

Today's briefing continues a succession of Helsinki Commission activities regarding post-conflict rehabilitation in the countries of Southeastern Europe which emerged from the former Yugoslavia.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are many problems in this region which, in whole or in part, stem from the horrible conflicts in the region during the last decade. The two themes which have had a particular Commission focus this year are (1) the continuing need to bring to justice those responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide; and (2) the continuing need to resolve the cases of missing persons. These two areas are, in fact, closely related. The tragic reality is that both evidence for trials and identification for surviving family are largely found in mass graves that continue to be uncovered. In addition, documenting the crimes committed and returning the remains of loved ones is needed to help so many people in the region close this dark period and move forward.

Our distinguished guest this afternoon will speak on the question of justice in Southeastern Europe, and few are more qualified than he to do so. Judge Theodor Meron has been a judge at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, or ICTY, since November 2001. He became its President in March 2003. Judge Meron has an extensive career in international human rights and humanitarian law and is considered a leading authority on the subject.

Judge Meron, we welcome you here this afternoon, and look forward to your comments. Your appearance is particularly timely given your recent visit to Serbia, the first for a ICTY President, and what prospects this may have created for apprehending those indicted persons still at large.

We further understand that there are efforts in Serbia but also in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, to give local courts greater responsibility for prosecuting war crimes, including potentially some of the cases currently with ICTY. There are questions of their ability to hold impartial trials, protect witnesses and other matters. Yet I agree with your assertion, made in Belgrade, that having trials take place closer to the people will add to their resonance. Ultimately, whether we are talking about prosecuting crimes or closing missing persons cases, the international community does need to remember that its efforts in Southeastern Europe are ultimately about helping the people recover and move on.