

Call for Input to inform the High Commissioner's report to the Human Rights Council on the impact of casualty recording

Submission by Megan Bassendale and Every Casualty Counts

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This submission is made by Megan Bassendale in a personal capacity, as an independent expert in forensic recovery and identification.

EXPERTISE

I am a leading global forensic advisor and an expert in human identification and emergency management. I am the Founder and Director of [Forensic Guardians International](#) (FGI), a global death and identity management company which provides professional forensic services, products and risk management solutions. FGI has an extensive international network of professional advisors and experts on all aspects of forensic human identification and has created products that are fit for use globally, including a highly secure biological profiling service to aid a person's identification and tools that can be used to support the management of human remains in emergencies.

Previously, I have worked as a Forensic Coordinator for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Lebanon and Georgia, the latter with responsibility for the Caucasus and Central Asia. My work included the recovery and identification of human remains and return to their families. I have also supervised and directly performed archaeological recoveries and thousands of anthropological examinations, at single and mass gravesites, for the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus and the International Committee for Missing Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I have facilitated the organization of exhumations and the sorting of highly commingled and disarticulated human remains, as well as strengthening the chain of custody for forensic evidence.

I hold a Master's degree in Forensic Archaeology and Anthropology from University College London, a Master's degree in Disaster and Emergency Management from Royal Roads University, a Diploma in Forensic Medical Sciences and Law from Apothecaries of London, and a Bachelor's degree in Archaeology from Simon Fraser University.

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MISSING PERSONS AND THE RIGHT TO TRUTH

Searching for grave sites, professionally exhuming remains, conducting scientific analysis of remains and associated evidence, taking DNA samples from human remains, cross-checking this information with DNA samples from relatives, and ultimately repatriating remains to their families is a critical and intricate process that demands a significant investment of time, expertise, and resources.

Unfortunately, the difficulties and expenses associated with identification are greatly increased when there are no official lists of the dead and investigators do not know how many bodies they need to search for or where. This lack of information can result in identification projects being under-resourced, which may lead to giving up the search before all individuals have been recovered. Alternatively, investigators may continue searching unnecessarily in areas where the task has already been completed, resulting in wasted resources and a slower identification process.

It is crucial to recognize that despite the challenges and costs, the search for and identification of human remains is an essential step in upholding the dignity and rights of the deceased and providing closure and answers to their families. As such, it is important that these efforts are appropriately resourced and supported and that all possible steps are taken to ensure that every individual is identified and returned to their loved ones.

In the context of the [Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, national authorities and the ICRC worked jointly to identify missing and deceased](#) civilians and military personnel. I worked on this project, which was complicated by the lack of accurate official data on deaths. Lists of missing persons compiled by other NGOs in collaboration with local family associations were essential starting points for the search. The lack of basic data on casualties made effective project planning and budgeting difficult. Investigators need to know how many bodies they will be searching for to allocate accurate time, staff, resources, storage facilities, DNA sampling kits, etc.

The importance for families of knowing the fate of relatives who have gone missing or died due to armed conflict cannot be overstated. During my professional career, I have observed that the need for answers, the anguish of uncertainty, and the ongoing pain of relatives is the same across contexts of armed violence. This need does not diminish over time; rather, it lasts into future generations. The failure to address families' need to know not only prolongs the agony of the bereaved but can jeopardise prospects of lasting peace and reconciliation.

I worked with the United Nations Commission for Missing Persons in Cyprus from 2006 - 2009. In this role I was involved in coordinating the search for grave sites, recovering human remains, conducting analysis of the remains, taking DNA samples, reconciling all the

information for identification of remains, informing relatives of successful identifications, and returning the human remains to the deceased's family.

Many of the missing persons we identified or were searching for were adult men who had been in the conflict over almost half a century ago. In many cases, the family members seeking missing relatives were their grandchildren or nephews and nieces. Many of the seekers had been young children at the time of the disappearance or had never met the deceased. Nevertheless, they had an extremely strong emotional commitment to uncovering their relative's fate and recovering their mortal remains.

