



# 1<sup>st</sup> WORLD ENFORCED CONGRESS ON DISAPPEARANCES

15&16  
JANUARY  
2025



## First World Congress on Enforced Disappearances

### Opening ceremony

15 January 2025, CICG

UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Nada Al-Nashif

### Keynote Remarks

Excellencies,

Distinguished participants,

Dear friends

It is a pleasure to welcome you to the First ever World Congress on Enforced Disappearances. These are very difficult times for human rights, and it is really impressive to be here together, in solidarity for human rights. I would like to warmly thank our co-organisers: the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the Convention against Enforced Disappearances Initiative and other civil society organisations; and to Argentina, France, Morocco, Samoa, and Switzerland for their invaluable support.



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Last month in Syria, the terrible suffering caused by enforced disappearance was brought to the world's attention as thousands of detainees, whose fate or whereabouts were unknown, were released from prisons. Some of those freed have already been reunited with family members, but tens of thousands of others are still missing. Those families remain desperate for news and glimmers of hope.

I pay tribute to all family members and relatives around the globe who have persevered over decades, often at great personal cost, managing emotional and psychological trauma, in pursuit of truth and justice for their disappeared loved ones.

Enforced disappearances are – most unfortunately - not a relic of the past. This heinous practice persists in all regions of the world. In some countries, tens of thousands of people are still disappeared, and in others, over 100,000 people remain disappeared. Over the past 45 years the Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances has dealt with over 61,000 cases in 115 States. And the Committee on Enforced Disappearances has registered almost 2000 urgent actions in 30 out of the 77 States parties over the past 13 years. Sadly, this is just the tip of a very large iceberg.

We have strong indications that escalating conflicts are increasing the risk of enforced disappearances. It is precisely in circumstances of instability, of repression, and human rights violations that they are more likely to occur.

In addition to conflict, people are also subjected to enforced disappearance on migration and trafficking routes, and in connection with anti-



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terrorism measures or criminal activities. Those who express dissent or expose human rights violations and abuses are often themselves directly targeted.

Whether directly by the State, or with its knowledge and approval, people are abducted, detained, enslaved, tortured, and mistreated, while their family members and loved ones suffer in ignorance of their fate or whereabouts.

And the tragic fact of widespread impunity for enforced disappearances means there is no deterrent for the prevention of these crimes.

Enforced disappearances often create an atmosphere of repression with a chilling effect on the whole of society. They affect everyone. While the majority of disappeared people are men, women and children are hugely impacted. It is women who most often lead the search for their loved ones – as wives, daughters, sisters. They may have to become the family breadwinner, they will fall into poverty, and can be prevented by law from accessing support without a death certificate for their spouse.

Excellencies,

Dear friends,

Over the past 40 years, States, victims' groups, civil society organizations, lawyers, and experts have led important efforts to counter this plague.

The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance was adopted in 2006. To date, only 77 States have ratified it. While some States have criminalised enforced disappearance in their



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national law; others have improved data collection, and some cases have been brought to justice.

Civil society and victims' groups have advocated for more legal and policy reform, have supported search and investigation processes, and have established victim-led solidarity networks. The Committee on Enforced Disappearances and the Working Group, together with other UN human rights mechanisms, have also helped move the needle on this issue, making recommendations to States and providing avenues of support for victims.

But the journey for justice for victims is far from complete.

This First World Congress is a testament to our collective determination to address, prevent and eradicate this profound violation of multiple human rights.

I welcome your commitment to adopt an Action Plan to protect people everywhere from enforced disappearance, and to submit concrete pledges that we can follow up on.

Progress and action in several key areas are crucial to have a lasting impact on the lives of victims, including family members, and survivors.

**First**, the rights and voices of victims and survivors must guide us and must remain at the core of all efforts.

These include efforts on the right to truth, justice, and reparation; the right to liberty and security of the person; the right to be free from torture; among many other rights.



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Family and relatives of disappeared people experience simmering mental suffering, often alternating between hope and despair. Their voices are often doubted, questioned, or dismissed. They are often intimidated and threatened, left wondering if they may suffer the same fate themselves.

States, civil society organizations and the international community must support and protect them. They must be able to speak up and speak out, safely, nationally and internationally. Their views are central to devising and implementing solutions.

**Second**, robust efforts within and between countries to tackle impunity are crucial. This crime remains largely unprosecuted. The lack of accountability tears at the fabric of society, leaving a mark for generations.

States must ensure thorough and impartial investigations into all cases of enforced disappearances and guarantee the independence of judicial authorities to do this work. Enforced disappearance must be understood and recognized as a distinct crime - throughout all stages of the judicial process, including sentencing. States must also strengthen coordination, including to address and prevent reprisals against victims, witnesses, and anyone who support them.

**Third**, States should improve reliable data gathering on disappeared people, ensuring cases are properly identified, to better inform laws, policies, and their implementation.

And **finally**, we must keep pushing – together - for universal ratification and effective implementation of the Convention.



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Our Office is by your side. Our teams around the world promote ratification of the Convention, its effective, practical implementation and follow up to the recommendations of UN human rights mechanisms. We train state authorities to better prevent and detect this practice. We advocate for investigations to bring perpetrators to justice. And we follow up on individual cases and connect victims with the Committee and the Working Group.

Distinguished participants,

Enforced disappearances are a human tragedy - trapping the disappeared, their families, relatives, and communities in fear, darkness, and uncertainty.

We know that international efforts can make a difference. The UN General Assembly's landmark decision in 2023 to establish the Independent Institution on Missing Persons in the Syrian Arab Republic was a crucial step in addressing this issue. So, I urge us all to join forces, share knowledge and lessons, and strengthen cooperation and political commitment to tackle this dreadful crime.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and look forward to hearing about the results of your exchanges.

Thank you.