

The ABC of the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons (UBPD)

What is it?

The Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons (UBPD) is responsible for searching those people who were disappeared in the context of the armed conflict. It is one of the three institutions of the Comprehensive System for Truth, Justice, Reparations, and Non-Repitition (CSTJRN) that arose from the Peace Agreement signed in 2016. The unit was developed in response to requests by relatives of disappeared persons, and civil society organisations that were part of the peace dialogues. In particular, they asked for the establishment of an institution in charge of searching for the disappeared without discrimination on the basis of their origin, age, gender, religion, militancy, or any other factor.

Nature of the Unit and its Approach

Given that the search and identification of disappeared persons must contribute to victims' right to the truth and reparation, the UBPD is a humanitarian state entity. It is also extrajudicial, so the information it produces cannot, under any circumstances, be used as evidence for judicial purposes. These two elements differentiate the UBPD from other entities involved in the search for disappeared persons in Colombia, such as the Office of the Attorney General of the Nation or the Investigation and Accusation Unit of the JEP.

Its methodology uses a differential and gender approach when working with relatives of disappeared persons. As part of this, the unit has created spaces for dialogue that actively involve family members in the search process, taking into account their knowledge and particular needs.



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Cases

The Unit's remit covers those disappearances that occurred before 1 December 2016 (the effective date of the peace agreement) and that have happened in the context of and as a result of the armed conflict. These relate to the following circumstances:

- Forced disappearance
- Kidnapping
- Illicit recruitment
- Disappearances during hostilities: combatants, both regular (members of the Public Force) and irregular (members of illegal armed groups).

Objectives

The UBPD has a 20-year term (from February 20, 2018), in which it must fulfill the following objectives:

1. To implement the search for disappeared persons and, in the case they are alive, locate them.
2. To coordinate and cooperate with the recovery, identification, and dignified handing over of the bodies.
3. To design and implement the National Plan and Regional Searching Plans.
4. To communicate information about the development of search plans to family members and society.
5. To follow the requirements and guidelines of the Truth Commission, and provide them with reports about what happened to the disappeared persons.



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Challenges

Since it began its work, at the end of 2018, the UBPD has taken on several challenges:

1. Gaining access to the resources needed to fulfill its functions. Of the three institutions of the transitional justice system, the UBPD has been the last to get underway.
2. The organisation and consolidation of the universe of disappeared people. Following the work carried out by the National Center of Historical Memory (and the Unique Registry of Victims) in reviewing the data of the National Registry of Disappeared Persons, and the Attorney General's Office, it is estimated that more than 100,000 people were forcibly disappeared.
3. Structuring regional and local search plans as well as investigation strategies. This has been done through the creation of the National Registry of Graves, Illegal Cemeteries and Burials, which identifies locations where human remains can be found. The Unit has been able to achieve this due to the support and information provided by relatives, communities inhabiting these territories, victims' organisations, and other official sources.
4. Improving the tools required for the identification of bodies that are discovered, as well as those that remain in cemeteries or university repositories.
5. Undertaking the search for disappeared persons amid a persistent and heterogeneous armed conflict, guaranteeing the continued participation of victims, and ensuring the confidentiality of information received.



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Achievements

The UBPD's work has not been easy. However, the Unit has advanced both in its structure and in its work with victims, including:

1. Carrying out pedagogical days for the search;
2. Collaborating with the JEP in defining the 16 areas of the country that require precautionary measures to ensure the protection of the remains of possible victims of forced disappearance;
3. Creating multiple channels so that victims of forced disappearance can access information and the search process efficiently and quickly. These include telephone lines and the website, in addition to being able to attend UBPD facilities;
4. Providing information on the location of corpses; and coordinating and providing accompaniment and support to seven dignified ceremonies of both individual and collective character;
5. Taking samples of genetic information from fifty families of people reported missing in the Magdalena Caldense;
6. Advancing in the production of a robust review on the phenomenon of disappearance in the context of and as a result of the armed conflict.

Embrace Dialogue celebrates the effort made by the UBPD to support victims' right to truth and reparation in the case of forced disappearance in Colombia. This snapshot is the first in a series of publications that will report in detail on the progress, challenges and opportunities that this institution offers to close the page on the war in Colombia.



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