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our loved ones

The discovery of human remains has brought hope to the family of one of the Disappeared. As they await the results of forensic tests, Lisa Smyth talks to some of those whose lives have been ripped apart by the mysterious disappearance of their loved ones at the hands of paramilitaries

Friday, 14 November 2008

Seamus Ruddy was thirty-two when he vanished. Some 23 years later — and despite extensive efforts by a Government body set up to locate the remains of the Disappeared — his body has never been recovered.

Mr Ruddy was working as a teacher in Paris when he was murdered by the INLA who disposed of his body at a secret location some time in May 1985.

For over two decades, his heartbroken family has lived in the shadow of this heinous act, with the desperate hope that one day his remains will be discovered and they will finally be able to give him a Christian burial.

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"At the moment we are not looking for justice," said Anne Morgan, a sister of Mr Ruddy and the last member of his family to see him alive.

"This is the most peculiar thing about the families of the Disappeared. It isn't justice we are looking for. We are just looking for the human right to bury a loved one.

"I was working as a teacher and I went to Paris on a school trip and stayed with Seamus about two weeks before he disappeared.

"He would have written letters and rung home and this stopped. Then his girlfriend returned to Paris from a trip home to Ireland and he was gone. His passport and belongings were still in his flat so we knew it was an abduction.

"Seamus went missing in May 1985 and in November of that year the INLA threatened us with death to stop us going to the Press. At that time we had to go to Paris to identify some clothes which had been found in a bag in the River Seine by some schoolchildren.

"Some of the clothes were ones Seamus was wearing in the last photograph I have of him that I took when I was in Paris.

"We had to live under the death threats,

which was very difficult because we couldn't talk about what was happening.

"It was absolutely terrible being under that threat. In the background I would have still been writing to people in France to try and get them to look at it from that side, but no-one seemed to want to know and the fact that Seamus went missing in France made things even more difficult for us because of the language barrier."

For years, the families of the Disappeared were left in an unimaginable limbo.

However, their plight was brought to the fore in the mid-1990s when the daughter of one of the best known of the Disappeared, Jean McConville, finally broke her silence.

Helen McKendry spoke out after she believed a plea to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams for help fell on deaf ears.

She said: "I told him I was going public to let people know what had been happening. I was terrified, but after the story broke I couldn't believe the support from people. That gave me the push to continue with the fight."

However, it was only during the 1990s, with the announcement of a ceasefire by republican paramilitaries, an admission in the involvement of the murders of the Disappeared by the IRA and the development of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains (ICLVR) that real progress was made in the search for the Disappeared.

Not only did the families of Disappeared victims finally feel comfortable to speak out about their ordeal, heightening public awareness of their struggle, the ICLVR also guaranteed immunity from prosecution to anyone who provided information.

The ICLVR was established in 1999 to locate the remains of people abducted, murdered and buried in secret locations by proscribed terrorist organisations.

Last week, it announced a possible breakthrough in the search for one of the Disappeared with the discovery of partial human remains in bogland in Co Wicklow — widely believed to be missing Danny McIlhone.

And while the development has created fresh hope for all of the families of the Disappeared, they are also anxious that the search for their loved ones is not hampered by false information.

It is important for us as a family to complete this story

Mrs Morgan said: "I was a teacher in Newry for 23 years, but I haven't been able to return to work since a search in France in 2000 found nothing. I tried my best to go back into the classroom, but I just couldn't.

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"And then this year they did another search for Seamus, but didn't find anything. I was devastated by that. I really thought I was bringing him home.

"I started to think that maybe lies are being told about where Seamus is just to increase our suffering."

Without a body, the families of the Disappeared say that cannot begin the grieving process.

"I just feel that it is important for us as a family to complete this story that we have been on for over 20 years now," continued Mrs Morgan.

"I want to be able to bury our Seamus with mummy and daddy. Before my mum died in 1995 she got his name inscribed on the headstone. I think it is very important for us to bury him in the same soil as her."

Mrs McKendry, who was finally able to lay her mother to rest after the body of the mother-of-10 was discovered by members of the public in Co Louth in 2003, said that this was an important step in rebuilding her life.

"I would say that when they murdered my mummy, they might as well have murdered the whole family because they tore us apart and we've never been the same since," she said.

"After she was abducted we tried to get on with it, but when people found out we were all split up and we had no contact.

"We weren't able to talk about it and stories were put out that she had a new family and was living up in the Shankill. Some of the family were so young when she went missing that they had it in their head that their mummy had got up and left.

"You never come to terms with something like this. I don't like to dwell on it, how she died, where she died, because that would really do your head in, but I'm happy to know that mummy is in Lisburn Cemetery.

"When you first get the news that a body has been found you're on a high, but then as time passes and you're waiting for the DNA tests you start to worry in case it is someone else. The whole thing didn't hit me until I saw my mummy's name on the coffin.

"If this is Danny then his family will finally be able to bring him home and bury him along with his parents. I hope that all the families get some sort of closure for themselves."

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