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IRRC





Interview with Florence Anselmo and Pierre Guyomarc'h*

Florence Anselmo is Head of the Central Tracing Agency and Protection Division at the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Between September 2016 and June 2025, she was in charge of the Central Tracing Agency (CTA), leading and coordinating efforts to prevent disappearance, reconnect separated families, bring answers and support to families of missing persons and promote the protection of the dead. For this purpose, she convened on CTA matters across the ICRC and beyond and has overseen the development of a new strategy for Restoring Family Links for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. She is also in charge of the management of protection data.

* Interview conducted by Stephane Ojeda, Managing Editor of the *Review*.

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Florence worked for the ICRC from 2001 until 2007, first as Field Delegate in Colombia, then as Head of Sub-Delegation in Burundi and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. From 2007 until 2016 she worked for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in Jerusalem as protection coordinator, setting up and developing UNRWA's protection strategy and activities in the West Bank. She holds a bachelor's degree and master's degree in political sciences from the University of Lausanne.

Dr Pierre Guyomarc'h is Head of Forensics at the ICRC. A forensic anthropologist trained at the University of Bordeaux (MSc 2008, PhD 2011), his research has focused on human identification, medical imaging and craniofacial analysis. He previously worked at the US Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, contributing to the identification of missing service members while advancing innovative forensic methods. Since joining the ICRC in 2014, Pierre has led forensic operations in contexts such as Ukraine, Lebanon and Georgia, and he has overseen programmes from headquarters since 2017. Today, he directs a global team of around 100 experts implementing humanitarian forensic action in conflict and crisis-affected settings worldwide.

Keywords: protection of the dead, ICRC, Central Tracing Agency, the missing, armed conflict, humanitarian forensics.

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Thank you for speaking with us. Could you start by telling us about your journey with the ICRC?

Florence Anselmo: My journey with the ICRC began in 2001, with my first mission in northern Colombia. Interestingly, that's also where I encountered my first dead body, a moment that has remained with me throughout my career and is especially relevant to this conversation. After Colombia I continued my field work, serving in Burundi and then in the Occupied Palestiniasn Territories, mainly in Nablus in the northern West Bank, and later in East Jerusalem. I left the ICRC for a period to work with UNRWA but returned some years later to the CTA and Protection Division at ICRC headquarters in Geneva. I first served as deputy head and later became head of the CTA.

Today, the CTA consists of two core programmes – Protection of Family Links and Forensics – as well as a support function focused on protection data management. These programmes serve people separated from their families, the missing, and the deceased and their families. Our work is fundamentally centred around restoring and preserving family links, protecting the dignity of the deceased, and ensuring proper data handling. Historically, the CTA has also been a central repository for protection-related information. Since its inception, the ICRC has registered persons in vulnerable situations – prisoners of war [PoWs], missing persons and separated family members – tracing their status and whereabouts as part of its protection mandate. This function began in Basel more than 150 years ago during the Franco-Prussian War, where the first temporary agency facilitated the exchange

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of PoW lists between belligerents. In that sense, the CTA is not only one of the oldest parts of the ICRC, but also one of the most emblematic of our protection mission.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: Originally, I am an archaeologist with a specialty in biological anthropology, and I used to study the human remains of past populations in France. Later, I further specialized in forensic anthropology and osteobiographic methods – that is, all the scientific methods that allow us to extract information from the bones of an individual in order to understand their life. After my PhD, I had the opportunity to work with the Central Identification Laboratory of the US Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, which is in charge of the search, recovery and identification of US soldiers who have gone missing or died in previous conflicts. I met the ICRC forensic team while working in this laboratory, which has been essential in setting recent scientific standards in the discipline of forensic anthropology. Back in 2012, the ICRC was already gaining a lot of recognition and admiration from the scientific community and was seen as an impactful organization for humanitarian forensics. I was lucky to be able to work with the ICRC after my time in the United States, and after a few years of field missions, I was appointed deputy head of the Forensic Unit in Geneva in 2017. Since 2022 I have been the head of the Forensic Unit, and I am grateful to work with an exceptional team of more than 100 forensic experts with various backgrounds: anthropology, pathology, archaeology, odontology, genetics etc. The Forensic Unit enables State authorities, practitioners and communities to properly care for the deceased, particularly in situations of mass fatalities, where the logistic and the scientific aspects of the operations are more complex than in regular situations.

Florence, you touched earlier on your first experience with death in Colombia. From that experience to today, how would you explain to a broader audience why it is important for the ICRC to work on issues related to the dead during armed conflict?

Florence Anselmo: I hope this doesn't sound too philosophical, but I believe this issue strikes at something deeply human. It forces us to reflect on what makes us human and how we relate to each other. In fact, one of the archaeological indicators of early human civilization is the existence of burial rituals. This tells us that awareness of death, and of how we treat the dead, has always been part of our humanity.

