

THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTIFICATION FOLLOWING THE TRAGEDY OF THE SOLAR TEMPLE (CHEIRY/SALVAN, SWITZERLAND)

Prof. Thomas Krompecher

Institut Universitaire de Médecine Légale, Lausanne, Switzerland

On October 5, 1994, 48 members of the Sect of the Solar Temple were found dead at two different locations in Switzerland: 23 victims in Cheiry and 25 victims in Salvan. Our Institute was commissioned to solve the forensic problems presented by this tragedy. Our goals were to establish the time of death, determine its causes, help elucidate the surrounding circumstances and identify the victims. This catastrophe was of an 'open' type: there was no list of 'passengers'; the victims were of five different nationalities and many had just arrived in Switzerland to participate in this event; family ties were very complex within this group; half of the victims were burned and sometimes charred. All the victims were positively identified within 1 month. In the present report, we describe the steps realized to progress in our work. The importance of being prepared for such an event is discussed.