of good governance, such as the Missing Persons Institute and the Commissions represented here today from Croatia, Serbia, Kosovo and Montenegro. Civil Society can grow stronger and unite across the political divide to demand their rights. At the same time, science can flourish, as the DNA-led identification process has done, and it can be placed in the service of securing rights, including the right to justice.

I would like to close with four key messages:

- First, it is essential that the international community continues to support the MPG. The MPG is the only regional mechanism that recognizes government responsibility to find missing persons;
- Second, the members of the MPG must make good on their commitments, including **publication** of the Regional Database without any further delay;

- Third, the members of the MPG must recognize the shared challenge of dealing with substantial misidentifications that were made prior to the introduction of DNA-led identification. They must JOINTLY explain this to the families of the missing and they must find a common solution to this problem, together with the families;
- Finally, the members of the MPG must come together to resist the continued campaign by politicians in the region to misuse the missing persons issue for political ends. They must do this by providing factual and reliable information to citizens.

As the effort to find the remaining 11,000 missing persons continues, maintaining continued trust and cooperation among the members of the MPG and between the MPG and its partners in government and civil society is an investment in regional peace and stability.

Today, the members of the MPG will brief us on the progress they have made since 2018. I look forward to hearing from my friends Amor, Ana, Rame, Dragan and Veljko. And, I especially look forward to hearing from Semina, a courageous and brilliant woman, who represents so many other amazing women from the region, who have been driving this process.

Thank you.