In war, this question becomes even more pressing. The expectation, sadly, is that people will die. Our role is to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of war, and death is the most irreversible of those. But how we treat the dead is not only about the deceased themselves; it's about the survivors, the community, and ultimately about dignity. Even in conflict, there is a widely held belief, one embedded in our collective conscience, that one must respect the dead, even the enemy dead. The way the dead are treated is a powerful indicator of whether fundamental norms, including international humanitarian law [IHL], are being upheld. Moreover, some obligations under IHL regarding the dead extend beyond the duration of hostilities.

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These obligations matter before, during and after conflict. Respect for the dead is not something that ends with the silencing of guns; it continues and often becomes even more important in the post-conflict phase, especially for reconciliation and healing.

Finally, the suffering of families must be acknowledged. It is devastating to lose a loved one in war, and the anguish is greatly compounded when families are left without the remains of the deceased or are unable to perform burial rites according to their beliefs and traditions. Particularly difficult is the uncertainty when someone goes missing. Psychosocial experts have described this kind of suffering as a wound that only grows deeper with time.

So, working on the protection of the dead is also very much about the living. As one of our forensic colleagues once put it: "You may not think about the dead until it's your loved one. Then it becomes your world."

What roles do families and communities play in these processes?

Florence Anselmo: Families are not just beneficiaries; they are central actors. Our engagement with them starts with a tracing request and continues throughout. They often do more than anyone to search for their loved ones, and our work must reflect that shared commitment. Communities, too, play a vital role, especially in crises. During COVID-19, for example, communities were often the ones recovering bodies. We've developed materials and tools to help volunteers and communities manage the dead respectfully and safely, even under challenging conditions.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: Community engagement is essential in our work to ensure the impact of our support, and the forensic teams aim to collect feedback at every step of their projects. Family associations usually play a very important role in co-designing a forensic response, so we organize information sessions with them to make sure we all have a common understanding of the identification process and its limits. We also work transversally with other ICRC departments, so our assessments and activities do not duplicate or create more difficulties for the communities.

That's powerful. You mentioned IHL earlier – are there gaps in the current legal framework that you think need to be addressed when it comes to protecting the dead?

Florence Anselmo: I should clarify that I am not a lawyer. My understanding of IHL is based on operational experience, applying the law for protection purposes. That said, I can say that there are significant IHL rules that address the treatment of the dead, particularly in international armed conflicts [IACs]. These include obligations around searching for, collecting, evacuating and identifying the dead, recording relevant information, and returning mortal remains when possible. There are also rules around marking graves and transmitting information via the CTA. More provisions exist for international than non-international armed conflicts, but relevant obligations do apply in both contexts. Moreover, these obligations span before, during and after conflict. This aspect is critical – the law doesn't stop when the fighting stops. I also find it noteworthy that customary law and religious traditions, including

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Sharia, have long protected the dignity of the dead and the rights of their families. These reinforce the universality of the issue. So, I wouldn't say the law itself has glaring gaps; the main challenge lies in the implementation, ensuring the law is respected and translated into concrete action on the ground, especially in large-scale conflicts where the number of fatalities can overwhelm existing systems.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: IHL sets out the most complete set of obligations in international law regarding the search, identification and dignified treatment of the dead. There are little or no specific provisions on the deceased in other bodies of law, and under international human rights law [IHRL] there are still debates on whether a person loses their rights as soon as they die. There are also ongoing debates about the need to enhance legal protection of human remains under IHRL in particular. Moreover, the diversity of funerary and mortuary practices around the world is important to take into account. There is a constant need to read the law in light of the realities of conflicts today, the different traditions and needs of the bereaved, and the evolution of technological and scientific advances in the field.

In 2022, the CTA became visibly active again in the context of the IAC between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. What was that experience like?

Florence Anselmo: I would push back slightly on the premise. The CTA has never ceased to be operational. It is, in fact, the original operational arm of the ICRC, dating back to the very first agency established in Basel in 1870.

What changed in 2022 was the rapid activation from the very outset of a specific system under IHL provisions for IACs, a situation we had not seen at this scale since World War II. This system involves the transmission of information about protected persons, both living and deceased, between parties to the conflict via the CTA. Over the decades, as the ICRC adapted to mostly non-international armed conflicts, our practices evolved accordingly. When the IAC between the Russian Federation and Ukraine escalated, we had to recalibrate. We needed to revisit and re-learn how to implement protections specific to IACs, while also preserving effective practices developed in other contexts. This required a shift in mindset. We had to understand how best to fulfil our mandate under changed circumstances, always with the goal of ensuring the greatest possible protection for individuals. Fortunately, we had already begun preparations a few years before to strengthen the CTA's role in IAC contexts. The need for better preparedness came to us in part through discussions with National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies [National Societies], especially as some of them were given specific roles under IHL during IACs, and with State authorities.

