



Opening ceremony of the 1st World Congress on Enforced Disappearances

Welcome address by Prof. Emmanuel Decaux

CEDI President and former Chair of the United Nations
Committee on Enforced Disappearances
15 January 2025, Geneva

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends,

It is a great honor and privilege for me to open this World Congress on Enforced Disappearances today. It responds to an immense expectation coming from very diverse horizons, and already seems full of promise.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to the organization of this event, starting with our Swiss hosts, and all the sponsors and partners of our initiative.

I welcome all those who will be taking part in our work, whether here in Geneva or from a distance, by dynamically involving all the concerned stakeholders, diplomats and international agents, independent experts and representatives of civil society, especially NGOs.

Above all, I would like to pay tribute to the victims of enforced disappearances and their families, who have always been at the forefront of the fight for justice and truth. For the first time, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance gives them a crucial place by guaranteeing their rights, but more broadly, it recognizes the role of *“any person with a legitimate interest”* in the fight against impunity, which is commensurate with the *“widespread and systematic”* dimension of the crime of enforced disappearance. Through their courage, dignity, and determination, the associations are constantly demonstrating that the mobilization against enforced disappearances admits no resignation, no renunciation, no abdication.

Our collective commitment is not only moral, but also legal. It is made up of patience and impatience. It is a long-lasting commitment, short-term when a disappeared person needs to be found as quickly as possible, through *“urgent appeals”* and immediate investigations in the hope of finding them safe and sound, but also long-term, to fight against oblivion, to find forgotten victims in secret prisons, or to successfully identify the children of families of the disappeared, more than a generation later. The immense progress made in forensic medicine, in particular in the use of DNA research, opens up new prospects for identifying disappeared



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persons, as does the preservation of memory archives, sometimes so humble but so deeply moving. The passage of time can also be marked by backtracking, with the risk of denial, or attempts at negationism, even when “guarantees of non-repetition” are inseparable from the demands for reparation enshrined in the Convention.

There is also the time of law, the time of States. Mobilization against disappearances has come a long way. The Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) was set up by the Commission on Human Rights in 1980. The International Convention came into force in December 2010, almost fifteen years ago. However, there is still a long way to go to achieve universal ratification and effective implementation of this treaty. Despite significant advances, we are still a long way off the mark. That is what this Congress is all about: not a hollow gamble, but a series of concrete, sustained commitments.

Our Congress is part of continuing efforts to give legal status to what has long been a nameless crime. In its jurisprudence, the Human Rights Committee lists the numerous violations of rights caused by an enforced disappearance, but without being able to define its specific element. This is the whole point of the Convention, which establishes the right not to be subjected to enforced disappearance. Beyond legal definitions, enforced disappearance is the denial of all rights, but also the denial of the law, the negation of human personality, and of the rule of law. From the outset, it plunges the victim into a black hole, a legal void, outside time and space. The strength of the Convention lies in its ability to take full account of this specificity, to try and provide a systemic response that can be extended to the criminal level, with the qualification as a crime against humanity.

Faced with all these challenges, the need for coherence is just as important. This implies synergy between all actors, starting with the one provided for by the Convention between the Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED) and the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID), with the effective support of the Office of the High Commissioner. But it goes further, as the Convention specifies that it covers “*all relevant institutions, agencies and offices working for the protection of all persons from enforced disappearance*”. It also concerns regional organizations with strong dynamics, as in Latin America, with the pioneering role of the Inter-American Convention which came into force in 1996, but also more recently within the framework of the Council of Europe and the African Union in particular.

Our Congress was built on a participatory process, based on very open regional consultations. This just goes to show how much we are looking forward to these two days, which represent an exceptional opportunity to respond to challenges that are more topical than ever in a context of international crises and armed conflicts. For us, it is a question of reinforcing the convergence between all the protagonists, by articulating humanitarian protection and criminal imperatives, in full respect of the international obligations assumed by States.



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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Friends, I thank you for your attention and wish you fruitful discussions.

I am pleased to pass the floor to Ms. Nada Al-Nashif, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights.