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# **Where There Is No CRVS:** Counting and Registering Deaths in Conflict, Emergencies, and Fragile Settings

by Carla AbouZahr, Laura Monzón Llamas,  
Carmen Sant Fruchtmán, and Daniel Cobos Muñoz



This publication is a single chapter in a larger body of work. The *Compendium of Good Practices: Harnessing Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Systems in Conflict, Emergencies, and Fragile Settings* was developed by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems in collaboration with Open Data Watch.

Published by the Centre of Excellence for Civil Registration and Vital Statistics Systems.

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The research presented in this publication was carried out with financial and technical assistance from the Centre of Excellence for CRVS Systems. Housed at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), it is jointly funded by Global Affairs Canada and IDRC. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of Global Affairs Canada, IDRC, or its Board of Governors.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent years have been characterized by significant movements of people fleeing from war, civil conflict, disasters, and emergencies to find a better life elsewhere. In this paper, we examine the role of civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems during crises associated with conflict, migration, disasters, and health emergencies. We focus in particular on counting and registering deaths and determining causes of death in such circumstances. This is essential for public health and for planning and delivering healthcare interventions to affected people. It is also critically important for individuals and families because civil registration provides legal documentation of the occurrence of vital events and of identity, civil status, and family relationships.

Often neglected, but of particular importance to surviving family members, is the legal documentation of the death of a family member. This provides evidence of changed civil status and eligibility of a surviving spouse to remarry, to claim nationality by descent, and to access possessions, benefits, entitlements, and inheritance. We identify key gaps in the international response to the recording and registration of deaths and discuss how capturing information on deaths and providing surviving family members with information and certificates of death can help support institutional and

societal resilience, contribute to the construction of post-crisis recovery, and pave the way for stability in the post-disaster and post-conflict future. The paper covers the following topics:

- The importance of tracking mortality during conflict, crises, and emergencies;
- The impact of crises on CRVS systems, with particular reference to death registration; and
- Approaches to rebuilding CRVS systems so every death is counted and registered.

This paper aims to

- highlight the importance of counting and registering deaths that occur during emergencies and crises;
- examine what is known about the impact of humanitarian crises, conflicts, disasters, and emergencies on country civil registration systems, with a focus on counting and registering deaths;
- propose strategies for improving links between humanitarian action and civil registration and vital statistics during crises and emergencies and among refugee and migrant populations; and
- identify strategies to ensure that deaths among vulnerable populations and in fragile settings are appropriately recorded, counted, and registered.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Around the world, people are leaving their homes. Many are forced to move to escape war, conflict, persecution, and violence; others are searching for a better life for themselves and their families. All face multiple risks, including ill health, disability, and death.
- Deaths that occur during these population displacements are rarely documented. When the dead are not registered, surviving family members have no evidence of the existence of their loved ones and are unable to realize their own rights to identity, civil status, or family relationships. Lacking evidence of identity, they face multiple challenges in accessing essential services and claiming their human rights.
- Every individual matters. Every death should be counted in recognition of the inherent value of every life. Civil registration systems must be flexible and resilient enough that the registration of vital events can continue despite conflicts and crises. Ensuring that each death is counted and registered and each deceased person is buried with dignity and humanity is essential to help heal societies that are damaged and disrupted during crises.
- In the aftermath of conflict and social disruption, civil registration and vital statistics systems can contribute to rebuilding trust and repairing social bonds. The right to have a death registered is connected other human rights, such as the right to inherit and the right to social security. The registration of a death is as much a human right as the registration of a live birth.

## POPULATIONS ON THE MOVE

Human populations have long been on the move in search of safety, peace, and prosperity. The movement of persons away from their place of usual residence, either across an international border or within a State, is called migration.<sup>1</sup> According to the World Migration Report 2020,<sup>2</sup> there were an estimated 272 million international migrants in 2019,<sup>3</sup> or 3.5 percent of the global population. Migrants may move away from their homes for many reasons, including to work, study, or to be united with family members, but in most cases they migrate under conditions covered by laws, regulations, or international agreements.

By contrast, some migrants seeking work or trying to reunite with their family do not have access to legal channels. Instead, they can only access irregular migration channels.<sup>4</sup> These are defined as movements that take place outside the laws, regulations, or international agreements that govern the entry into or exit from the State of origin, transit, or destination. Some irregular migrants turn to people smugglers to gain access to the countries of their choice.<sup>5</sup> There are an estimated 3 million irregular entries into the United States each year, most of which involve smuggling. Of the more than 181,000 migrants who crossed the Mediterranean Sea from North Africa to Italy in 2016, the majority are believed to have used smuggling services. The smuggling business could be worth as much as US\$10 billion or more per year.

