

FORENSIC ASSISTANCE PROJECT

Consultant Report 1999-001

Čapljina I

Republika Srpska Commission on Tracing Prisoners and Missing Persons
23 March 1999

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Summary of Events

The Republika Srpska (RS) Commission on Tracing Prisoners and Missing Persons conducted investigations at three cemeteries in the Tasovčići region, east of Čapljina, Bosnia-Herzegovina, on March 23, 1999. The remains of at least 26 individuals were recovered. All bodies but one had been placed in body bags, plastic bags, or plastic sheets before interment.

At least 23 individuals were removed from crypts in two cemeteries located at Klepci and Tasovčići. All remains from the Tasovčići cemetery had been supplied with identification tags before interment. The remains of what were believed to be four individuals were recovered from a trench in a third cemetery just outside the town of Tasovčići (Partizansko cemetery). Three iron markers, each engraved with the year "1992," were positioned close together in the middle of the trench.

The recovered bodies were placed in body bags and transported to the RS temporary morgue facility in Trebinje for postmortem examination.

Two Forensic Consultants from Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) were present at the three locations for the duration of the exhumations, but were not present for the postmortem examination in Trebinje. Information on cause and manner of death and the identities of the decedents had not been provided at the time of this report.

(Editor's note: In 1999, it was agreed that the "State Commission on Missing Persons (Bosniak Side)" and the "Federal Commission on Missing Persons – Croat Side" would eventually be referred to as the "Federation Commission on Missing Persons – Bosniak Side" and "Federation Commission on Missing Persons – Croat Side," respectively. For purposes of simplicity and clarity, any reference to either of these commissions in 1999 reports will use the "Federation" names.)

Participants and Observers

Republika Srpska Commission on Tracing Prisoners and Missing Persons

ULJAREVIĆ Dragan	Member
TEŠANOVIĆ Spomenka	Judge, Čapljina area
KOVAČINA Milan	Center for Security Police Forces
KARAN Dr. Željko	Forensic Pathologist, Banja Luka
MARIĆ Milko	Crime Technician and Morgue Assistant
PIŠTINJAT Obrad	Crime Technician
GAČINOVIĆ Slobodanka	Judge
Laborers	

Federation Commission on Missing Persons - Croat Side

BUNTIĆ Gordana	Judge Investigator, Čapljina
ČORIĆ Vinko	Crime Technician

Office of the High Representative (OHR)

VIZINA Daniel	Exhumations Officer, Mostar
BEĆO Abdel	Translator, Mostar

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR)

DRAYER Francine	Forensic Consultant
HARRINGTON Dr. Richard	Forensic Consultant
TORLAKOVIĆ Azur	Field Assistant

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

STANKOVIĆ Jelena	Member
BANĐUR Vanja	Member
KOMNENOVIĆ Žarko	Member

Regional Red Cross

ČIČKOVIĆ Radmila	Member
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Security

Local Police escort	Čapljina area
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Site Description

Although the initial plan had been to exhume only at the Klepci cemetery, exhumations were conducted at three cemeteries. These were all in the vicinity of Čapljina (DMA map Čapljina, Edition 8-DMA, Series M709, Sheet 2681 II, Scale 1:50,000) (Figure 1). The first cemetery is located near the village of Klepci, southeast of Čapljina at grid coordinate 33T YH 219 744. Photo 1 is a northwest view of the tomb. The second cemetery is located just east of Čapljina in Tasovčići, at grid coordinate 33T YH 212 772 (Photo 2) and the third cemetery (Partizansko cemetery) is located north of Tasovčići at grid coordinate 33T YH 212 776 (Photo 3). According to the Exhumations Officer of the Office of the High Representative, pre-visits had been conducted at the first two cemeteries, but official clearance for exhumation had been granted only for the first site. No prior intimation had

been given that exhumations would be conducted at the third cemetery, nor had a pre-visit or mine assessment been done at this site. However, since exhumations were conducted here the previous year, the cemetery was considered to be 'demined' and safe.

