

Annexure 15:

Guidance and Information for Families

Source: INTERPOL DVI Working Group

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You have reported a member of your family or a friend missing and fear they may be among the victims of a disaster. This is clearly a distressing time for you and can sometimes be a long and frustrating process. The following information describes this process and will give answers to some of your most urgent questions.

The Disaster Victim Identification Process

Specialists from the Disaster Victim Identification Team of your local Police are responsible for identifying victims of disasters. Those disasters can be man-made like aviation and transportation accidents, terrorist attacks, or natural disasters like floods and fires. The DVI Team is also deployed abroad. It consists of investigators from the police, medical specialists and counsellors. They will give families certainty about the fate of a missing person.

Identification of the human remains takes place according to internationally recognised procedures standardised by INTERPOL. It is a meticulous process to guarantee the correct identification of each deceased person in an incident where there are multiple fatalities. Depending on the incident it may take days or even weeks to fully recover the deceased from a mass fatality site.

The forensic evidence that leads to establishing the identity of the deceased is on the one hand collected during a post mortem examination of all human remains. The most important evidence comes from dental examination, finger prints and DNA profiling. Additional evidence is provided by other indications such as tattoos, scars, further body description and jewellery or clothing. Detailed information will be gathered and documented. All methods will be used to ensure appropriate identification. This information is referred to as 'Post Mortem Data.'

However, your support is needed. An identification of the deceased can only be achieved with information regarding the missing person. This information is referred to as 'Ante Mortem Data.'

In order to achieve this we kindly ask for your assistance:

Please contact a police station near you as soon as possible and file a report on the missing person from your family. The missing persons report is important to establish the identity of the deceased and the injured as well. Based on experience, the number of persons thought missing fluctuates heavily in the first few days following a disaster. We therefore also ask you to notify a police station near you immediately if the person you reported missing has contacted you in the meantime.

You will be asked to provide very detailed information about your family member during an interview. The police will require your assistance in order for them to fill out a standard forms set that which covers all necessary issues. Police officers will ask for entrance to the living quarters of the missing person. They need finger prints, medical and dental records as well as photographs that show for example: tattoos, scars and jewellery. They also need to collect items used by the missing person that may produce scientific evidence (DNA specimen) to assist in identification. You can assist the police by listing the names and addresses of the missing person's doctors and dentists. This is an extremely detailed process which will require a lot of time and patience. Some questions may seem irrelevant, but we have learnt that any detail can be the clue to a successful identification.

The identification process depends on the quality and quantity of the Ante Mortem data.

A team of specialists then compares the information from the post mortem examination with the data from the missing persons to determine the identification. All efforts will be made to identify the deceased as soon as possible and release them to their families.

Frequently asked questions

Q. Where do I go for help?

A. Depending on the incident a contact officer or family liaison officer may be appointed to assist you with questions. They should be able to advise you regarding counselling or other support services available. Please contact the support services by telephone or e-mail to obtain help and information.

Q. Should I travel to the place of disaster?

A. We understand families wanting to visit scenes of the incident as part of the grieving process and access to the site is possible after the investigation process has concluded. This can take several days or in some cases considerably longer. You are an important part of the identification process by staying at home during this time. Please make sure that someone will be able to assist the Police with Ante Mortem data collection and contact a police station near you before leaving home. Please don't travel on your own initiative to the place of disaster. Family assistance centres may be able to facilitate you.

Q. Is it possible to visually identify a deceased person by photographs or with the help of a close relative?

A. Visual identification alone is not considered appropriate as a form of identification. Scientific testing must be carried out ensuring that each deceased victim is identified prior to being released to their families.

Q. How long does the identification process take?

A. Unfortunately, the search for and identification of victims of a disaster are often very time-consuming. We are aware that great patience and understanding is demanded of you and that you are in an extremely difficult position.

Q. How are the bodies handled during the identification process?

A. Each deceased person is afforded the appropriate respect and attention. Certain investigational procedures must be followed. However, wherever possible investigators will endeavour to respect the cultural and religious practices of victims during the investigation

Q. What happens after a body has been identified by the DVI Team?

A. As soon as the identity of the missing person is established, a person to be named by you will be contacted by the police. Arrangements will be made to return the body of the missing person home to a designated place. Please take care to ensure that other family members are then informed.

Q. Can I view the body/human remains?

A. Generally this is allowed and encouraged to occur as long as the body is recognizable. It is advised to do this only after consultation of support services, such as family assistance centres, family liaison officers or counsellors.

Q. What happens if a missing person cannot be identified?

A. Even if the majority of the disaster victims are already identified, all efforts will be carried out to find and identify all missing persons. This can last weeks, months or in some cases considerably longer. Legal procedures will declare a missing person as dead, if years of searching have not shown any results.

Q. What happens to the personal belongings of the victims found at the site of the incident?

A. Personal belongings will be secured and stored until the ownership is established. It is the aim of the DVI Team to return all personal belongings to the appropriate family. If a criminal investigation is under way, the belongings may be stored until the investigation is concluded.

Q. Do I need to collect the body personally?

A. You will receive assistance in returning the body of the deceased. If the incident took place abroad, you will be supported with the repatriation procedure.