1 International Organization for Migration. 2020. [iom.int/key-migration-terms#Migration](https://iom.int/key-migration-terms#Migration)

2 International Organization for Migration. 2019a. [publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020](https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2020)

3 Migration Data Portal. 2019. [migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-migration-flows](https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/international-migration-flows)

4 International Organization for Migration. 2020.

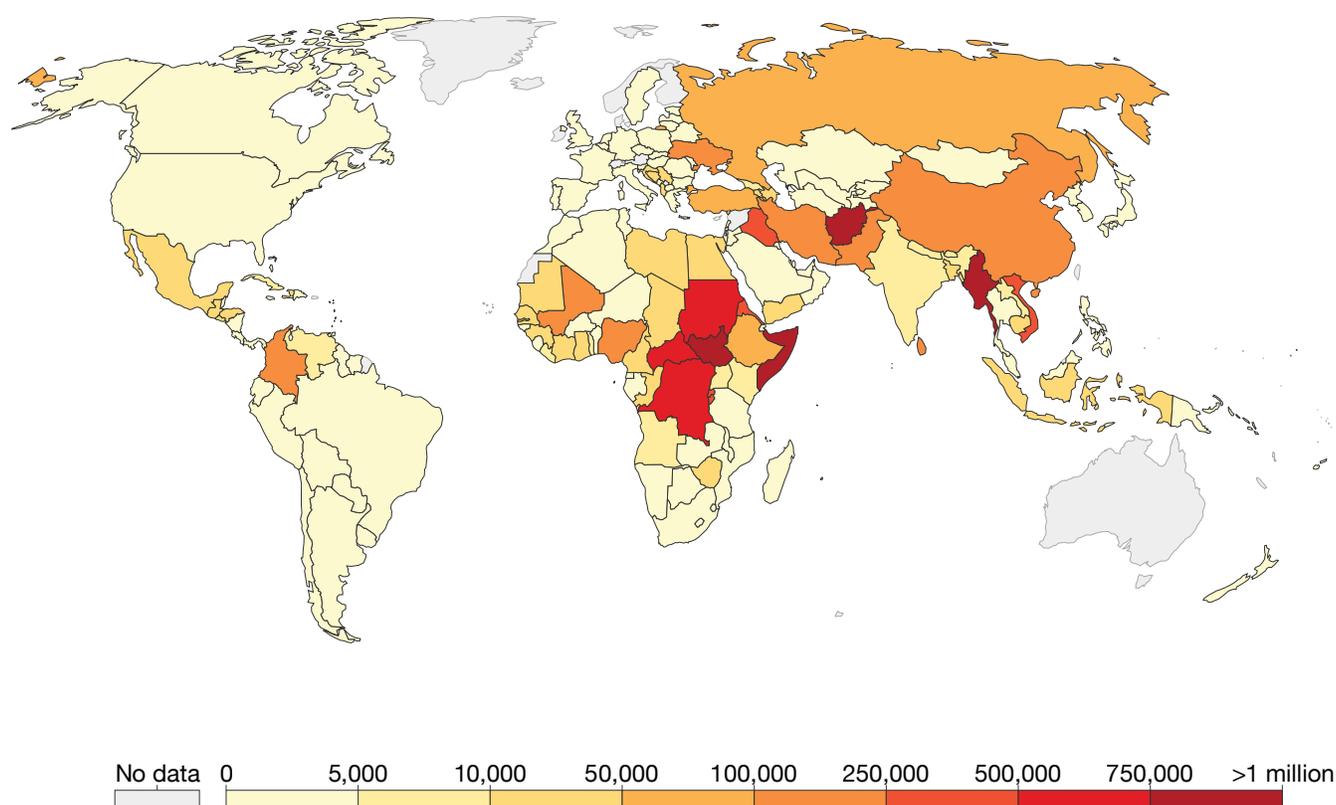
5 United Nations. 2000. [unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/2011/04/som-indonesia/convention\\_smug\\_eng.pdf](https://unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/2011/04/som-indonesia/convention_smug_eng.pdf)

While it is generally individuals or small groups that decide to migrate in such circumstances, irregular migratory flows can swell to large numbers. The thousands of migrants who gather close to international borders – such as the US-Mexico border or the borders of countries in the European Union – are evidence of this.

