

# PHYSICIANS *for* HUMAN RIGHTS

Pere Cuskica br. 24  
75000 Tuzla  
Bosnia & Hercegovina  
tel/fax: 387-75-250-639, tel: 242-936

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## **Forensic Monitoring Project Report Ozren Mountain Region, Including Stog, Gostovici, Zavidovici, etc. November 10, 1997 - November 27, 1997**

Page Hudson, M.D.  
Director, Forensic Monitoring Project  
Physicians for Human Rights, Tuzla  
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### **Summary:**

The Ozren Mountain region was subjected to countless searches for surface remains and for mass graves in November, 1997. The site and body searches were conducted by various RS teams, generally accompanied by Federation police, UN police, IPTF officers, and/or Swedish or Turkish SFOR troops. RS and Federation commissioners and other officials and personnel were commonly in attendance at the major sites, but frequently also in the forays into the hills and dales. The RS personnel included one or more of the following: forensic pathologist, mechanical engineer/crime scene investigator, cartographer, clerk, photographer, crime scene examiner, scout, laborer, driver, translator, and grave digger, among others. Representatives of OHR and several international organizations were typically at the major sites and frequently accompanied the sorties. The Stog community was a frequent base and staging area for the explorations.

Innumerable searches for remains were fruitless, with three exceptions. Two closely related groups, 17 and four, of bodies were recovered close to the ruined church at Stog. Surface remains of what seemed to be two male adults were found close to each other on the Ozren hill side. Otherwise, almost daily searches for a grave of about 58 reputed victims of a terrorist group as well as reported surface remains were in vain. Thus, the total remains recovered were 23 humans whose deaths were believed associated with the armed conflict of 1992-1995.

Post-mortem examination revealed 22 males and one female. Five of the bodies found in the grave had associated identification documents. Post-mortem examinations to aid determination of the causes of death were underway at last inquiry (December 17, 1997).



### **Site Description Overview:**

The Ozren Mountain area includes thousands of square kilometers of largely forested mountains, scraggly pasture and orchards, watercourses, roads and trails, and numerous towns, villages and hamlets. Many of the communities are but severely damaged, deserted buildings.

The buried bodies recovered were in close proximity to a ruined church located within 200 meters of a paved, two-lane road that parallels a river, in the village of Stog. The first of the two mass graves found was at 30 meters west of a ruined church in Stog (grid coordinate 845 210; map name Zavidovici; edition 4-DMA; series M709; sheet 2783 IV; scale 1:50,000; horizontal datum: WGS 84). The grave site was about 70 meters north of the paved road between Zavidovici (west) and Ribnica (east). Several partly-destroyed and abandoned houses separate the road and the church. A picket fence is but a few meters behind the church and between it and the grave. The immediate terrain is essentially flat and grassy, with eroding mounds above the graves.

There were many and widespread areas of the mountains, glens and plains of Ozren visually examined on foot by the several RS teams. Other searches were made along all but impassable logging trails. One day a small RS squad returned to Stog with partial remains that included the major portion of two skulls.

### **History Relating to the Mass Grave:**

There are several clues, hints, and rumors of mass graves and unburied or improperly interred dead from the 1992-95 war in the greater Ozren Mountain region, particularly relating to combat occurring in the area in July, 1995. One is of execution and burial of about 58 Serb prisoners by an extremist faction. Much of the searching, particularly in the area of the region of the Gostovi River and nearby hills, was for these bodies. In addition, the surface remains sought during this period were believed to be remains from fighting in the territory. Officials from the RS 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade contended that 20 people of the 21 found at Stog during this exhumation were their troops and about 110 of the 130 of their number lost in fighting in the region in the summer of 1995 are yet to be found there.

