

FORENSIC MONITORING PROJECT REPORT

Baljkovica Area Exhumations
State Commission on Missing Persons
(29 September 1998)

FINDINGS

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Tuzla, Bosna i Hercegovina
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BALJKOVICA AREA EXHUMATIONS

Summary of Events

The State Commission on Missing Persons (Bosniak) conducted investigations at 11 locations in the Baljkovica region west of Zvornik, Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 29 September 1998. The skeletonized remains of 13 individuals were recovered from surface deposits. The remains were incomplete in many cases, and evidence of animal activity was seen on a few bones. Various articles of clothing were found in association with the bodies.

According to witnesses, the decedents were Bosniaks who fled from Srebrenica in July 1995 and were killed by Bosnian Serb Army forces as they crossed the mountainous area west of Zvornik and east of Tuzla. Their bodies were left where they fell.

The remains were transported to the Tuzla Clinical Hospital for postmortem examination and identification. At the time of this report, the postmortem examinations had been concluded, but the results had not been released. Identifications of the decedents had not yet been concluded.

A Forensic Monitor from Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) was present for the field investigations, but did not attend the postmortem examinations.

BALJKOVICA AREA EXHUMATIONS

Participants and Observers (not all inclusive)

State Commission on Missing Persons (Bosniak)

ALIĆ Sead	Crime Technician
BEKTAŠEVIĆ Dževad	Crime Technician
ČOTA Anto	Crime Technician
HALILČEVIĆ Emin	Judge
HURTIĆ Murat	Member
KEŠETOVIĆ Dr. Rifat	Forensic Pathologist
KOSO Sejid	Member
MAŠOVIĆ Amor	President
Seven laborers	

Republika Srpska Commission on Missing and Tracing

ŠKRBA Slobodan	Member
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Physicians for Human Rights

GOULD Dr. Jill	Forensic Monitor
SPAHIĆ Lejla	Translator

Office of the High Representative

JOHANSSON Agneta	Head, Exhumations Department, Sarajevo
KULJUH Klaudija	Translator and Special Assistant, Sarajevo

SFOR representatives – Swedish Battalion

International Police Task Force – India, Ghana

Site Description

Baljkovica is a mountainous area located northeast of Kalesija and northwest of Zvornik (DMA map Zvornik, Edition 7 DMA, Series M709, Sheet 2883 I, Scale 1:50,000) (Figure 1). The locations investigated were accessed by traveling east of Mahala on Highway 4 for 2 km, north on a gravel road for 3 km, north along a trail for 1.3 km to Highway 470, and continuing to the village of Potočani. From Potočani, the investigators proceeded in a northerly direction along a poorly maintained dirt road for 1.5 km to the rugged mountain area where the scattered surface remains were located.

None of the locations investigated had been assessed for land mines, as local inhabitants stated that they farmed the terrain and had not found evidence of mines in the past. The area, however, was noted to be along the front line where land mines are known to exist. All sites appeared to have been modified by natural elements such as weather and vermin.

Location #1 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 403E 233N) was bordered on the west and south by a row of trees and shrubbery. The site was accessed after a 20-minute hike into the mountains from the road. The surface of the location was overgrown with tall weeds and vegetation.

Location #2 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 401E 231N) was located southwest of Location #1 at the interface between the forest and the field.

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Location #3 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 409E 231N) was located south of the road in a grassy area, accessed by a 0.3 km hike through the forest and field. The remains were found in uncut grasses measuring approximately 1 m in height.

Location #4 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 409E 230N) was located on the left side of the road after hiking down the slope of the mountain for approximately 50 m to a valley. The vegetation at the location consisted of tall grasses and weeds measuring up to 1 m in height.

Location #5 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 410E 232N) was approximately 60 m northeast of Location #4. Similar terrain was evident in this location.

Location #6 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 409E 228N) was situated in the forest on a moderate slope that bordered on a meadow known to contain land mines.