In addition to regular and irregular migrants, millions of people are forced to leave their homes and countries for compelling and sometimes tragic reasons, such as conflict, persecution, and disaster. In recent years, war and civil conflict have driven large movements of refugees who

seek international protection or asylum. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has estimated that globally, at the end of 2019, some 79.5 million people had been forced to flee their homes, of which some 26 million were under the age of 18.<sup>6</sup> This is 1 in every 100 of the world's people. Figure 1 shows the refugee population by country or territory of origin in 2017.<sup>7</sup> Very large numbers of refugees have come from countries affected by conflict or civil strife, including Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Myanmar, Somalia, South Sudan, and Sudan.

**Figure 1:** Refugee population by country or territory of origin, 2017.<sup>8</sup>



Source: World Bank

6 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2019a. [unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html](https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html)

7 Our World in Data. 2017a. [ourworldindata.org/grapher/refugee-population-by-country-or-territory-of-origin](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/refugee-population-by-country-or-territory-of-origin)

8 Ibid.



Photo: Mohamed Azakir / World Bank

Unlike refugees, internally displaced people (IDPs) have not crossed a border to find safety; they are fleeing within their own countries. Globally, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, by the end of 2019 some 45.7 million people in 61 countries were internally displaced due to armed conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.<sup>9</sup>

While refugees make up a fairly small percentage of all migrants, they are often the ones who need assistance and support the most. Displaced people include ethnic and religious minorities who are excluded from national administrative systems such as civil registration. Also, they tend to move to areas where it is difficult for aid groups to deliver humanitarian assistance. The volume of population displacement can be overwhelming. For example, the conflict in Syria, which had a total population of around 21 million before the civil war started in 2011, has resulted in over

6 million internally displaced people<sup>10</sup> and over 5.5 million refugees,<sup>11</sup> totalling almost half of the pre-conflict population.

In addition to refugees and IDPs, millions more people are stateless: they have been denied nationality, in many cases because their births were never registered and they cannot provide evidence of identity, place of birth, or parentage. This often means they cannot access basic rights such as education, health care, employment, and freedom of movement. The impacts of this deprivation rebound across the generations, negatively affecting the rights of children to basic services, including education. Population groups at higher risk of statelessness include nomadic and border populations, refugees, IDPs, and irregular migrants. Abandoned, orphaned, unaccompanied, or separated children are especially vulnerable; they often lack any documents to establish their identity. Migrants whose situation is irregular may be unwilling to approach the authorities to register their children for fear of being identified or deported. Figure 2 provides a summary of basic statistics on refugees and displaced persons.<sup>12</sup>

While much of the world's media attention focuses on migrant and refugee flows to high-income areas such as Europe and North America, in practice, countries that offer shelter and asylum to large numbers of refugees are more often neighbouring low- and lower middle-income countries. These countries – for example, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Uganda (Figure 3) – are themselves facing multiple social, economic, and political challenges.

9 Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC). 2020. [internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2020-IDMC-GRID.pdf](https://www.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/2020-IDMC-GRID.pdf)

10 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2020. [unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people](https://www.unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people)

11 Operational Data Portal. 2020a. [data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria)

12 International Organization for Migration. 2019a.

**Figure 2:** Basic facts about population movements.



The global refugee population was **25.9 million** in 2018.

