

ICMP and the Srebrenica Genocide

The Srebrenica Genocide was the premeditated and organized murder of more than 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys in July 1995, in and around the town of Srebrenica. The atrocity was committed in the final stages of the four-year armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It took place after the UN-declared Safe Areas of Srebrenica and Žepa had fallen to Bosnian Serb armed forces.

Thousands of men and boys left Srebrenica on 11 July 1995 and attempted their way toward Tuzla, which was controlled by the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the following days they were repeatedly ambushed, separated into groups and captured. Hundreds were killed and left in the forest; many more were taken prisoner and executed. Men and boys who had stayed in Srebrenica were detained by Serb forces and were executed. The bodies were buried in numerous mass graves in eastern Bosnia and the perpetrators later used heavy machinery to remove the bodies from primary mass graves to secondary sites, sometimes 50 kilometers from the original execution sites. This orchestrated effort to conceal evidence of the crimes resulted in bodies being disarticulated, with the remains of one person often deposited in several different graves.

In 2007, the International Court of Justice concurred with the earlier determination of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) that these crimes amounted to genocide. These judgments were supported by the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), which used advanced DNA methods to identify the Srebrenica victims. ICMP's use of DNA was the first-time scientific methods of identification were applied to largescale missing persons scenarios.

ICMP's DNA laboratory system went online in 2001 and today over 7,000 of the around 8,000 persons who disappeared in July 1995 have been identified using DNA kinship matching. In addition, through DNA- based identifications, ICMP was able to reveal the extent to which perpetrators attempted to conceal their crimes. Typically, a person missing from the Srebrenica genocide is found in three to four different mass graves, often many kilometers apart.

As of June 2023, ICMP had received 7,745 reports of persons missing from the fall of Srebrenica and nearby places. Their relatives have provided 22,337 biological reference samples for DNA testing. By comparing the DNA profiles of the surviving family members with DNA profiles extracted from human remains recovered from clandestine gravesites, ICMP has identified 6,981 victims. To date, using DNA and non-DNA methods, 7,017 victims have been identified. ICMP estimates the number of persons killed as a result of the fall of Srebrenica as just over 8,000.

ICMP submits DNA match reports to authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina in charge of conducting official missing persons investigations, issuing death certificates, and returning the mortal remains of the missing to their families. ICMP DNA match reports are based on a minimum 99.95 percent statistical certainty, although in most cases the degree of certainty is far higher. ICMP DNA and related evidence was presented at the ICTY in the Hague and at war crimes trials in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Twenty individuals have been tried at the ICTY for crimes related to Srebrenica, and 57 have appeared before the State Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Four life sentences and 38 other sentences have been handed down, in part based on the largest DNA-identification effort in history.

Over the course of the last 25 years, advances in forensic science have increased the technical capacity to locate missing persons, including by identifying their remains through DNA testing, and this has been embraced by the scientific community across the Western Balkans including BiH. ICMP continues to process DNA samples from the region, and at the same time, it is fostering DNA testing capacity in domestic laboratories, which will ensure the development of sustainable domestic forensic science capacities to take forward the process of accounting for those who are still missing.

In the last 25 years, with ICMP assistance and through the pioneering use of DNA, the authorities in BiH have been able to account for 75 percent of the 30,000 people who went missing during the conflict of the 1990s, a ratio that has not been equaled in any other post-conflict country. Around 7,500 persons are still missing, including around 1,000 from the genocide in Srebrenica.

The main challenge to this effort is a lack of reliable information on locations of clandestine gravesites that may contain remains of missing persons. This is due to the passage of time and the fact that 25 years after the end of the conflict there are fewer witnesses who could provide relevant information.