### **Exhumation Process and Condition of Remains:**

The occasion of going to the church area at Stog originated from the third hand (at best) information that there were eight bodies buried in the vicinity of the church. Upon our first venture to the that area, several of the RS contingent proceeded immediately along worn paths and wagon trails to the rear of the church. There had been no de-mining and most of the remainder of us did not proceed far, remaining on more well-used paths and watching the RS scouts. Within minutes, the RS group said it had a suspect area. Members pointed to several parallel, body length, elongated mounds. Much walking about the church grounds and visual searching was made by RS personnel. De-mining was carried out the morning of November 14. The process was led by Steve Brown of Ronco. The exhumation site was within the officially de-mined area as defined by a "fence" of stakes and tape.



The eight proved to be 17. Removal and dispatch of the 17 bodies was completed in one afternoon. The 17 bodies were found in an approximately 2.5 meters east/west by 15 meters north/south rectangular grave, less than a meter deep in the rocky, clay soil. For this first Stog exhumation, classic delineation of the suspected area was made; a trial trench was run. This was successful. The trench was through the visible hummocks and proved to be directly in line with the bodies. The scene was photographed. An RS official made diagrams. The entire affair was witnessed by representatives of many organizations. Plastic sheeting labeled "UNHCR" formed the individual wrapping of each body. Plastic tape held firm the sheeting. Operatives exposed the wrapped bodies as they lay in seven parallel pairs plus one triple cluster. Extra sheeting and a wooden pole lay buried with the northern-most pair of bodies. There was numbering in-situ. The bodies were carried to numbered bags. Dr. Karan slit each original wrap for a cursory examination. The remaining soft tissue was decomposed and wet. The bodies were essentially complete except that the heads were absent for about half; several skulls were severely fragmented. Uniforms of the RS 16<sup>th</sup> Brigade were on at least several of the bodies. Attendants placed the bodies in their old wraps into new body bags. The labeled bodies went into a van and thence to Banja Luka.

Indirect witness information suggested that there were yet three more bodies near the others already exhumed. Another suspect area was later found about eight meters west of the south end of the trench where the 17 had been found. This approximately one by two by three meter repository was excavated a few days later. The three proved to be four instead. These four similarly wrapped bodies did not have as much banding about the plastic as the previous group of 17 bodies. Dr. Karan and staff handled them in fashion similar to the 17.

No anthropologist or pathologist was present at the scene for the RS recovery of the partial remains of two human skulls. This monitor was told that photographs were taken of the bones *in situ*. The material was separated at Stog by Dr. Karan, who transported the bones to his facility in Banja Luka.

### **Summary of Autopsy Findings:**

As of 7 Dec 97 there had been no autopsies. Much examination had occurred and was proceeding for identification purposes. Five of the twenty-one were said to have had identifying documents in their clothing. One of the four wrapped bodies found together, was believed to be that of a woman. From the group of 17, approximately half of the heads were absent and several skulls severely fragmented. There was a strong belief among some RS authorities that Muslim extremists beheaded some of the bodies, if not living prisoners. Examination by Dr. Karan concerning that issue was scheduled for later in December 1997, as was examination of the two sets of partial skeletal remains.