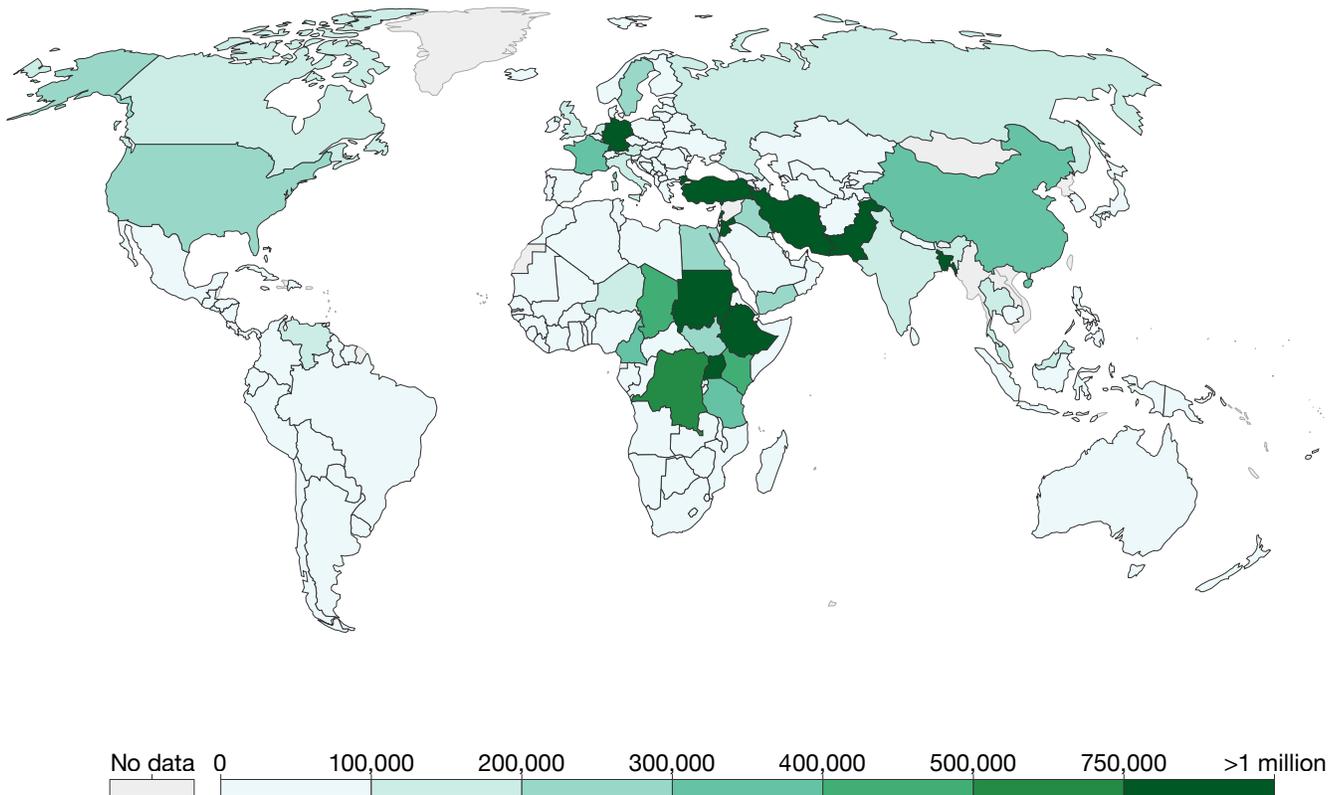
- **20.4 million** refugees were under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
- **5.5 million** were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.
- **52 percent** of the global refugee population was under 18 years of age.

The number of internally displaced persons due to violence and conflict reached **45.7 million** in **61 countries** by the end of 2019.

- The Syrian Arab Republic had the highest number of people displaced (**6.5 million**), followed by Colombia (**5.5 million**) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (**5.5 million**).
- The number of stateless persons globally in 2018 was **3.9 million**.
- Bangladesh had the largest number of stateless persons (**around 906,000**). It was followed by Côte d'Ivoire (**692,000**) and Myanmar (**620,000**).

Displacement remained a major feature in some regions.

- The Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey were the origin and host of the largest number of refugees globally: **6.7 million** and **3.7 million**, respectively.
- Canada became the largest refugee resettlement country, resettling more refugees than the United States in 2018.
- The Philippines had the largest number of new disaster displacements in 2018 (**3.8 million**).
- Around **4 million** Venezuelans had left their country by mid-2019. The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela was the largest source country of asylum seekers in 2018 (**over 340,000**).

**Figure 3:** Refugee population by country or territory of asylum, 2017.<sup>13</sup>

Source: World Bank

Some refugees flee from countries with civil registration and vital statistics (CRVS) systems in place to countries that also have such systems in place, such as from Syria to Germany, Jordan, or Turkey; or from Venezuela to Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, or Panama. But in many cases, people flee from and to countries that do not have well-functioning administrative and statistical systems, such as from Somalia to Kenya or from Myanmar to Bangladesh. This worsens the problem of already stretched resources in receiving countries that have limited administrative, civil registration, and statistical capacities.