Site History

At the time of this report, no history of events at the first site, the Klepci cemetery, was available; however, according to Dr. Karan, the remains of at least three individuals were allegedly buried here. The vault at the second site, the Tasovčići cemetery, belongs to a woman by the name of Stana Drasko, who died during the First World War. According to a male witness who was present during the recovery process, a woman with the name "Silvana" who was killed in Mostar on June 7, 1992, had allegedly been buried in this vault. The witness had received this information from family members of the murdered woman. These family members were living in Trebinje. No history of the third site, the Partizansko cemetery, was available at this time.

Exhumation Process and Condition of Remains

1. Klepci Cemetery

The recoveries at the first cemetery presented no technical problems. The bodies were removed from the two crypts of the vault by a laborer who stood inside the crypts and handed the remains to his colleague. All remains were in body bags and/or plastic bags. The first crypt contained the remains of at least eight individuals and the second crypt of at least four (and possibly five) individuals. Photos were taken of all remains after removal from the crypts (Photos 4 and 5). The condition of the bags was poor, and the handling of the bodies caused tearing and disintegration of the plastic, resulting in some cases in the commingling of bones. However, this allowed the examination on site of some of the remains. At least one female and two children were exhumed from the first crypt. The fragmentary, partial remains of the children had been placed in two smaller plastic bags filled with soil (secondary burials). The RS team used a screen to remove the bones. The bones and clothing of one adult individual showed signs of burning. Another adult was wearing military boots and a uniform. A tear in the body bag of individual number 3 showed the remains of long, red dyed (henna) hair, suggesting that this person may also be female. The preservation of all bones was fair to good; no remains of soft tissue were noted.

Crypt 1:

Body Bag 1 remains: These are the well-preserved remains of an older, adult male; however, the cranium is fragmented.

Body Bag 2 remains: A set of 2 keys was found with these remains.

Body Bag 3 remains: A tear in the body bag showed the remains of relatively long, red-dyed (henna) hair, suggesting that this may be a female.

Body Bag 4 remains: The body bag of these remains had been tied with a rope. Handling of the skull by the laborers resulted in fragmentation.

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Body Bag 5 remains: The partial, fragmented remains of a child approximately 8-10 years old had been placed in a small plastic bag, with clay and sand. The contents of the bag were screened and the bones were removed by Dr. Karan, Mr. Marić, and Dr. Harrington.

Body Bag 6 remains: These are the remains of an adult.

Body Bag 7 remains: The pubic bone indicates that this person was a female, probably older than 40 years of age at time of death. A lumbar vertebra shows evidence of severe osteophytic lipping. The body bag also contained shoes and clothing.

Body Bag 8 remains: These are the remains of a small child, approximately 2-3 years of age. The fragmentary, partial remains were contained in a small plastic bag, again full of clay and sand. The contents of the bag were screened and the bones removed by Dr. Karan and Mr. Marić.

Crypt 2:

Body Bag 9 remains: These remains consist of several torn body bags and a number of commingled bones. It was not known at the time how many individuals were represented. After Dr. Karan performs the autopsies he will inform us of the minimum number of individuals (MNI).

Body Bag 10 remains: These are the remains of an adult. The skull of this individual has pronounced sagittal keeling and a large dent superior to the external occipital protuberance. These cranial characteristics seem to be of a pathological nature.

Body Bag 11 remains: These are the partially burned bones of an adult male. Also included are the remnants of partially burned clothes.

Body Bag 12 remains: A cranium and mandible were recovered from this body bag; however, these belong to different individuals.

2. Tasovčići Cemetery

Entrance into the two crypts was gained with the use of a pick ax to loosen the cement that held the covers in place. The first crypt contained two body bags (Individuals 13 and 14; Photo 6). These bags were in good condition; no tears or rips were present and the contents could not be seen. These bags had been supplied with identification tags prior to interment.

