

## - CROATIA -

### THE HOSPITAL AT VUKOVAR

#### Introduction:

On December 17, 1992, four international forensic experts, assembled by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) - NGO, USA - conducted a preliminary site investigation of a mass grave, located approx. 6 km. southeast from the city of Vukovar, Croatia (former Yugoslavia.)

The work was carried out under the auspices of the United Nations Commission of Experts. This commission started working in November 1992 and has the responsibility under UN Security Council Resolution 780 (1992) to collect and analyze "evidence of grave breaches of the Geneva Convention and other violations of international humanitarian law, committed in the territory of former Yugoslavia."<sup>1</sup> In its report to the Security Council from January 26, 1993, the Commission of Experts elaborated this general mandate: "The Commission understands that the purpose of the Security Council in requesting conclusions on the "evidence of violations of international humanitarian law is not merely to establish the existence of certain patterns of criminality but also to obtain specific evidence such as an investigative body would need for prosecution purposes. Seen in this perspective, the Commission's task requires in-depth investigations which, given the volume of the available information and existing practical constraints, can be carried out only on a selective basis.... "An important concern of the Commission in identifying the cases to be investigated in depth is to discern patterns of

---

<sup>1</sup> U.N. Security Council, Letter dated 9 February 1993 from the Secretary-General Mr Boutros Boutros-Ghali, addressed to the President of the Security Council.

behavior sufficiently consistent to reveal genocide, "ethnic cleansing" or "systematic sexual assaults"<sup>2</sup>

In order to gather this evidence, the Commission of Experts has established as one of their tasks to carry out on-site investigations of alleged crimes in the Vukovar area and the mass grave near Vukovar, through the international forensic team - which includes EAAF members- assembled by PHR.

The mission counted on the escort and assistance of the United Nations Protection Forces (UNPROFOR) Sector East. The delegation was formed by Dr. Clyde Snow, forensic anthropologist; Eric Stover, PHR Executive Director; Dr. Rebecca Ann Saunders, archaeologist and Dr. Morris Tidball Binz, MD, member of EAAF.

#### Background of the case:

On November 20, 1991, during the evacuation of Croatian patients from the Vukovar Hospital, 200 patients and medical staff members disappeared. "At that time, the hospital held several hundred civilian and military patients, most of whom had been wounded in the heavy fighting in an around Vukovar during the preceding months. When Serbian forces occupied the Hospital in mid- November, both sides agreed that the approximately 420 Croatians patients should be evacuated to Croatian-held territory. "<sup>3</sup> The evacuation was going to

---

<sup>2</sup> UN Security Council, Interim Report of the Commission of Experts Established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 780 (1992), January 26, 1993, Annex I.

<sup>3</sup> PHR Report of A Preliminary Site Exploration of a Mass Grave Near Vukovar, Former Yugoslavia, January 19, 1993, p. 28-29.

be monitored by representatives of the European Monitoring Mission and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

That morning, however - witnesses recalled - reservist and Yugoslav National Army (JNA) officers and soldiers separated the lightly wounded military and civilian males from the other patients, together with some male hospital workers and boarded them on several buses near the hospital. They were taken to JNA barracks in Vukovar and three hours later to Ovcara where they were held in a warehouse. While walking from the buses to the warehouse and inside of it, men were severely beaten by JNA soldiers and Serbian para-military units with blunt instruments for several hours. At least two men were beaten to death.

At 6 pm. that same day, JNA soldiers divided the prisoners into groups of about 20 men. A truck carried off one group at a time, returning empty, every 15-20 minutes. Witnesses were able to give some information concerning the landscape while on the truck.

The grave was discovered by Dr. Snow and members of the UNPROFOR Civilian Police (UNCIVPOL) at the end of a ravine, in an isolated wooded area southeast of the farming village of Ovcara, near Vukovar, on October 18, 1992. A preliminary inspection of the site showed three young adult male skeletons partially exposed by erosion and animal scavengers. Soon after the discovery of the grave, UNPROFOR took immediate action to insure the custody of the site until a bigger mission could be sent to the site.

#### **Preliminary Site Exploration:**

The delegation sent in December conducted a survey through the surface of the site to determine if there was any evidence of a mass execution at or near the grave. In addition, they dug up a test trench through the site to establish the

presence of a mass grave. Their main conclusions were <sup>4</sup> :

1 - A mass execution took place at the grave site. A large concentration of spent 7.62 mm cartridges of the type used in Kalishnikov firearms were found in the burr bushes northwest of the gravesite. Some spent cartridges together with a Serbian ammunition box, had been removed from the site by personnel of UNPROFOR, before the delegation arrived at the site. In addition, multiple bullet holes were found in the small acacia tree and in a rusted vehicle southeast of the site.

2.- The grave is a mass grave, containing perhaps as many as 200 bodies. The entire grave site consists of a rectangle 6.8 meters in width . The complete dimensions of the grave site have not yet been determined. A test trench (1 x 7 meters) was dug across the site. Approximately, nine individuals were exposed in the test trench.

3.- The remote location of the grave suggests that the executioners sought to bury their victims secretly.

4.- There is no indication that the grave has been disturbed since the time of execution and interment.

5.- The grave appears to be consistent with witnesses' testimony stating that the site is the place of execution and interment of the patients and medical staff members who disappeared during the evacuation of Vukovar Hospital on 20 November, 1991. However, before that determination can be made with scientific certainty, the grave will need to be excavated and a number of bodies identified using forensic methods and procedures.

6.- The fact that two bodies bore necklaces with Roman Catholic crosses - one bearing a small metal plate with the inscriptions "*BOG I HRVATI*" ( God and Croatians) - suggests that the grave is likely to contain the remains of Croatians.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 27, 31 and 32.

### Identification Preparation:

In Zagreb, the delegation contacted members of the "Joint Commission to Trace Missing Persons and Mortal Remains". The commission is formed by Serbian and Croat medical doctors and forensic specialists and meets periodically in Budapest to exchange information about missing and presumable killed people in the war. The Commission provided the delegation with a list of names and some pre-mortem data about the patients missing from the Vukovar Hospital.

The delegation gave photos to the commission of the necklaces and other personal effects found in the test trench. The commission will distribute the photos among relatives of victims and will continue to collect pre-mortem information related with the case.

### Exploration of other alleged mass graves:

On December 18 and 19, one member of the delegation accompanied members of the UN Center for Human Rights, visiting sites of alleged mass graves in or near UN protected Areas ( Sectors East and West).

Several sites were visited and information was collected about the alleged mass graves that may be investigated in the near future.

### Future Work:

PHR made the necessary arrangements to send a bigger delegation - including two EAAF members- who will stay for several weeks, excavating the entire grave site at Ovchara, Vukovar. This next mission was originally scheduled for March, but due to the current war situation it is uncertain when the investigation of this and other alleged mass graves in former Yugoslavia will occur.