Whatever causes them to leave their homes, refugees, IDPs, irregular migrants, and stateless persons share similar challenges in being able to provide evidence of identity, civil status, and parentage. People who flee their homes in situations of threat, conflict, and fear are under duress and in a hurry; often they carry only the most basic necessities. Many will have no documentary evidence of birth, citizenship, marital status, or family relationships because the CRVS system in their country of origin didn't work well or because documentation was lost or destroyed when the people were displaced. Also, the central civil registration archives of vital events

13 Our World in Data. 2017b. [ourworldindata.org/search?q=refugees+by+country+of++refuge](https://ourworldindata.org/search?q=refugees+by+country+of++refuge)

are often damaged or not accessible during crises. This means people cannot get copies of documents when they make a claim for asylum. Births and deaths that occur during displacement are unlikely to be officially registered, either in the country of origin or in the host country.<sup>14</sup> Host countries are often reluctant to provide registration documentation to non-nationals due to fears that birth registration will automatically confer nationality, even though these fears are unfounded.<sup>15</sup>

Within displaced populations, armed groups – both State and non-State – are often active. High levels of deaths and injuries result from internal rivalries, particularly among young men. Children who are unaccompanied and who lack valid documentation on their age and parentage are exposed to trafficking and exploitation. Women, especially if they are widowed or unaccompanied by male relatives, lack legal protection, and their low levels of empowerment make them highly vulnerable to sexual violence.<sup>16 17 18</sup> When people die in these circumstances, their deaths are rarely officially counted or legally registered, and little is known about the causes of their deaths. They pass out of the world leaving little trace of their existence, ignored and uncounted.

## MISSING, DISAPPEARED, OR DEAD?

When the dead cannot be properly counted, they may be classified as “disappeared” or “missing.”<sup>19</sup> According to the International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP), which aims to keep a record of every disappearance, some 10,000 people are currently missing in Libya, and 250,000 are missing in Iraq.<sup>20</sup> Large numbers of missing persons are reported along dangerous migration routes in Central America, South Asia, and the Mediterranean.<sup>21</sup> Across the African continent, the International Committee of the Red Cross has recorded 44,000 people as declared missing by family members. Shockingly, almost half of these people were children at the time of their disappearance. Governments receiving irregular migrants are often reluctant to make the effort to recover and identify these missing persons, leaving individuals and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to report and investigate their deaths. Fortress Europe,<sup>22</sup> an observatory for the victims of migration along European borders, reported more than 19,144 deaths between 1988 and 2016.<sup>23</sup>

What has happened to these missing people? Many may indeed be dead; others may have been victims of human trafficking and exploitation.

14 APAI-CRVS. n.d. Civil Registration in Conflict and Emergency Situations. [au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/33070-wd-civil\\_registration\\_in\\_conflict\\_and\\_emergency\\_situations\\_en.pdf](http://au.int/sites/default/files/newsevents/workingdocuments/33070-wd-civil_registration_in_conflict_and_emergency_situations_en.pdf)

15 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2017. [unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/11/Good-Practices-Paper-on-Ensuring-Birth-Registration-for-the-Prevention-of-Statelessness.pdf](http://unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/11/Good-Practices-Paper-on-Ensuring-Birth-Registration-for-the-Prevention-of-Statelessness.pdf)

16 De Schrijver, L. et al. 2018. [doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15091979](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15091979)

17 Qayoom, F. 2014. [doi.org/10.5897/IJSA2013.0512](https://doi.org/10.5897/IJSA2013.0512)

18 De Schrijver, L. et al. 2018.

19 International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP). 2020a. [icmp.int/press-releases/icmp-dg-on-international-day-of-the-disappeared-end-the-double-standard/](http://icmp.int/press-releases/icmp-dg-on-international-day-of-the-disappeared-end-the-double-standard/)

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Fortress Europe. 2016. [fortresseurope.blogspot.com](http://fortresseurope.blogspot.com)

23 Ibid.

Some may have been forcibly disappeared,<sup>24</sup> killed without being part of any legal process. In Syria, in addition to the estimated 400,000 deaths said to have occurred during the conflict, another 100,000 people were forcibly disappeared between 2011 and 2018.<sup>25</sup> The report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council, Unlawful Death of Refugees and Migrants, focuses on the mass casualties of refugees and migrants during their flight.<sup>26</sup> It addresses killings by both State and non-State actors and denounces a quasi-generalized regime of impunity, worsened by an absence of accurate data on the dead and missing.<sup>27</sup> The report presents evidence of multiple failures on the part of States to respect and protect refugees' and migrants' right to life. These include unlawful killings, such as through the excessive use of force and as a result of deterrence policies and practices that increase the risk of death.

