

MISSING AND DECEASED MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

ADDRESSING THE PLIGHT OF MISSING AND DECEASED MIGRANTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

MAY 2021



South Africa is a major destination and transit country for migrants from the Eastern and Southern Africa regions and beyond. Though the Southern African route receives far less public attention than the Central Mediterranean route, the dangers and risks that migrants face along this route and upon destination are of similar humanitarian concern.

Along the journey and after their arrival in South Africa, migrants often face intense hardships and violations of their fundamental rights. Many lose their lives, and it is not infrequent for migrants to involuntarily lose contact with their families and disappear without a trace. There are many reasons for this, including illness, injury, detention, trafficking, deportation and a lack of means, access or resources. A recent assessment has shown that migrants hardly ever anticipate or prepare for the possibility of being separated. As a result, every year, thousands of migrants die or go missing on their journey or upon arrival in South Africa. However, no reliable data exists on the number of missing or deceased migrants along the Southern African route.

The family members who are left behind are deeply affected as they face the uncertainty of not knowing whether their loved ones are alive or dead. This causes great suffering and can be extremely distressing. Many relatives of the missing person spare no effort in trying to find information. They exhaust their economic resources and might even put themselves and other family members at risk. Families can also face numerous practical challenges which include the struggle to access social benefits, selling or managing property or inheritance, remarriage and exercising parental rights. Furthermore, this can impact on the families' efforts to resume their lives and find their place in the community. In the case of death, repatriations and burial rights cannot be conducted, and families and communities cannot mourn at their traditional burial site.



PILOT PROJECT

PILOT PROJECT ORIGIN

Many Zimbabwean migrants traveling to South Africa come from rural areas which are extremely isolated, with almost no means of communication. In case of disappearance, their families lack the resources to conduct an efficient search across the border. In 2016, the ICRC, with the support of the authorities in the Zaka and Gwanda Districts, collected personal information from families on the missing persons that could be used to assist in the search for them in South Africa, whether alive or dead.

The ICRC then visited communities in South Africa seeking to trace the missing individuals alive. In the unfortunate event that the ICRC could not find the missing migrants, with the informed consent of the families, it shared the missing persons data with the South African authorities to see if they could match the description with unknown bodies in South African mortuaries or cemeteries.

Annually literally thousands of bodies remain unidentified in mortuary facilities across the country and are eventually buried as “Unknown Male” or “Unknown Female”. These cases exert increased pressure on the available public services, including pathology services, police services, health services and even municipalities responsible for the burial. The financial implications for the government cannot be overstated. Many of these bodies without identification that are buried are believed to be migrants. To reduce this number, and to provide answers to the families of missing persons, the ICRC collaborated with the authorities to enhance forensic identification procedures employed in one of the leading high-throughput mortuaries in the country. This involved introducing secondary examinations exclusively for identification purposes, standardizing forms and processes, and training of practitioners and forensic students.

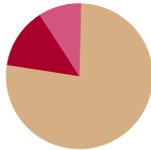
TIMELINE

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- 2022:** Authorities-led mechanism in place
 - 2021:** Increased involvement of the authorities in the project
 - 2020:** Concept note on the way forward; family needs assessment
 - 2020:** Expansion of data collection from families of the missing to Harare and Bulawayo
 - 2019:** Continuation of secondary examinations
 - 2016:** Establishment of an identification unit at Johannesburg Forensic Pathology Services (mortuary) to assist with enhanced identification procedures
 - 2016:** Launch, collection of data in Gwanda and Zaka Districts, Zimbabwe

RESULTS

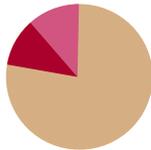
The pilot project proved successful in identifying migrants alive and increasing the identification rate of unknown bodies in the main mortuary of Johannesburg.

PILOT STUDY



Tracing requests:

127 requests, 23 successfully located with ICRC intervention, 14 reestablished connection through own means



Secondary identifications:

416 examinations of unidentified bodies conducted in Johannesburg mortuary with 93 confirmed identities, 49 South African and 44 foreign nationals

FINDINGS

The pilot project demonstrated that:

- Once sensitized and informed properly, families expressed a willingness to actively participate and support the search for their missing loved ones by authorities and supporting organizations.
- Missing migrants were grateful to be reconnected with their families.
- Families were able to provide relevant information on personal features that with their consent was shared with authorities to aid in comparison and maximize identification opportunities.
- A concrete humanitarian-based solution in response to the public concerns raised repeatedly about the unacceptable number of unidentified bodies in South African mortuaries as well as mortuary operations struggling under the huge workload.
- The Forensic Pathology Services in South Africa showed willingness and dedication to implement secondary examinations, thereby increasing the identifications of unknown bodies (which reduces the workload and associated costs) while opening additional storage space for new admissions.
- This identification programme benefited both South African nationals and foreigners, as both were identified through this non-discriminatory process.

PROPOSAL

Based on these findings, the ICRC proposes to transform the pilot project into a coordinated formal programme with the commitment from the concerned authorities in South Africa and Zimbabwe. To be more effective the project needs to transition into a programme run by concerned authorities who can manage the growth of the project to accommodate the gradual inclusion of mortuaries throughout the country. An authorities-led programme could also include the acceptance of missing persons enquiries from more foreign families through an official, safe and reliable multi-national conduit and collaboration.



WAY FORWARD

Despite increasing risks, migration flows to South Africa will remain a characteristic of the region. And migrants will continue disappearing, with serious humanitarian consequences for their families and communities.

The ICRC considers that the authorities are best-placed to respond to this long-term issue and ensure the sustainability and gradual expansion of the programme. South African authorities have the responsibility, infrastructure, legislation and technical expertise to address this humanitarian concern. It will be beneficial to them at various levels:

- Decreased burden on the available judicial, police, forensic and municipal resources and reduce cost implications for the government;
- Development of forensic resources and expertise, which increases the identification of both South African nationals and foreigners;
- Contribution to the fight against human trafficking and crime impunity;
- Option to expand the programme at regional level;
- Response to increasing international organizations' interest in the Southern African migratory situation.
- Development of disaster management (mass fatality planning) capabilities and resources, and showcasing of the high-level of forensic expertise in South Africa on a global stage

CLEAR ASK

It is therefore uttermost important that South African authorities commit to the programme and collaborate with the ICRC in the form of a representative from relevant departments participating in an Oversight Committee on Missing Migrants. This Committee will be in charge of setting up a cross-border mechanism to exchange information on missing migrants.



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The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.

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