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Missing Persons
**UNMIK Police Missing Persons Unit - Overview for 2000: Assuaging families' fear and distress**

This week the UNMIK Missing Persons Unit in Pristina presented its first report, "Overview. One Year Missing Persons Unit" at an UNMIK press conference on 27 March. In this article Alexandra George discusses the Missing Persons Unit's (MPU) work with its police officers and with officials from units/organizations collaborating with MPU.

An unidentified body was found in the woods near Pristina. The Pristina UNMIK Investigation Unit passed the report to the UNMIK Police Missing Persons Unit (MPU). Guido Van Rillaer, MPU head, recalls "I identified the body by comparing the police report which stated that the man had thick eyebrows. Going through our own files I found a similar description of a missing person from November 1999. The clothes and dates corresponded." After identifying the body the case was closed in April 2000.

Pristina police found a 10-year-old Roma boy on the street two months ago. They confined him to a hospital as he was retarded. Van Rillaer received a report on a missing gypsy boy from Djakova filed by his parents at the police station there. Van Rillaer compared the parents' and the Pristina police report and matched them. "The police report spoke of an 8-year old Roma boy in pyjamas and I matched him with the parents' account. This happened a few weeks ago. We returned the boy to his parents." Van Rillaer stressed the match was made possible by MPU's coordinating role with different police units, one of MPU's principle tasks.

Two-to-three months ago an Albanian couple reported their 16-year old daughter missing to UNMIK Police's Trafficking and Anti-Prostitution Unit, who in turn passed the information to MPU. Van Rillaer notes: "Her parents suspected she was working in a bar as her friend was working in such an establishment. Indeed, the police found her working in a bar in Obelic municipality."

These incidents comprise three of UNMIK MPU's 253 closed cases regarding identification of missing persons up to 31 December 2000. Of this number, 148 people were found to be alive. "Some of them were in prison. In other cases families had filed reports on missing relatives, months went by, and when we contacted them the person had returned home," says Van Rillaer. Of the 105 dead, 52 suffered a violent death, 53 had an unknown cause of death. The 253 closed files were based on information provided as follows: 52% from UNMIK Police, 38% from ICRC, 3% from OSCE, and 7% from others.

The report states MPU had identified 2,393 missing up to 31 December 2000. It notes that of this total a considerable percentage were elderly and youngsters, including 363 children (16%). The majority of Albanians went missing during the NATO air strikes in March, April and May 1999, "with a peak of 700 in the month of April." In 2000 the figures are considerably lower, the highest figure being around 17 \*\*\* Albanians missing in March.

The latest numbers bring the total to 3,399 missing ("The number increases daily," says Alexander Hasenstab, MPU team leader), of which 2,860 are Albanians, 335 - Serbs, and 204 from all other communities (including Roma, Ashkalis, Bosnians). "These are not only persons missing in war," Van Rillaer adds. The missing covers those who disappeared before the conflict and "the young girl who didn't come home last week," the report states. "Up to 31 December we had closed 253 cases, now the figure is 370," Van Rillaer continues.

This was a considerable accomplishment for 12 months' work. Over a year earlier, in late 1999, a Canadian police officer, Mike Wathen, working in crime intelligence, accepted the task of organizing a Missing Persons Unit. In those early days his was literally a one man operation: he found himself on hands and knees searching through a carton-box filled with scraps of paper written and delivered to the security guards by despairing families of missing and kidnapped people. In early December 1999 officer Wathen obtained a six square metre office with broken windows. Soon he was advertising for an assistant in the induction-training center: he hired a Belgian officer who had headed the Belgian National Missing Persons Unit in Brussels for the last five years. Thus the UNMIK Police MPU was established.