The International Commission on Missing Persons (ICMP) provides technical assistance to governments in locating, recovering, and identifying missing persons.<sup>28</sup> In Libya, for example, the ICMP has helped facilitate cooperation between civil society and local government and has developed an institutional and legal framework to account for missing persons. This is not only a matter of helping individual families trace their loved ones, important as that is. It is also about rebuilding strong institutions that protect the rights of citizens and thus strengthening the legitimacy of the State. Such legitimacy is often lacking in conflict-affected and post-conflict societies.

Missing children are perhaps the most tragic victims of these population displacements. Many may never be reunited with their families. Experience following the Second World War has shown that intensive efforts needed to reunite families, or at least to provide surviving children with information about their parentage and place of origin, yielded important returns in terms of individual, familial, community, and societal healing.<sup>29</sup>

In this paper, we focus on the importance of documenting mortality during crises and among migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. We go on to discuss how CRVS systems can adapt to meet people's core rights related to mortality during crises:

- The right to be counted;
- The right to be registered; and
- The right to a burial.

## THE RIGHT TO BE COUNTED

On 3 October 2013, an estimated 368 migrants died when two boats sank near the Italian island of Lampedusa. This led the International Office for Migration (IOM) to start collecting and compiling information on migrants who perish or go missing on migratory routes worldwide. Through the Missing Migrants Project,<sup>30</sup> information on migrant fatalities is collected daily and made available on the Project's online database, which is managed by IOM's Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.<sup>31</sup> The Project also analyzes the data and issues

24 United Nations. 2010. [treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg\\_no=IV-16&chapter=4](https://treaties.un.org/pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtdsg_no=IV-16&chapter=4)

25 Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR). 2018. [sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/A\\_tunnel\\_without\\_end\\_en.pdf](https://sn4hr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/A_tunnel_without_end_en.pdf)

26 United Nations. 2017. [doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eey002](https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eey002)

27 Ibid.

28 International Commission on Missing Persons. 2020b. [icmp.int/what-we-do/](https://icmp.int/what-we-do/)

29 Zahra, T. 2009. [doi.org/10.1086/593155](https://doi.org/10.1086/593155)

30 Missing Migrants. 2020b. [missingmigrants.iom.int](https://missingmigrants.iom.int)

31 Migration Data Portal. 2020. [migrationdataportal.org/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances#data-strengths-amp-limitations](https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/migrant-deaths-and-disappearances#data-strengths-amp-limitations)

related to deaths during migration in briefings and in its Fatal Journeys reports.<sup>32</sup> Data sources include official records of coast guards and medical examiners, media stories, reports from NGOs and United Nations agencies, and interviews with migrants (see Annex A).

Since it launched in 2014, the Missing Migrants Project has recorded the deaths and disappearances of more than 33,400 women, men, and children – most of them in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>33</sup> Several other regions of the world have seen thousands of deaths during migration since 2014:

- More than 7,400 deaths have been recorded across the African continent; many of them occurred on transit routes across the Sahara Desert.
- The deaths of more than 3,000 people have been documented during migration in Asia in the last five years, often linked to the exodus of the Rohingya from Myanmar.
- In the Americas, more than 3,600 people have been reported dead or missing during migration. Sixty percent of these deaths were documented on the border between Mexico and the United States.

Documenting the deaths and disappearances of people during migration journeys presents many challenges.<sup>34</sup> All existing counts of migrant fatalities have gaps<sup>35</sup> because most such deaths happen in the context of irregular migration. This means they occur in areas that are physically remote or outside of well-monitored routes. As a



Photo: Mohamed Azakir / World Bank

result, the physical remains of the dead are not found, and deaths or disappearances may not be reported to the authorities in a timely manner, if at all. On routes that involve transit over water, such as the Central Mediterranean route, people are even more likely to die without a trace. The Missing Migrants Project attempts to document “invisible shipwrecks,” where there is evidence of a departure but no evidence of rescue or interception, implying that the passengers were lost at sea. However, it is highly likely that not all cases are accounted for in IOM’s records. These challenges are complicated by the fact that few official sources collect and publish data on the number of people who died during irregular migration journeys in their territory. In many cases, those who died on migratory journeys are never identified,<sup>36</sup> so their remains are even less likely to be included in counts of migrant fatalities. For these reasons, the data available on fatalities during migration are best understood as minimum estimates.

