Thirty years after the war Bosnia Herzegovina families of the missing still seek answers

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Abstract: Three decades after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, more than 7,500 families are still searching for answers about their missing loved ones. Despite legal frameworks and international support, political barriers and time threaten to leave these stories unresolved forever.

> Some people are sorry when they do not find the complete skeleton of their missing family members. I would be happy to find only one of my mother's bones, bury it next to my father and then I could come to their grave to pray and light a candle.

This is the story of Jovanka Simić, daughter of a woman who went missing during the 1992-1994 conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And Jovanka's story is just one of thousands. In 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina marks 30 years since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, which brought the end to the conflict. Yet the

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consequences linger on and for families of more than 7,500 persons still missing from the war, will remain for the rest of their lives.
Jovanka fears that time is running out. As the years pass, so does her hope that she will live to see her mother found and laid to rest.

Jovanka's parents, Trivko and Đuka, both went missing in 1994. Her father was found in 2006, but her mother's fate remains unknown. Photo: BIRN BiH

Unfinished story

According to official data, around 35,000 people were reported missing during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Thanks to the tireless work of families, local institutions, and international organisations, over 80 percent of those cases have been resolved. But more than 7,500 families are still waiting for answers. And as time passes, the search for missing persons becomes more complex. The main challenge is lack of reliable information on the locations of the gravesites.
Families of the missing and local authorities have even offered financial rewards for information about the locations of their loved ones**.** However, few have come forward. Within the Institute for Missing Persons of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a fund has been designated for this very purpose. Yet, it remains unused, as the necessary regulations outlining how the funds should be administered have not yet been adopted.
The fact that mass graves discovered today are often secondary or tertiary sites — places where remains were deliberately moved to conceal crimes, poses another big obstacle towards resolving cases of missing persons. This makes the forensic work incredibly difficult, as bones are scattered and fragmented and natural degradation over decades complicates identification through DNA.
Politicisation of the issue is also a major problem. Although Bosnia and Herzegovina has a Missing Persons Institute at the state level, lack of collaboration between

entities is hindering progress and conflicting historical narratives are affecting commitment to resolving these cases objectively and humanely.
As the post-war generation grows up mostly unaware of the scope of the problem, in the absence of ongoing education, there is a chance that the national consciousness will lose sight of the issue's urgency.

The biggest challenge for families is the lack of reliable information about the location of gravesites. Photo: *Balkan Insight/EPA/STR*

Power of families

What has kept the search for the missing alive all these years is, first and foremost, the unwavering determination of families. From the early days of the post-war period, family associations have been the backbone of advocacy efforts.
Their resilience is remarkable. Witnessing the lack of political will to act, they continue to press for answers, in spite of the emotional toll such engagement takes.
United in their struggle, families of the missing — representing victims from all three major ethnic groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats) — began jointly commemorating 30 August, the International Day of the Disappeared, each year, holding events in different cities across the country. These commemorations serve not only as a reminder of the ongoing pain and unresolved grief but also as a call to action for the authorities to fulfil their obligations.
Since the introduction of DNA identification in BiH in 2001, family members play a crucial role in providing DNA samples and personal information that can aid

identification processes. Without their participation, many of the successes achieved so far would not have been possible.

'Where are our loved ones?' — A message carried by families of the missing during the commemoration of the International Day of the Disappeared in Sarajevo, August 2024. Photo: ICRC BiH

Living with uncertainty

Families of the missing live in a state of limbo — caught between two conflicting realities: on one side there is the hope that their loved ones might still return, on the other the passage of years strongly suggests otherwise. Psychologists often describe this condition as 'ambiguous loss' — a type of grief that lacks closure. This unresolved grief deeply affects mental health. Families of missing persons may develop depression, anxiety, even suicidal thoughts. For many, the search for truth becomes a lifelong mission, often at great emotional and financial cost.

Almir Sehic, who has been searching for his mother since 1992, embodies this emotional conflict:

> 'I still have hope. This is a lot of pressure, but not a day goes by that I don't think about my mother, not a day goes by that I don't remember her'.