Location #7 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 408E 230N) was identified in the forest immediately northwest of location #6. Burned wood fragments were scattered about.

Location #8 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 409E 230N) was on the top of a hill overlooking a 45 degree slope just to the east of location #7. Fifty meters to the northeast was the road that accessed all locations. A partially destroyed building with a sloping roof was seen just to the east. The terrain was covered with tall grasses and weeds measuring up to 0.7 m in height.

Location #9 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 408E 231N) was situated east of a creek along a sodden bed of earth and vegetation. The site was accessed by traveling south of the road along a forested and heavily weeded path for 200 m and turning left for 20 m. A swollen forest creek flowed toward the road. The creek width on this particular rainy day was approximately 1 - 2 m and 0.75 m deep.

Location #10 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 408E 230N) was located on the east aspect of the creek bed approximately 20 m north of location #9.

Location #11 (grid coordinate 34T CQ 406E 233N) was located approximately 100 m to the left of the road after a hike up a steep hill.

Site History

In July 1995 numerous Bosniaks fled from eastern Bosnia across the mountain region west of Zvornik towards Tuzla, where they hoped to find safety from the attacks of Bosnian Serb Army forces. The majority of those fleeing on foot were males who were separated from their families. As the people fled down mountain trails, roads, paths and through mountain pastures, they encountered hostile forces. It is reported by witnesses that many were shot as they fled, and their bodies were left without burial where they fell.

Exhumation Process and Condition of Remains

All scenes were investigated under the guidance and direction of Judge Halilčević and Amor Mašović. Most locations were isolated with crime scene tape around the periphery by the Tuzla crime scene investigators, therefore eliminating inadvertent disturbance of the evidence. The evidence and bodies were recovered using shovels, and only on a few occasions using small hand tools. All bodies were photographed first as found and again later after being placed in body bags. The bags were labeled with the location and number, zippered closed and transported to the mortuary vehicle. After the exhumation process for the day, the bodies were transported to the Commemorative Center in Tuzla for storage until autopsy at the local hospital by Dr. Rifat Kešetović.

After accessing Location #1, an approximate 9 m² area was examined by Judge Halilčević, Dr. Kešetović and crime scene investigators Bektašević, Čota and Alić. Scattered along the surface of the ground were disarticulated skeletal remains. Recovered were two skulls, four innominate bones, two sacra, ten long bones and numerous vertebrae. Clothing recovered consisted of black tennis shoes and a pair of black heavy-duty type boots. These remains were consistent with two individuals (Balj. 1 & 2).

Location #2 consisted of a 6 m² area along the forest floor where skeletonized surface remains of what appeared to be a young male and young female were found (Photograph #1). Traumatic injuries to the right scapula were noted during the recovery operation. Fragments of clothing were seen, including two zippers and what appeared to be a belt. The remains were consistent with two individuals (Balj. 3 & 4). A third skeletonized, disarticulated body (Balj. 5) that was scattered over the forest floor was recovered approximately 3 m from Balj. 3 & 4. All remains were photographed and collected by hand. Thorough examination of the underbrush was undertaken for extraneous significant materials. A brown shoe and possibly a sweater were recovered.

Location #3 yielded scattered bones consisting of a tibia, an innominate bone, two femora and numerous vertebrae; these were collected by the crime scene investigators from the forest floor. Also recovered after sifting through the decaying leaves along the forest floor were athletic shoes and a civilian-type shirt. No skull was recovered (See Location #11). The remains, which consisted of a minimum of one individual, were photographed at the site (Balj. 6).

Location #4 revealed surface remains, with the skull located to the north and the long bones to the south. The sacrum was identified within the clothing. The skeletonized remains were partially discolored black, which may represent thermal injuries. The skull was intact. Additional bones recovered were two scapulae, a right humerus, and numerous long bones, vertebrae and innominate bones. The body (Balj. 7) was photographed by crime scene investigators and placed in a body bag.