32 International Organization for Migration. 2019b. [publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-4-missing-migrant-children](https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-volume-4-missing-migrant-children)

33 Migration Data Portal. 2020.

34 International Organization for Migration. 2017. [reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/fatal\\_journeys\\_volume\\_3\\_part\\_1.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/fatal_journeys_volume_3_part_1.pdf)

35 Missing Migrants. Methodology. 2020. [missingmigrants.iom.int/methodology](https://missingmigrants.iom.int/methodology)

36 International Organization for Migration. 2014. [iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/pbn/docs/Fatal-Journeys-Tracking-Lives-Lost-during-Migration-2014.pdf](https://iom.int/files/live/sites/iom/files/pbn/docs/Fatal-Journeys-Tracking-Lives-Lost-during-Migration-2014.pdf)

Counting deaths during conflicts and humanitarian crises comes with similar difficulties. As Fischhoff and Atran observe, “Counting casualties is part of any conflict. The parties must do it both to monitor the conflict’s progress and to give it meaning. Without accurate counts, the situation is obscured and the fallen are dishonored. If these failures appear deliberate, then they may aggravate the conflict, by adding insult to injury.”<sup>37</sup>

The United States Government Accountability Office, in its review of estimated death counts during the conflict in Darfur, noted a number of challenges related to collecting data in the field and extrapolating from limited data. Difficulties in collecting sound, consistent survey data – including lack of access to particular geographical regions, the conditions under which the surveys are conducted, and limited resources and training for field staff conducting surveys – affect the quality of the data collected and result in data gaps. In its assessment of mortality data in Darfur, the Office noted that because of such limitations and the unavailability of data from other sources, “the death estimates that we reviewed rely on potentially risky assumptions and limited contextual information.”<sup>38</sup>

The United Nations (UN) system has been criticized for not doing enough to measure mortality in crisis settings, such as Angola, Central African Republic, Chechnya, and Zimbabwe.<sup>39</sup> NGOs, human rights organizations, and academics have partly filled the data void. Humanitarian agencies make major efforts to track mortality to identify emerging health problems and determine program needs. However, collecting data in such settings is an operational challenge and often

faces political barriers. Greater precision and more complete death reporting are needed to be able to use the information to target programs to the most vulnerable people.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, families also need documented evidence of deaths of family members.

## THE RIGHT TO BE REGISTERED

Counting the dead is important from a statistical perspective, but counting alone is not enough. Every dead or missing person, no matter what their migration or refugee status, leaves behind a family. Often these families have little support and face psychological, legal, and economic challenges for years after their loved ones disappear or die. The ability to formally register a death, to bury the body if it is found, and to know the fate of a family member is crucial to enable survivors to grieve and find some kind of closure. But the deaths of displaced persons and irregular migrants are rarely registered, except within the European Union, where a death must by law be registered following an investigation.

The registration of a death has important legal implications for family members of the deceased. Although neither the Universal Declaration of Human Rights nor the two International Covenants on Human Rights mentions specifically the right to have a death registered; this right is connected with other human rights, such as the right to inherit and the right to social security. Death registration in an official register by a competent authority is as much a human right as the registration of a live birth.<sup>41</sup>

The right to inherit depends on official proof that the person who held the property has indeed

37 Fischhoff, B. et al. 2007. [cmu.edu/epp/people/faculty/research/Fischhoff-Counting-Casualties-JRU.pdf](http://cmu.edu/epp/people/faculty/research/Fischhoff-Counting-Casualties-JRU.pdf)

38 U.S. Government Accountability Office. 2006. [gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-24](http://gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-24)

39 Checchi, F. and Roberts, L. 2008. [journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.0050146](http://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.0050146)

40 Spiegel, P. B. et al. 2002. [doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00169](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-7717.00169)

41 Powell, N. P. 1980. [cdc.gov/nchs/data/isp/007\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_registration\\_of\\_vital\\_events.pdf](http://cdc.gov/nchs/data/isp/007_human_rights_and_registration_of_vital_events.pdf)

died. The registration of a death also provides the proof, where needed, to

- enable surviving children to show evidence that they are orphans and to claim parental filiation with the deceased person (if their own births have been registered);
- protect the surviving spouse's interests with regard to assets, death benefits, the right to remarry, and so on;
- claim protection when the head of a household dies without providing for the continued wellbeing of the family, such as allowances or insurance from the State or other authority;
- establish beneficiary status in respect of pensions; and
- establish the surviving spouse's right to custody of the children who are the offspring of a marriage – documentary evidence that could be essential for family members seeking to return to their country of origin when the conflict ends (Figure 4).