When the conflict escalated in 2022, we rapidly started receiving capture cards, and due to our prior planning, we managed to activate the system efficiently. The CTA became a transmission belt for information between the parties to the conflict, providing thousands of updates to families whose loved ones had fallen into enemy hands. The system envisioned by the Geneva Conventions proved not only functional but profoundly impactful, even if not perfect. Were it implemented fully and correctly, we would see far fewer cases of missing persons in such conflicts.

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Could you explain how your teams coordinate at headquarters and in the field when tracing missing persons or conducting forensic investigations?

Florence Anselmo: Certainly. At the CTA, both our Protection of Family Links and Forensic programmes work hand in hand. This work is deeply multidisciplinary: alongside forensic experts, at the ICRC we engage mental health specialists, legal advisers, economic security staff and others. The needs of families are multifaceted – emotional, legal and material – and our approach reflects that.

When it comes to forensic investigations, the primary obligation to manage the dead lies with States. The ICRC's role includes confidential protection dialogue with authorities, advising them on their obligations, and supporting them technically. Often this means helping to strengthen medicolegal systems, training first responders, or providing material support like morgue equipment or body bags.

At the same time, we also conduct direct tracing. Most of the time, this starts with a family member approaching us. The CTA has a statutory mandate to coordinate this work across the global Red Cross and Red Crescent network.[1] Our teams follow leads, visit last known addresses, check hospital records and visit detention centres, seeking to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing individuals.

The ICRC has also engaged in what we call "reverse tracing", starting from unidentified remains to find the family, but it's a resource-intensive process. Even so, we have learned a great deal that has proven useful to national forensic systems.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: The Forensic Unit is comprised of more than 100 experts around the world, and there are also coordination efforts within this team both regionally and centrally (in Geneva headquarters). The diversity of expertise and experience in the team allows the ICRC to make strategic decisions on how to adequately manage unidentified human remains and to leverage the local medicolegal systems' capacity. We also work with external experts when we lack a very specific set of knowledge, and we bring them on board to provide their services where needed. When we can, we participate in regional and international scientific events in order to update ourselves on the state of the art in forensic sciences and connect our interlocutors with the relevant expertise.

What are the most pressing challenges in protecting the dead in armed conflicts?

Florence Anselmo: I would highlight three. First is awareness and political will: many still fail to see the protection of the dead as a priority, so we need stronger promotion of the issue and more sensitivity to what respectful management of the dead entails. Second and third are preparedness and prevention. States need to prepare in peacetime – through contingency planning and integration of international legal

1 Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, *Restoring Family Links: Strategy for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement 2020–2025, Now Extended to 2030*, Res. 6, 2024.

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obligations into national laws, policies and practices – so they are ready when war breaks out. For example, not deploying soldiers with ID tags or failing to collect DNA in advance makes later identification nearly impossible. With proper preparation, many missing persons could be accounted for from the start.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: The main challenge we identified in conflict zones is usually to adapt the local coordination of the different actors involved in managing the deceased. Each country has a unique medicolegal system, formed by a diverse set of first responders and experts, each with their own jurisdiction and regulations. When a conflict takes place, the usual functioning of the system is disrupted, and often the actors involved in managing the dead will not be the same and/or will be overwhelmed by the scale of the event. We are trying to continuously improve our capacity to support local actors at the early phase of the emergency, but it is still a challenge to ensure rapid coordination and provide timely support, be it material assistance or technical expertise. If the deceased are managed quickly, the identification is usually faster and easier, because the information about the event is still recent and accurate, and the remains are more likely to be in a good state of preservation. However, after a few days or weeks have passed, it becomes exponentially difficult to obtain accurate contextual information about the death, and the decomposition of the body makes the *post-mortem* analysis more challenging. Forensic archaeologists, anthropologists and odontologists are therefore particularly needed in these cases.

How do you navigate the diverse cultural and religious practices around death and burial?

Florence Anselmo: This is crucial. While death is a universal experience, cultural expressions and rituals vary greatly, and whatever we do must be shaped by that reality. This means engaging with religious leaders, communities and families to ensure that our response is appropriate and respectful. We've learned this through experience. For instance, in Bougainville, communities rejected DNA testing because sending remains abroad violated local spiritual beliefs. So, we adapted, shifting away from a purely scientific approach to one rooted in cultural sensitivity. Even creating a memorial space can be meaningful when individual identification isn't possible.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: It is extremely important to keep the affected population at the centre of our approach, and this means considering their needs before, during and after any humanitarian operation. Our staff are aware that they need to maintain close communication with the different beneficiaries – families and communities, but also practitioners and authorities – in order to adapt our activities. A few years ago, we contributed to multiple discussions on the management of the deceased in Muslim communities, and with the help of scholars, IHL experts and religious leaders, we were able to bridge the scientific standards with the cultural and religious needs of these communities. For example, experts can adapt their methods to speed

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up the analysis, limit invasive examination of the remains, and be wary of the importance of gender in who is handling which body. The fact that we currently have teams working in more than fifty countries also allows for a better understanding of the specific needs and frameworks of those countries.