For Almir, Jovanka and many others, the search is not just about finding a body but about holding onto the hope that one day they will be able to offer their loved ones the dignity of a final resting place.

Empty spaces between the rows of tombstones at the Potočari Memorial are reserved for more than 1,000 people still missing from Srebrenica — to be laid to rest beside their loved ones once they are found and identified. *K. Faingnaert / ICRC*

Right to know

After 30 years, the families of the missing deserve more than sympathy — they deserve answers. The right of families to know what happened to their loved ones is rooted in both domestic and international law.

Under international humanitarian law, parties to a conflict have a duty to prevent persons from going missing and, when they do, to search for them, account for their fate, and inform their families. The 1949 Four Geneva Conventions establish the information framework for tracing (e.g., national information bureaux and the Central Tracing Agency), while Additional Protocol I recognises the *right of families to know* and, in Article 33(1), obliges each party, as soon as circumstances permit and at the latest after active hostilities have ended, to search for persons reported missing by the adverse party. Although Additional Protocol II contains no specific provision on missing persons, customary IHL, as reflected in Rule 117 (Accounting for Missing Persons) confirms the obligation of each party to the conflict to undertake all feasible measures to account for persons reported missing, in both international and non-international armed conflict. The ICRC's 2025 commentary to the Fourth Geneva Convention, in Article 7(f), further reaffirms the Convention's comprehensive obligations and mechanisms to prevent persons from going missing,

At national level, in 2004 Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted the Law on Missing Persons applicable to persons who went missing in the period from 30 April 1991 to 14 February 1996 — the first legislation of its kind in a post-conflict country related to missing persons anywhere in the world, establishing a legal framework to regulate the tracing of missing persons and safeguard the rights of their families. From an international human rights law perspective, Bosnia and Herzegovina ratified the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in 2012. In its 2016 concluding observations on BiH's initial report, the UN Committee urged BiH to harmonize criminal laws across all jurisdictions and criminalize enforced disappearance as an autonomous offence with proper penalties and limitation rules. It further pressed for victims' rights under Article 24,

including an operational Fund for the Support of Families and reparation without requiring a declaration of death.
The international community has played, and continues to play, an important role in supporting efforts to fulfil the legal obligations arising from both international and domestic laws. The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), with specific projects and a broad range of activities, and other agencies has brought the necessary technical expertise and critical funding. In 2023, domestic institutions from BiH, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia, with the support of ICMP launched a public, regional database of active missing-persons cases from the former Yugoslavia, enabling anyone to search records, submit information, and report cases. Beyond transparency, its purpose is to facilitate regional cooperation, promote data accuracy, support legal and accountability efforts by documenting and tracking cases transparently.
Thanks to the work of BiH institutions and international community, and the huge experience in the search for the missing, Bosnia and Herzegovina is today a reference point for other countries grappling with similar tragedies.
However, it is important to emphasise that fulfilling these legal commitments is not just about institutional compliance: it is about restoring dignity to the victims and their families. It is about acknowledging the pain and proving that society did not forget those who vanished in the chaos of war.

An exhibition displaying the names of more than 7,600 people missing in BiH, set up in front of the Parliament building in Sarajevo during the commemoration of the International Day of the Disappeared in 2024. Photo ICRC BIH

Path forward

Resolving the remaining cases of missing persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina still requires a lot of work and commitment from all actors involved. Primarily, it is necessary to depoliticise the issue and approach it as a shared human obligation that transcends ethnic and political divisions. It also demands that we listen — truly listen — to the voices of the families. Their stories are not relics of the past; they are urgent calls to action.

It is important that we continue to remind ourselves that the missing persons are not simply part of history — they are part of today's unfinished story. By continuing the search, by supporting the families and by fostering a culture of remembrance and accountability, Bosnia and Herzegovina will move closer to a future where wounds begin to heal, and justice is finally served.

Because even after thirty years since the end of the war, for the families of the missing, the journey is not over. And it will not be over until every missing person is found and every family looking for their relatives finds the peace they have been searching for since the war took their loved ones away.