

International Commission on Missing Persons Meeting in Geneva

The recently-formed International Commission on Missing Persons in the former Yugoslavia held its initial meeting in Geneva on October 11 and 12. The Commissioners participating were Commission chairman Cyrus Vance, former U.S. Secretary of State; Lord Carrington, former British Foreign Minister; Robert Badinter, former French Minister of Justice; Jose Ayala Lasso, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; and Comelio Sommaruga, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The purpose of the session was to update the Commissioners on the status of the missing-person effort and to permit them to identify important areas for attention.

During the meeting the Commission received briefings from its advisors. Subjects addressed included the status of the commitments of the involved governments to carry out systematic release of information on missing persons; processes for identifying mortal remains through use of forensic science; problems associated with efforts to exhume mass grave sites, including mine clearance; and the role of families and other survivor groups in expediting the solution of missing-persons cases.

The Commissioners identified four areas for future action:

Enhancing Support for Families and Other Survivors.

The Commissioners believe that the missing-person effort cannot succeed without the active involvement and support of those most directly affected. They must be encouraged and enabled to cooperate with the various organisations attempting to resolve missing-person cases and to help and comfort one another. To advance these goals, the Commissioners agreed to establish a Survivors Fund. The purpose of the Fund will be to support efforts by survivors and survivor groups to identify and communicate with one another.

Elevating the Bosnian Governments' Attention to the ICRC-chaired Working Group on the Unaccounted For.

The Commissioners believe that the ICRC-chaired Working Group, established in the Dayton Peace Accords, is well-suited to perform its task. As the success of the Working Group depends almost exclusively upon the good-faith participation of the involved governments, the Commissioners will ask representatives to the Commission, when selected, to review their commitment to the Working Group process.

Intensifying the Bosnian Governments' Cooperation in Humanitarian Exhumations.

Serious problems have arisen with some of the humanitarian exhumations conducted on the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Sites may be mined and there may be a variety of other security concerns: related to exhumation activity. In concert with the Office of the High Representative, the Mine Action Centre, IFOR and IPTF, the Commission will explore the steps necessary to expand their administrative efforts and obtain priority for mine clearance and security activity associated with humanitarian exhumations.

Creating a Central Source of Accurate Information.

Many overlapping activities affect the missing-person effort. As yet there is no single organisation to which the press and public can turn routinely for information on the subject. Accordingly, the Commissioners have agreed that a principal duty of the Commission's Sarajevo Office shall be to receive and disseminate full and accurate information concerning all aspects of the missing-person effort throughout the former Yugoslavia.

It was agreed that, before its next session, certain Commission members may travel to the area to discuss the Commission's work with families of the missing and with concerned governmental leaders.