Search for mass grave.  
Gostovici-Ozren  
Nov. 1997





**View of Stog mass grave area from highway side. Church in distant background.**

**Stog-Ozren**

**Nov. 1997**



**Meadow on far side of church.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**



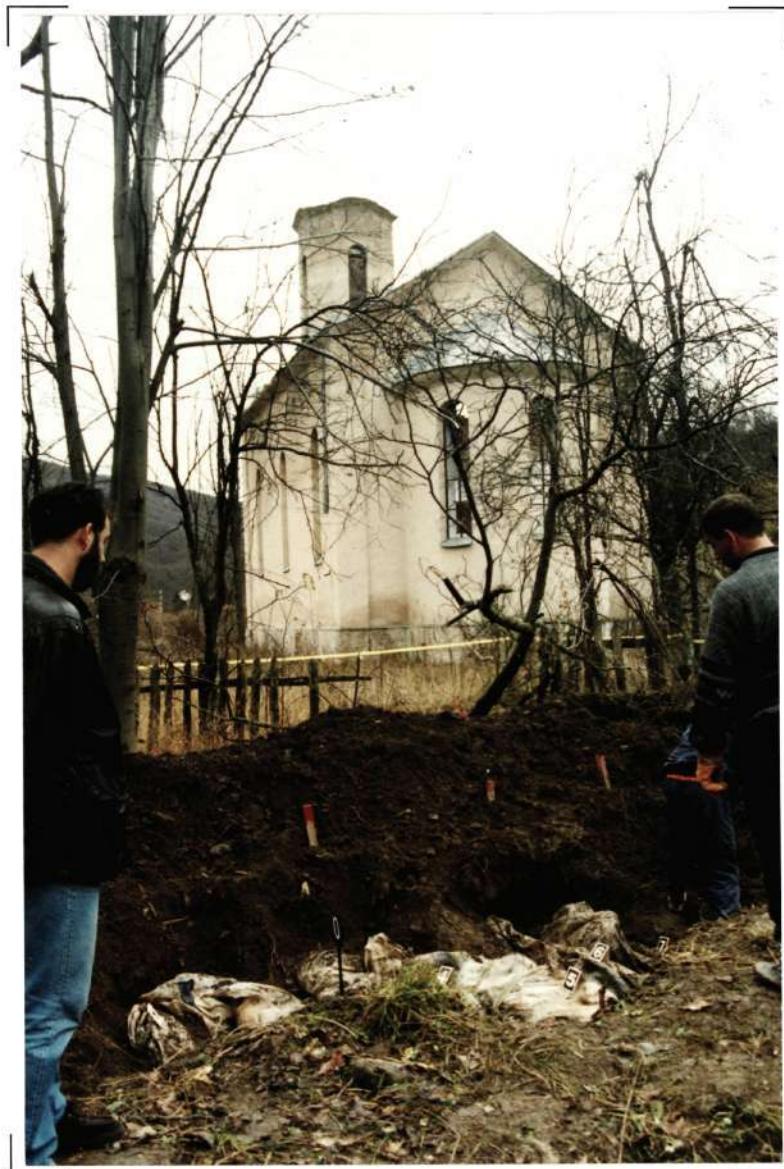
**Forensic pathologist Dr. Page Hudson, PHR Director  
of Forensic Monitoring Project at Stog excavation  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**





**Mass grave with 17 bodies behind ruined church.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**





**Grave with 17 bodies.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**



**Dr. Karan in mass grave.**  
**Stog-Ozren**  
**Nov. 1997**





**Plastic wrapped and taped bodies plus extra plastic  
(at foot of photo)Man on left holds his nose.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**



**Bodies #1-#6 from mass grave with 17 bodies.**

**Stog-Ozren**

**Nov. 1997**





17 bodies from grave  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997



Body #15 from mass grave with 17 bodies.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997





**Attendants load 17 bodies for transport to Banja Luka, RS.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**



**After cursory inspection of body in original plastic, the body is re-bagged. Dr. Karan (knife in hand) moves to next body.**

**Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**





**17 bodies being transported.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**



**Consultation during exhumation featuring OHR representative, Agneta Johanssen, and RS pathologist, Dr. Karan.**

**Stog-Ozren**

**Nov. 1997**





**Dr. Karan probing for bodies.  
Gostovici-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**



**Searching for remains.  
Gostovici-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**





**Dr. Karan and members of RS team.**  
**Stog-Ozren**  
**Nov. 1997**



**Dr. Karan with probe and PHR's Dr. Harrington.**  
**Gostovici-Ozren**  
**Nov. 1997**





**The first of four, plastic wrapped bodies is exposed at Stog, representing an extension of the 17 found a few days earlier . The feet are those of Dr. Karan.**

**Gostovici-Ozren**

**Nov. 1997**



**Grave with 4 bodies.  
Stog-Ozren  
Nov. 1997**





**Dr. Hudson and Dr. Karan examining remains in Banja Luka morgue.  
Dec. 1997**