The opening of the second crypt provided some problems. The heavy cement lid slipped and fell into the crypt, possibly crushing bones. Eight body bags (Individuals 15 through 23, all supplied with identification tags) were recovered from this crypt. Initial perusal of the identification tags showed that Individuals 17, 18, and 19 belong to members of the same family (husband, wife and son). Their names are alleged to be Reljić Novica, Reljić Đurđa, and Reljić Vukašin. The names of three other individuals are alleged to be Vojko Sijerčić, Đoko Donlaga, and Dulać Vitomir.

Exhumations at this cemetery were completed at 12.05 p.m.

3. Partizansko Cemetery

At 12:10 p.m., the convoy reached the last site, the Partizansko cemetery. Approximately 40 m east of the entrance gate is a trench that runs in an east-west direction and ends 40 m west of the monument (see sketch). This trench is about 20 m long, 70 cm wide, and 30 cm deep. Three iron markers, surrounded by large boulders and rocks and engraved with the year "1992," had been placed close together in the center of the trench (Photo 7). The rocks and boulders were removed by the RS laborers, and the clayey soil was loosened and removed with a pick and shovel. At a depth of about 30 cm, the first set of remains (in a body bag) was exposed. These were removed and placed in another body bag.

Excavation of an additional 50 cm of soil proved negative. Subsequently, the ditch to the east of Individual 1 was excavated and the second individual was discovered at a depth of about 75 cm. The body bag was damaged, and the skull and jaw were found outside the bag. Continued digging and probing at this location also proved negative. A third individual was discovered to the west of Individual 1, at a depth of approximately 30-50 cm. (The three individuals had been buried longitudinally, head to feet in the trench, and all were contained in body bags). While removing the last set of remains, the proximal part of a femur was noted protruding from the soil. These remains, which were saponified, were not in a body bag. It is unclear at this point if these constitute a separate individual or are part of Individual 3.

The RS team made no site sketches, and the soil was not screened. The remains were placed in four body bags and taken to Trebinje for autopsy (Photo 8).

Postmortem Examination Findings

At the time of writing of this report, no autopsy results had been received by PHR.

Process Evaluation

Exhumations at the first two sites were straightforward and presented no problems. All bodies in these cemeteries had been wrapped in body or plastic bags and deposited in crypts. However, the remains at the Partizansko cemetery were buried in the ground, and the techniques used to excavate these bodies were extremely poor and inadequate. The two laborers were equipped only with a pick ax and shovel. They used the pick vigorously to loosen the soil and did not check to see if potential damage would be done to the body and bag. The random use of the pick ax resulted in the penetration of a skull. Moreover, instead of making sure that all edges of the body bag were exposed before attempting to lift it out of the ground, the laborer repeatedly and consistently hooked the pick ax under the bag and tried to pry it up. This resulted in severe damage. In addition, the workman stood on the remains while attempting to lift the body bag. Once these bodies were recovered, no further effort was made to explore the soil and area extending from Individuals 2 and 4.

Transportation vehicles were also inadequate: in order to fit all remains in the truck for transport, Mr. Marić stood on the body bags and stamped them down. The inadequacy of transportation was not really an oversight on the part of the RS team. According to Dr. Karan, the team had expected to recover at the most 10 or 11 bodies from the three sites;

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instead the MNI was at least 26 individuals. Dr. Karan did ask the PHR Forensic Consultants to help transport the bodies to Trebinje, and initially Dr. Harrington had agreed to do so. On further thought, however, because of the political tensions that existed between Yugoslavia and NATO at that time, Dr. Harrington decided that traveling to the RS might pose a risk to the PHR team and vehicle.

