

White Paper DVI (target group authorities / diplomats)

Introduction

Disasters and serious incidents, whether or not caused by human intervention, often lead to large numbers of casualties and fatalities. Following incidents such as these many public and private bodies set out to alleviate the suffering of the injured victims and surviving relatives as much as possible.

Victim identification forms part of this process. The return of an identified body to the surviving relatives not only enables them to pay their last respects to their loved ones in a fitting way, but can also aid their own grieving process.

In today's global society it is unusual for disasters to have no more than national impact: it is often the case that people from several nations are involved.

The governments of the countries whose citizens have fallen victim to a disaster share the responsibility for ensuring that the victims are treated with dignity through a transparent process. Authorities and diplomats can play a vital role in this process. This can be achieved not only by facilitating the identification process and providing support, but also by communicating honestly and effectively regarding the DVI process and how it is expected to progress. Communication particularly the methods of identification and providing realistic time frames can make an important contribution to help alleviate the suffering of surviving relatives.

This paper was written to give authorities and (relevant) diplomats in particular a general insight into the identification process and the operational difficulties it entails. Some practical recommendations have been added as well.

General impression

When a mass fatality incident occurs, identifying the bodies is an intensive and, in some cases, time-consuming process, which is often perceived as taking too long by the surviving relatives. In most cases it is not the recovery of the bodies and recording their description that takes so long. It can often take much more time to obtain and collect the ante mortem information needed to identify the victim, especially if that information has to come from abroad.

A lack of understanding of the international procedures used to identify victims and the time the identification process, can often lead to dissatisfaction amongst surviving relatives and the relevant authorities regarding the speed of the identification process.

Following a mass fatality incident partnership between the countries is of paramount importance. The identification process can be expedited by prompt consultation between the representatives of the countries involved, with consideration to the magnitude of the disaster and an understanding of the DVI process itself.

Local authorities, also the relevant diplomats of the affected countries can play a vital role in alleviating the suffering of surviving relatives by communicating clearly and specifically regarding the situation and events, as well as the progress of the investigation.

Outline of the identification process

Identification process

Details of the internationally agreed INTERPOL Disaster Victim Identification Standards are covered in the INTERPOL Guide which can be viewed on the INTERPOL website. (www.interpol.int)

Basis

The Standard is based on the following key principles:

- Victims have a right to identity after their death
- All victims are treated equally in the identification process; there is no discrimination on any basis whatsoever.
- The victims are identified on the basis of the set standards
- A single error can seriously damage the integrity of the entire process and any future processes.

Process

Three sub-processes can be distinguished in the identification process:

- a. the Post Mortem (PM) data collection process
This is the process in which the victim's body is described as fully as possible.
- a. the Ante Mortem (AM) data collection process
This is the process in which as much information as possible about the missing person and any specific identifying features are collected.
- a. the Reconciliation Investigation process
This is the process in which the AM and PM information is assessed, matched and the authority in charge identifies the victim on that basis to the agreed standard.

Identification criteria

The actual identification of the victim is based on the INTERPOL criteria.

Methods of identification used in cases of disaster must be scientifically sound, reliable, applicable under field conditions and capable of being implemented within a reasonable period of time.

The primary and most reliable means of identification are fingerprint analysis, comparative dental analysis and DNA analysis.

Secondary means of identification include personal description, medical findings as well as evidence and clothing found on the body. These means of identification serve to support identification by other means and are not sufficient as a sole means of identification

- So identification is based wherever possible on at least one match for one of the primary identifiers:
 - Dental records (Odontology)
 - Fingerprints
 - DNA

The established identification match is a result of comparison between reliable ante mortem data and post mortem data and is carried out by a suitably qualified specialist in Odontology, Fingerprints or DNA

2. Identification based on unique and/or personal features (secondary identifiers).

Those identifiers include unique features such as tattoos or scars, or unique personal effect. Other supporting information (such as sex, clothing, documents and jewellery) can also contribute to evidence of identification.

These means of identification serve to support identification by other means and are not sufficient as a sole means of identification
3. Identification based on combined information
Even where a strong primary identification standard has been achieved it is good practice to record other evidence that supports identification.

Based on these INTERPOL criteria, a victim can never be identified solely by means of visual recognition!!

Time Scales

As mentioned above, the collection of AM information, especially for foreign victims, can be a time-consuming process. The authorities and diplomats involved can make a valuable contribution by using their contacts and information channels to expedite fast and valid information gathering.

Jurisdiction

There have been situations where Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) operatives have obtained AM data by direct contact with relatives of the victim, without any reference to the appropriate authorities of the victim's home country. Such practice causes difficulties when the home jurisdiction has a duty to investigate the death at home and confirm that a correct identification has been made.

This practice is therefore declared contrary to Interpol DVI guidance. Local authorities and diplomats from the affected countries must prevent such situations occurring.

Evidence of how the identification of a deceased disaster victim has been achieved will be made available to the official representative of the home country of the victim; this includes copies of both AM and PM documentation used in the process.

The legal standard of identification can differ from country to country, therefore the details of which specific features were found to match in order to identify the body will always be provided to the receiving country.

Identification conclusions and documents, including photographic evidence, will be passed on to the official representatives. They should be allowed to arrange further examination of the victim's body if they request it.

Documentation

All the Interpol Forms and the DVI Guide are available to be downloaded from the INTERPOL website

Repatriation

Many funeral directors are experienced in the legal requirements relating to the transportation of victims' bodies across international boundaries and by air.

Effective coordination between transport providers and the responsible authorities in the country of dispatch and receipt can considerably speed up the process of repatriation of the identified body back to the family.

Tips

Contact with the people involved/operational DVI teams/experts

Establish contact with the person in charge of the DVI team involved or the DVI experts in your country as soon as possible. They will be able to advise you on the situation. It will also be possible for you to use your diplomatic and other contacts to facilitate the flow of information needed for the identification process.

Contact with the DVI team of your home country

Always contact the DVI experts / representatives in your home country.

They will also be able to provide you with help and advice regarding necessary activity in this situation.

Contact with diplomats and authorities in other affected countries

Arrange for effective and regular contact with other authorities and diplomats involved.

Coordinate your actions and communication processes with them. This will prevent the affected country or other countries involved from perceiving that the deployment of assisting DVI teams is intended only to give the country's "own" victims preferential treatment.

Identification standards

Do not approve an identification that has not been based on the INTERPOL criteria.

Communication

Do not say anything about the identification process itself or give any time indications without consulting the local DVI managers.

Do not make any promises to surviving relatives that have not been discussed with the DVI managers.

Repatriation

Make agreements with the people in charge in the home country (in some cases private facilities) regarding the repatriation method, the times and procedures for the arrival of victims in the home country and the persons responsible for communicating information on this subject.