Location #5 yielded skeletonized surface remains comprising a pelvis, ribs, ulna and other long bones in a 4 m² area. A defect was noted in the right scapula during the recovery. Adjacent to the remains was a pair of deteriorating red shorts. The recovered elements represent a minimum of one individual (Balj. 8).

Location #6 yielded a skeletonized skull atop the soil just to the east of the forest. No body number was assigned, given the absence of associated skulls at other locations in the area.

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Location #7 consisted of surface remains located on the forest floor admixed with fallen leaves and particles of charred wood. The skeletonized remains consist of a pelvis, humerus, right and left femur, tibia and scapula. The green, military-appearing clothing scattered around the scene appeared burned. Two shoes were collected from the area. One shoe was a heavy-duty high-topped boot and the other was a brown, low-cut shoe. A minimum of one individual was recovered (Balj. 9).

Location #8 yielded the skeletonized remains of an individual that was partially obscured by tall grass. The entire body was devoid of tissue. Clothing was scattered next to the body. An identification document was recovered next to the body (Balj. 10).

Location #9 yielded the remains of a single skeletonized male that was removed by surface collection along the sides of the previously described creek. The remains consisted of a skull, femur, mandible and other bones. Clothing adjacent to the body consisted of orange and brown colored athletic shoes and various other articles. The skull demonstrated evidence of comminuted fractures (Balj. 11).

Location #10 consisted of two sets of surface remains located along the creek bank and within the confines of the creek. Two skulls, one innominate bone, one ulna and one scapula were retrieved without difficulty. Due to the location near running water, the possibility exists that many of the bones may have been carried away over the years when the creek had risen. A black high-topped boot and pieces of deteriorating clothing were recovered from near the bodies (Balj. 12 & Balj. 13).

Location #11 yielded a skull that was resting on the ground beneath a tree. The skull was devoid of soft tissue. No body number was assigned, given the absence of associated skulls at other locations in the area.

Postmortem Examination Findings

Autopsies have been performed on all remains by Dr. Rifat Kešetović. Information on the results of these examinations was not available at the time of writing.