Typically, after receiving the mortal remains, families conducted full funerals for the deceased and buried them in their family plot or gravesite. These funerals were important events. Religious ritual is important in Cypriot culture and society, and burying a body appropriately is highly significant.

PREVENTING DISAPPEARANCES

In situations of armed conflict, people often become missing because there [is insufficient time or resources to ensure they are individually buried in a properly marked site](#). Survivors may be at continued risk of attack, or may rapidly flee the area. If they have had time to bury the dead, it is often in a shallow or collective grave with a temporary marker. Wooden grave markers in particular are liable to rot and degrade. Mass or shallow graves lead to the dispersal and mixing of remains. In these circumstances, although a victim was known at the time of death and burial, finding their burial place and remains later becomes impossible. Recovering and identifying human remains recovered from mass graves makes human identification very time consuming, difficult, and expensive.

Casualty recording systems can help mitigate these problems by enabling witnesses and relatives to record details of death and burial in a professionally maintained system and database, using simple but durable tools. The more information that can be recorded as early as possible, in a standardized manner, the greater the chances of successfully (re)locating and identifying mortal remains at a future date. Taking proactive steps with recording also greatly reduces the overall cost of identification and future investigations.

Forensic Guardians International advocates for and supplies [low-cost but durable body tags and grave markers](#) which can be distributed for use among at-risk populations. These tools integrate technology that captures digital, geographical information about where remains are recovered from and where they are laid to rest. The use of low-cost, durable plastic [body tags with integrated QR codes](#) that are digitally linked to online casualty data collection systems supports the standardized collection of information that is essential for identification. Any person can attach the tag when the remains are collected and use a smartphone to upload the location and details of the deceased to a secure casualty

recording system. This facilitates cross-referencing certain information from recovered human remains with details of missing people. Using gravesite markers that digitally record the exact location of burial and information about the case ensures that the burial location is marked with a durable solution and digital footprint. These simple interventions are highly effective and increase the ability to make identifications, thereby greatly reducing the number of deceased persons who go missing during an armed conflict. They are a fraction of the cost of post-conflict programs to search for and identify the dead, such as the examples of Georgia-Abkhazia and Cyprus.

COMBATTING IMPUNITY

I worked with the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) in Bosnia from 2004-2006. Following the protocols established for that context, each time we exhumed a gravesite, crime technicians and a representative of the prosecutor's office were present. Information [from our investigations was at times shared with ICTY investigators](#), and ICMP staff testified in some of the war crimes tribunals.

MISINFORMATION

I have observed that in situations of armed conflict, both international and intra-national, there are incentives for belligerents to manipulate casualty figures. This is true for both civilian and military casualties. States may deliberately under-report military casualties for propaganda purposes to avoid revealing political or military weakness. Similarly, they may try to influence public opinion (nationally and internationally) by inflating figures of civilian casualties attributed to the other party to the conflict. The existence of adequate mechanisms to record the number of deaths, and identify the missing and deceased, can prevent or reduce this type of manipulation of casualty data. The more resources allocated to forensic institutions and other actors in the casualty recording process, the more comprehensive and accurate the data produced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Various simple, low-cost measures can be taken to greatly reduce the number of persons who go missing in armed conflict. Modern technology, including geo-tagging, QR codes and smartphones, can record and digitize information instantly within secure, centralized casualty databases. This enables the identification of the dead and (re-)location of their remains to be undertaken immediately rather than many years after the events. The savings in resources and the suffering of the victim's relatives is immense. **States and the international community should prioritize these preventive measures** when allocating resources for humanitarian response.

States should also enable military personnel, and any other persons at particular risk of death, to store DNA samples and other biometric information before deployment. This makes subsequent identification of human remains much faster, more accurate and less expensive than taking DNA samples from relatives to compare with post-mortem samples from the deceased. Storing information taken directly from at-risk individuals allows direct matching with samples and information collected from and about the deceased.

The international community should recognize the enormous value of the work conducted by casualty recorders and support them by ensuring they are adequately resourced. This crucial work has a heavy emotional and psychological toll but is too often left to under-resourced civil society volunteers working at great risk to their own personal safety and well-being. In the worst cases, [volunteers are killed](#) as a direct result of their work.