By October 2000 MPU was expanding with a second office opening in Pristina and a third office in Gracanica, both of them incorporated into the Resource Centres of the Bureau for Detainees and Missing Persons (BMP) in the Office of Human Rights and Community Affairs (OHRCA). From the outset the MPU's two offices at the BMP were busy: families from all over Kosovo, both Albanians and Serbs (see UNMIK Direct, November 10 "A Haven of Grief and Impeciousness") came to find out or report news of their family members. The MPU team took details of any complaints, and collected additional information in existing files. Unfortunately currently the work is slowing down, especially in Gracanica Resource Center as since the 16 February bus bombing, despite the recent reinstatement of bus services from Nis Serbs are no longer coming to Gracanica, according to Van Rillaer. Instead mobile units are planned in the future, although 5 mobile teams have functioned up to 31 December 2000: "BMP, ICRC, OSCE and MPU are planning to visit other regions so families can easily contact us."

Today, MPU has a staff of 18, including 7 international police, 3 KPS officers, all Albanians, and 8 other local employees. As a central coordinating body MPU receives copies of all initial MP reports taken by UNMIK police stations or regional investigation units. These contain a detailed ID and description of the missing persons, with the circumstances of disappearance. Regarding unidentified bodies autopsy reports must be given, as well as precise information about the time and place where the body was found. "Each unidentified body is a missing person," the report notes. One of MPU's main priorities is to keep the families informed of any new developments in a case.

The unit relies entirely on the work performed by regional and local investigators. For example, MPU works closely with the UNMIK Police Regional Investigation Units (RIU). Roger Abshire, Missing Persons Coordinator, RIU, Prizren, is currently very busy. His attention is focused on the stream of refugees that have poured into Dragash and Recan, Prizren region, in the past several days from Macedonia. As of 28 March border police reports, which Abshire receives daily, 6,286 refugees from mountain villages above Tetovo had converged into villages in Dragash and Recan, Prizren, to escape the fighting in Macedonia. "They've been living in some of the mountain villages above Tetovo. They're afraid, so they're coming back," says Abshire. The local Red Cross and Mother Theresa society are beginning to register the refugees pouring across the border daily: Abshire needs the lists of names to compare them with those in his Missing Persons data-base: "I would love nothing more than to make an identification and remove a name from our data-base."

A second, more gruesome, task: In recent days two bodies were found in Celina, Orahovac, Prizren region, in a shallow grave in a field: two men, one about 50, the second between 25-35 years: "Both were shot in the head. They were killed about the second week of January 2001," asserts Abshire. (Their ethnic identity is unknown.) Abshire's task is to make an identification by reading missing persons reports from the past 6 months looking for similar physical characteristics and clothing as the victims. "This is a considerable job as we have over 800 missing persons in our data base," says Abshire.

The MPU also receives information from the UNMIK Police Central Criminal Investigation Unit (CCIU) charged with investigating war crimes, and murders that occurred during the war, incidents involving missing persons. According to CCIU Head, Brian Cox: "If we establish that a person was killed, that there were two to three eye witnesses to the murder, even if we cannot locate the body, we pass the information to the MPU. They can at least tell the family that the person is believed to be dead."

Most cases CCIU investigates, with the help of its 32 international police officers, are mass murders. For example, currently CCIU is investigating a case in Vucitern municipality, Mitrovica, involving around 100 killed and 60 to 70 missing persons. Brian Cox says: "In the course of our work we've established about 4,000 to 5,000 deaths and at least a few thousand missing people as well. We've passed all such information to MPU."

The collection of Ante Mortem Data (AMD), up to now, was done by UNMIK Police, ICRC, and foremost by the Council for the Defence of Human Rights and Freedom and the Transcultural Psycho-Social Organization (TPO), which passed on the information to MPU. AMDs were compared with forensic work carried out by the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) to help in identification. Of the 2, 393 MP registrations by MPU up to 31 December 2000, AMDs were collected on 1,138 cases, a figure which MPU hopes will be higher in the future enabling the unit to achieve better identification results.

Currently MPU is expanding: according to the unit's team leader Alexander Hasenstab: "In the near future we will continue the work performed by OSCE in identifications and by ICTY in both identifications and exhumations."

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