



JOINT NEWS RELEASE:

ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF MISSING MIGRANTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Pretoria, 7 October 2021 – The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) convene today, the first-ever meeting of the Oversight Committee for Missing Migrants with South African authorities.

South Africa is a major destination and transit country for migrants from the Eastern and Southern Africa regions and beyond, with a large number coming from Zimbabwe. Along the journey to and within the country, 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.

Against the backdrop of the ICRC reporting that 44,000 persons in Africa are considered missing, a joint initiative with IOM has, for the first time, brought together a community of concern to address the plight that families of missing Zimbabwean migrants face in the search for their relatives.

“The family members who are left behind are deeply affected as they face uncertainty of not knowing whether their loved ones are alive or dead. This causes great suffering and can be extremely distressing,” says Marie-Astrid Blondiaux who coordinates the ICRC’s protection work which is aimed at mitigating the consequences of armed conflict, violence, natural disasters and migration. “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 and showcase the high-level of forensic expertise in South Africa on a global stage,” Blondiaux adds.

On this occasion, the IOM and the ICRC are unveiling for the first time in South Africa a memorial exhibition in commemoration of the countless missing migrants and their families.

The memorial features a series of 60 images in an incomplete puzzle with each puzzle piece representing individuals who migrated from Zimbabwe to South Africa and went missing along the journey or after arrival. These families form part of the ICRC’s Missing and Deceased Migrants Programme, which, with the involvement of the authorities, seeks to clarify the fate and whereabouts of missing individuals, help families restore and maintain contact and increase the rate of identification of bodies in South African and Zimbabwean mortuaries.

“Families of missing migrants often face an endless search for answers, therefore it is crucial for states to set up efforts to support families of missing migrants in line with the resolution adopted by the African Commission on Human and people’s rights,” says Lily Sanya, IOM’s Chief of Mission for South Africa.

The memorial symbolizes how the families of missing migrants are connected in their search for their missing loved ones but similarly to the fragmented memorial puzzle, for the families, their lives remain incomplete as the search for answers continues.

It is reported that 4 000 to 7 000 unidentified bodies are buried as paupers annually in South Africa. The plight of missing migrants and their families is without doubt a humanitarian issue that requires efforts and commitment from the authorities and other actors.

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