

## KNOWING THE TRUTH IS A HUMAN RIGHT

### Enforced disappearances – an issue for the EU?

Today, when people hear the term ‘enforced disappearance’ they still think first of past crimes in military dictatorships in Latin America. However, this serious human rights violation is still an everyday occurrence in many parts of the world. It can take months or years for people to find out what has happened to their missing relatives, whether they are even still alive and who is responsible for the crime perpetrated against them. The financial impact on families is often severe, and surviving relatives frequently come under pressure and find themselves facing threats or worse. It is usually women who lead the search for missing family members and the fight to secure the truth and compensation.

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In July 2019, after 10 years in office, I swapped my work as a Member of the European Parliament for a seat on the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances (CED). There are some similarities between the two roles. I was elected to both - the first time by voters in Germany, this time by the States which are parties to the International Convention for

the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance, ICPPED. In both roles, protecting human rights was and is a priority: as chair and vice-chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI), I investigated many human rights violations around the world and used all the possibilities offered by the EP to improve the human rights situation. As a member of the CED, I am still dealing with specific complaints and prevention, focusing on a particularly brutal type of human rights violation, enforced disappearance. And looking at the EU from both vantage points, I cannot help but feel that it should be doing more to combat serious breaches of human rights. But there are many differences as well: 751 MEPs here, 10 committee members there. I was paid for my work in the European Parliament. My work on the CED, meanwhile, is voluntary, and the UN’s human rights budget is so shamefully small that, to give just one example, the committee can hold only four of its five scheduled meeting weeks per year. The European Parliament is known throughout the world. Mention the Committee against Enforced Disappearances, even in the EU, and the response is most likely to be a puzzled look. Why does this body exist, and what exactly does it do? The CED is one of the 10 so-called treaty committees that monitor compliance with key UN human rights treaties. We independent experts keep an eye on the application of the ICPPED, which has so far been ratified by 62 countries, discuss country reports, examine and decide on individual complaints and make recommendations on how to look

for disappeared persons. In addition, relatives can apply for ‘rapid actions’ to help them find such a person. The committee calls on the State Party concerned to provide information or take concrete steps to establish the whereabouts of the person in question. Thus far the committee has dealt with almost 900 applications for rapid actions; most of the recent ones have come from Iraq and Mexico. Even if only very few disappeared persons are found either dead or alive, our work sends the States concerned and the family members who submit applications the important message that human rights cannot be breached with impunity.

The EU can and must take determined action to ensure that cases of enforced disappearance are resolved, that those responsible are punished, the relatives are compensated and that human rights activists are supported in their fight against enforced disappearances. In December 2020, the ICPPED will be 10 years old, a good reason to lobby for more support. Thus far, however, only 12 EU Member States have ratified the convention, although 13 more have at least signed it. If EU human rights policy is to be credible and convincing, more Member States need to ratify the convention as a matter of urgency.

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