Could you describe the interaction between the ICRC, State authorities and National Societies in the management of the deceased?

Florence Anselmo: The CTA has a statutory mandate to coordinate the tracing services of National Societies, and we support them with training, tools and sometimes funding. States, of course, are the duty bearers under IHL. National Societies play a dual role, partnering with us on operations and acting as auxiliaries to their governments. Depending on the country, they may be deeply embedded in the national system.

Pierre Guyomarc'h: Managing the deceased in emergencies or in conflict is usually not part of the mandate of National Societies, but they may be asked to support these operations in some situations. The ICRC will support National Societies if they help with the recovery or transport of the deceased, so they are trained and equipped to be the first responders in mass fatalities. Beyond the technical importance of collecting the deceased with enough documentation to allow their traceability (and thus facilitate their identification), first responders need to be protected in legal and mental health aspects. The ICRC can ensure that the right dialogue takes place between a National Society and its authorities to mitigate the risks inherent in these activities. The role of National Societies can also be important in their interactions with families and communities – for example, in facilitating the collection of information on missing persons and participating in the activities of family assistance centres after a natural disaster.

What recent advancements in forensic science and tracing technology have significantly improved the protection and identification of the dead, and how are these tools being used by the ICRC on the ground?

Pierre Guyomarc'h: The field of forensic science is constantly evolving, but advanced technologies are not all easily implementable in the field, particularly if they require new machinery or expensive materials. A key example of relevant advances is the creation of faster and more accurate genetic extraction methods, which can prove essential in analyzing degraded bone samples. In large caseloads, the application of forensic genealogy may also increase the identification rate in the future, but there is still a gap between needs and local capacity for this expertise. Another example is the multiplication of isotopic research, which opens more avenues to estimate the geographic origin of skeletal remains and could help to narrow the list of hypotheses of identity for unidentified persons. Beyond the forensic sciences, the most notable advancement is, of course, the use of artificial intelligence, which is being extensively discussed in the humanitarian sector and has a high potential for analyzing large and complex datasets on missing persons. There

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is still a lot to develop in this field, and the scientific community at large is actively debating the best and safest way to use these new tools. We hope to see concrete applications in the field soon.

Can you describe the process for verifying identities in war-related mass casualties, and explain how you balance scientific rigour with ethical considerations in these sensitive operations?

Pierre Guyomarc'h: We have to make a distinction between a scientific identification and a legal identification. The former may require different experts to confront lines of evidence and compare the information from the missing persons with the information collected from the remains, while the latter depends on what is accepted by the domestic law to produce a certificate of death. When sufficient circumstantial information is available and there is no question regarding the hypothesis of identity of the deceased, visual recognition by a relative is typically enough to confirm identification, but when there is some uncertainty or when the facial features have been altered, the scientific process needs to be employed. In war-related mass casualties, armed forces ideally keep track of their operations and their soldiers who go missing or are killed in action. Well-organized data on the events may provide enough information to facilitate the search and identification of these combatants and limit the need for extensive or invasive *post-mortem* analyses. Ultimately, we adapt our advice and approach to each situation, depending on the available expertise, the domestic framework and the needs of communities.

How do you manage the tension between the urgent need to identify and return the remains to families and the longer, more meticulous process of forensic investigation?

Pierre Guyomarc'h: There are various solutions for ensuring the proper management of the deceased for each scenario of a mass fatality event. Depending on the pressures of the situation – security, legal, public health etc. – the recovery, transport and storage of the deceased can be adapted without tampering with the lines of evidence that will be used for identification. In many cases, for example, bodies are buried temporarily, so the deceased can be put to rest with funerary rites, even if they have not been formally identified. Another operation at a later stage may allow exhumation and examination in better conditions, if a scientific identification is needed.

Looking ahead, what priorities and innovations do you see as critical for protecting the dead in future conflicts?

Florence Anselmo: The top priority is building understanding of this issue, as it often remains invisible until it's too late. We must communicate it more effectively, not just legally but also emotionally and ethically, and preparedness and prevention must follow. Recent conflicts have shown the sheer scale of the challenge: when hospitals are destroyed, graves improvised and entire areas contaminated, managing the

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dead becomes nearly impossible. That's why advance planning is vital. We also face new threats, such as the misuse of images of the dead on social media for propaganda purposes. This dehumanization is a dangerous trend. Respect for the dead is ultimately a reflection of our collective humanity – if even in death, people are not protected, what does that say about who we are?

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