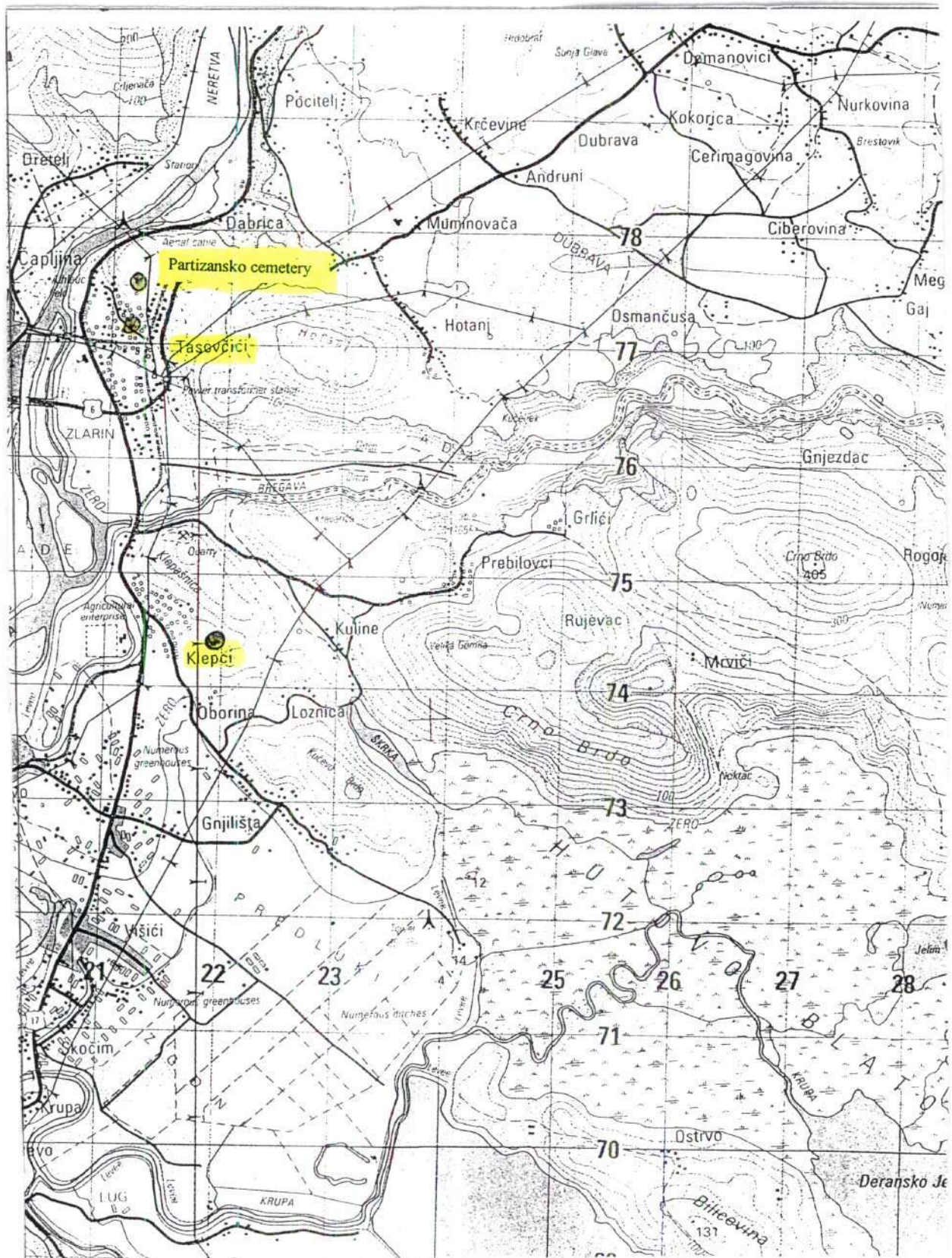


Figure 1.

Čapljina area site locations



Photo 1: Northwest view of crypts at Klepci cemetery (Roll 99-1, Exp. 8).



Photo 2: View of Tasovčići cemetery (Roll 99-1, Exp. 14).



Photo 3: View of Partizansko Cemetery (Roll 99-3, Exp. 6).



Photo 4: Klepci cemetery, burial 9. Multiple individuals. (Roll 99-1, Exp. 7).



Photo 5: Klepci cemetery. (Roll 99-1, Exp. 11).



Photo 6: View inside crypt at Tasovčići cemetery. (Roll 99-1, Exp. 15).



Photo 7: View of markers at Partizansko cemetery (Roll 99-3, exp. 5).



Photo 8: Partizansko cemetery (Roll 99-3, exp. 14).