



D26 The Political Realities of Building a High-Tech DNA Identification System in a Post-Conflict Society

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The participants will be given an overview of the inherent difficulties and political realities of building a high-tech DNA identification system in a post-conflict society. It is hoped that the model employed in the regions of the former Yugoslavia could be built upon in other regions of the world.

In the regions of the former Yugoslavia affected by the conflicts beginning in 1991 and continuing, to a lesser extent, in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) estimates that there are up to 40,000 persons missing. Most of these persons disappeared as a consequence of actions committed by the regional governments or agents acting on their behalf. In the majority of these cases of "enforced disappearance," governments in the region went out of their way to hide bodies and conceal material evidence that could later be used in court, or more specifically, by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

There is growing consensus that in cases of enforced disappearance, the use of sophisticated DNA technology as a tool to uncover the identity of victims is the most scientifically accurate method. However, in addition to the scientific challenges of implementing a large-scale process of DNA identification in a war torn region, another concern of the ICMP has been how to create a process that is not only scientifically accurate, but also politically neutral in a politically charged atmosphere.

In addition to these hurdles, the ICMP faces the task of introducing a new methodology to a society that has a tradition of deferring to authority.

Addressing these difficulties has ramifications on many aspects of the ICMP's work. These include educating local pathologists regarding evolving identification techniques to encouraging government officials to view the construction of DNA laboratories as a tool to assist the families of the missing, rather than a tool to politically manipulate them. Other difficulties include helping the families through the labyrinth of information and misinformation they are fed regarding the legitimacy of DNA technology in the identification process.

The technical solution to these issues was to create a centralized system that would expedite the process of addressing the approximately 40,000 persons missing from the conflicts in the Balkans. As a consequence, ICMP has constructed five DNA laboratories in the regions of the former Yugoslavia, with one central location for submitting, blinding, and distributing biological samples to the five laboratories. This regional system requires that the governments in the area move away from viewing the labs as "national" centers of identification, to accepting that the laboratories work together on identifications, regardless of the ethnic, religious or national origin of the missing person.

Despite on-going obstacles, the governments in the region have largely agreed to the centralized system. ICMP hopes that the increased levels of identifications now being realized will fully validate the credibility and legitimacy of the DNA-led centralized process, thus allowing the cooperative process of DNA identifications of mass casualties from a recent war to become sustainable.

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