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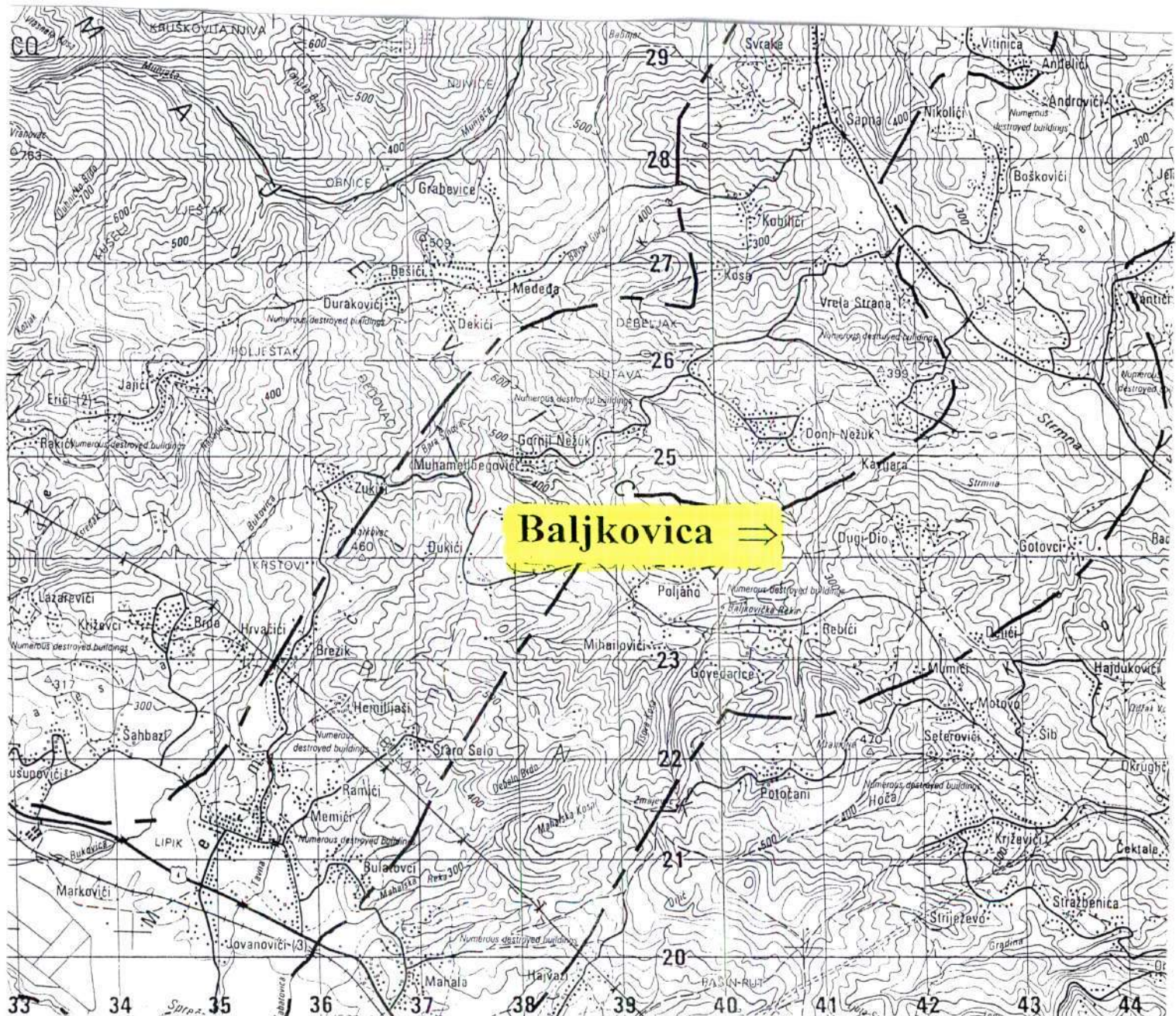


Figure 1. Location of Baljkovica area exhumations.

BALJKOVICA AREA EXHUMATIONS



Photo 1.

Collection of remains from Balj. 1 and Balj. 2.



Photo 2.

Skeletal remains of Balj. 4.

PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) mobilizes the health professions and enlists public support to protect and promote the human rights of all people.

PHR believes that human rights are essential preconditions for the health and well-being of all members of the human family.

We use medical and scientific methods to investigate and expose violations of human rights worldwide.

We work to stop violations of human rights.

We demand the perpetrators of human rights violations be held accountable for their actions under international law.

Since its founding in 1986, PHR has carried out forensic investigations, including exhumations and autopsies, of alleged torture and extrajudicial executions in Afghanistan, Brazil, Israel, the former Czechoslovakia, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kuwait, Mexico, Panama, Somalia, and Thailand. PHR has also devoted considerable energy and resources, under the auspices of its Chicago-based International Forensic Program, to assist the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (and its predecessor the U.N. War Crimes Commission) and the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, to collect evidence of genocide in those nations.

The President is Charles Clements, M.D., M.P.H., the Vice President is Carola Eisenberg, M.D., the Executive Director is Leonard Rubenstein, J.D., the Deputy Director is Susannah Sirkin, the Advocacy Director is Holly Burkhalter, the Senior Program Associate is Richard Sollom, the Director of Communications is Barbara Ayotte, the Campaign and Education Coordinator is Gina Cummings, the Membership Development Coordinator is Steve Brown. William H. Haglund, Ph.D., is Director of PHR's International Forensic Program. Vince Iacopino, M.D., Ph.D., is Senior Medical Consultant. The director of Bosnia Projects is Laurie Vollen, M.D., M.P.H.