

Cyprus uses high-tech tools to speed search for its missing

June 23 2017, by Menelaos Hadjicostis



In this Wednesday, May 31, 2017 photo, skulls of the missing persons are seen in the anthropologist laboratory of Cyprus Missing Persons (CMP) inside the U.N buffer zone in the divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

With glue gun in hand, Turkish Cypriot anthropologist Sinem Hossoz

meticulously pieces together tiny fragments—the pulverized skull of a child, one of the youngest victims of conflict on ethnically divided Cyprus.

Paul-Henri Arni, the U.N.-appointed member to the Committee on Missing Persons, says such things must be done.

"It's for the dignity of the dead," he says, but also to spare relatives the shock of seeing a smashed skull when the [remains](#) are returned to them.

"The skull in all cultures, including here, is the center of the human person, it's the soul," Arni said at the CMP laboratory on the grounds of the disused Nicosia airport straddling a U.N. controlled buffer zone where skeletal remains are assembled for identification.

With international donations, the CMP has worked diligently for 11 years to help heal a gaping wound from this east Mediterranean island's tortured past and foster its future reconciliation. It has unearthed and identified more than a third of the 2,001 Greek and Turkish Cypriots who vanished during fighting between the two sides in the 1960s and during the summer of 1974. That's when a coup aiming at union with Greece triggered a Turkish invasion that split the island into a breakaway, Turkish Cypriot north and an internationally recognized south.



In this Wednesday, May 31, 2017 photo, a bulldozer and workers of Cyprus Missing Persons of the two communities work together during an excavation in a field for missing persons in the Turkish breakaway northern part of divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

Time is working against the committee. Potential eyewitnesses who could help pinpoint graves are dying out, while unceasing construction sometimes makes such burial sites forever inaccessible.

To expedite its work, Arni says the CMP is now sifting through archival information it has for the first time gained access to from the U.N., the International Committee of the Red Cross and some six countries that had dispatched peacekeeping troops to Cyprus at the time of the fighting.

It's also investing in new technologies like the Geographic Information System, or GIS, that links all information gathered from archives, investigators and eyewitnesses to give a more exact estimate of possible burial sites.

Gulden Plumer Kucuk, the CMP's Turkish Cypriot member, says she expects the new approach will begin to produce results within a year. She estimates the archival search will boost the inflow of information by up to 20 percent.



In this Saturday, June 10, 2017 photo, Eleni Kyriakou, 88, right, mother of 20-year-old Epiphaios Kyriakou who went missing in 1974 during the Turkish invasion, seen in portrait, left, mourns during his funeral at a military cemetery at Makedonitissa in divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

"The important thing is that we do everything in our capacity ... so when we turn our faces to the families, we should be able to say that we did everything for them," she said.

The decades-long agony of the relatives of the disappeared is what drives Romanos Liritsas, a Greek Cypriot researcher with the committee.

It's "the humanitarian aspect that edges us to speed up, because the relatives have been waiting much too long to find their beloved ones," says Liritsas, standing in a field in the northern, Turkish Cypriot half of the island where colleagues, acting on a tip, are searching for a missing soldier's remains.

Greek Cypriot Eleni Kyriakou lived long enough to bury her son. The 88-year-old sat in a wheelchair at the head of the grave into which the small, wooden flag-draped coffin carrying the remains of her son Epiphanios was lowered—a burial with full military honors at Makedonitissa military cemetery.



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The remains of Epiphanios, a 20-year-old second-lieutenant, were found along with those of five other comrades in a makeshift grave after vanishing on Aug. 15, 1974, during a retreat from of advancing Turkish troops.

A Turkish Cypriot man who recently recalled seeing the soldiers' unburied bodies in a gully shortly after fighting ceased, said Sevgul Uludag, a Turkish Cypriot journalist who for years has been gathering information on the whereabouts of the missing. The Turkish Cypriot man was 7 years old at the time, riding atop a donkey led by his

grandfather, who had buried the soldiers.

Epiphanios' older brother Kyriakos said the back of his brother's skull bore a small hole.

"After 43 years, you can imagine the emotional pressure," said Kyriakou. "When I saw the bones of my brother, I felt relief from this pressure."



In this Wednesday, May 31, 2017 photo, an anthropologist works on the remains of a missing person at the anthropologist laboratory of Cyprus Missing Persons (CMP) inside the U.N buffer zone in the divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

The CMP still encounters a strong unwillingness from some witnesses or even perpetrators to talk, despite promised immunity from prosecution.

"We're 100 percent sure that there are people that are still alive who are keeping information," says Kucuk's Greek Cypriot counterpart, Nestoras Nestoros. "We want them to understand that it is very, very useful for us and for the families that are still waiting and still looking for their loved ones."

A public appeal for information has been made by the island's Greek Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Turkish Cypriot leader Mustafa Akinci, who will meet in late June in Geneva for a summit in continuing pursuit of a breakthrough deal reunifying the island. A similar appeal has been made by the island's Christian and Muslim leaders.

Not all remains of the missing will be found, says Kucuk. In some instances, only partial skeletal remains will be returned to families.



In this Wednesday, May 31, 2017 photo, an anthropologist classifications the remains of missing persons at the anthropologist laboratory of Cyprus Missing Persons (CMP) inside the U.N buffer zone in the divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

Some of the dead were left exposed on hilltops or buried in riverbeds, so their bones were scattered. Others may be buried under apartment buildings where the remains are inaccessible, although the CMP did dig up a private pool to get to the remains of two missing persons. In other instances, remains could have been dug up and reburied elsewhere, reinforcing the silence of perpetrators.

Nestoros says even a single bone from a missing person can offer some consolation to families.

"It shows that this person has died," he says. "This is an answer for the relatives."

Turkish Cypriot Raif Toluk is hopeful his family will soon find answers about his missing father. Working at the state telecommunications authority CyTA, Mehmet Raif vanished on Dec. 22, 1963. Toluk says his brothers were told their father was shot as he rode his bicycle home.



In this Saturday, June 10, 2017 photo, mother of 20-year-old Epiphanios Kyriakou who went missing in 1974 during the Turkish invasion, Eleni Kyriakou, 88, left, and his sister Maria, mourn during his funeral at a Christians Orthodox church at Makedonitissa in divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

For 40 years, the family had heard nothing. Now Uludag's investigative work has indicated that Mehmet Raif may be among a number of Turkish Cypriots buried in a mass grave.

Toluk says an excavation at the site late last year unearthed the remains of seven people and that DNA results are pending.

"My mother died waiting, 'He will come, he will come,'" says Toluk. "When you say 'This is your father' and we bury, I think we will relax. At least we will know that he's there."



In this Saturday, June 10, 2017 photo, soldiers carrying a coffin with the remains of 20-year-old Epiphaios Kyriakou who went missing in 1974 during the Turkish invasion, his portrait seen on cross over his grave, during his funeral at a military cemetery at Makedonitissa in divided capital Nicosia, Cyprus. Over 11 years of work, Cyprus' Committee on Missing Persons has worked diligently to help heal a gaping wound from this tiny east Mediterranean island's tumultuous past. (AP Photo/Petros Karadjias)

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Citation: Cyprus uses high-tech tools to speed search for its missing (2017, June 23) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-06-cyprus-high-tech-tools.html>

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