H130 Lessons and Challenges From Srebrenica: A Summary and Future Perspectives

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After attending this presentation, attendees will gain information and perspectives relating to the large and complex undertaking of the ICMP in the application of integrated forensic sciences to the identification of the missing from the 1995 fall of Srebrenica.

This presentation will impact the forensic community by increasing an understanding of the success that can be achieved in large scale missing persons identification, and the range of technical processes and considerations that should be taken into account when attempting such an undertaking.

This presentation is intended as a conclusion to a series of presentations in a multidisciplinary symposium highlighting the integrated forensic sciences that the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) has employed in a massive and complex effort to identify and repatriate the victims of the 1995 mass killing associated with the fall of Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Discussion will focus on some of the central and ongoing challenges of the undertaking, and attempt to draw lessons that may be more widely applicable in other contexts.

The nature of the Srebrencia "event"—the mass killing of ~8,100 men and boys that occurred in July 1995 as result of the fall of the United Nations "Safe Haven" in Srebrenica to the Army of Republika Srpska, and the subsequent distribution of the mortal remains throughout a large series of secondary mass graves—poses a formidible challenge in an attempt to scientifically identify the victims. Elements adding to the challenge include: the very large number of victims, of a relatively uniform demographic; a systematic lack of antemortem medical or dental records; the relative lack of distinctive clothing and personal effects among the refugee victims; the distribution of fragmented and commingled remains in either secondary graves and surface environments; and the clandestine nature of the graves that complicates full recovery.

It is through the novel use of DNA typing on a very large scale, and blind DNA matching in a "DNA-led" identification process, that the ICMP has been able to, as of August 2009, establish a named DNA match on over 6,100 individuals missing from the Srebrenica event. More than 4200 of these cases have been closed, with repatriation to family members. The discrepancy between these numbers is again due to the nature of the event, with many cases awaiting recovery of additional portions of the mortal remains prior to case closure. This underscores some of the policy challenges that will be discussed in this presentation, and that become more acute as the number of remaining known un- excavated Srebrenica graves dwindles.

While Srebrenica is in many ways unique, each of the component challenges involved are present to one extent or another in almost any large scale forensic identification undertaking. This presentation will discuss how the approach used to achieve large scale success in the case of Srebrenica is applicable elsewhere, and the variables that condition such considerations. Other policy issues that are of general relevance relate to personal data protection in various contexts, and the presentation of forensic identification casework in the support of criminal justice proceedings.

Srebrenica, ICMP, Missing Persons Identification