## THE RIGHT TO A BURIAL

Burial and other death rites date back thousands of years. These core elements of human society are disrupted by war, conflict, forced displacement, and undocumented migration. When people are vulnerable to exploitation, social cohesion collapses and the rule of law is routinely flouted. Many refugees, displaced persons, and undocumented migrants face risks of exploitation and violence during their journeys, and significant numbers of them die.

People who die in such circumstances are not only uncaptured and unregistered, they also



Photo: Martine Perret / UN

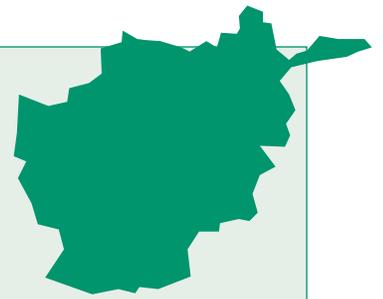
often remain unidentified and unburied.<sup>42</sup> This is especially true with irregular migration of individuals and small groups, where humanitarian and relief agencies are rarely involved. Much of the information that is available on mortality during unregulated migration is based on media reports, personal histories of migrants, and information from border patrols, coast guards, fishermen, and shipping logs. Bringing together these varied information sources is complicated. Information on causes of death in these situations tends to be based on assumptions.

When dead migrants are found, it is rare for anyone to try to contact the families of the deceased. Notable exceptions include the case of the deaths of 39 illegal Vietnamese migrants to the U.K. who died of suffocation in a truck during the journey.<sup>43</sup> Because many of the migrants had mobile phones and contacted their families before they died, it was possible to identify the dead and inform their family members. Still, discussions about who would pay for the corpses to be sent home for burial continued for several months; in several cases, this has not been resolved.

42 Migration Data Portal. 2020.

43 Wikipedia. 2019. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essexlorry\\_deaths#References](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essexlorry_deaths#References)

**Figure 4:** The impact of the conflict in Syria on access to civil registration.



The outbreak of the Syrian conflict and large-scale internal and external displacement of the population have blocked the complete and accurate registration of vital events for many Syrians. Millions of people fled the armed conflict and sought refuge in neighbouring countries, such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. A 2015 study of Syrian refugees in Jordan found that thousands had experienced life events requiring official documentation, such as births, marriages, and deaths,<sup>44</sup> but faced ongoing problems in getting the documents they needed.

Children born outside Syria during the conflict may face challenges claiming their nationality. Under Syria's nationality law, acquiring nationality from a Syrian father is automatic at birth via *paternal jus sanguinis*, whether the child was born inside or outside Syria. By contrast, Syrian women can confer nationality to their children only if their child was born inside Syria. Because the law does not address the situation if the child is born outside Syria, an individual born abroad will acquire Syrian nationality only if the father is a Syrian national.<sup>45</sup>

The registration of deaths has been badly affected, especially for those resulting from the conflict and violence. A study by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia found that even when refugees were listed with an official refugee agency, it was difficult to register the death of a family member and get a legally recognized copy of a death certificate. The reason is that the civil registration law is designed for Jordanian nationals and cannot readily accommodate the civil registration of non-nationals.

Reliable information on the extent of underregistration of deaths in these populations is sparse. It is generally based on findings from small-scale convenience samples that rely on self-reported survey responses from registered refugees. Also, the massive population movements have made it impossible to calculate birth and death rates because of unknown denominators.

People who are displaced by conflict and whose documentation is lost, destroyed, or confiscated are particularly vulnerable to statelessness if they are unable to replace their documents because civil registry archives have been destroyed due to the violence.

Not having this documentation also affects the registration of subsequent divorces, deaths, marriages, and births – all of which can affect a Syrian child's acquisition of nationality. Unregistered deaths have consequences for inheritance and remarriage. A widow who lacks proof of her husband's death cannot legally remarry, for example. Also, for families who buried their loved ones without first obtaining a death certificate, there may be legal consequences, such as criminal prosecution.

44 International Human Rights Clinic et al. 2015.

<http://law.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Registering-rights-report-NRC-IHRC-October20151.pdf>

45 The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR. 2019c. [refworld.org/pdfid/5db174a4.pdf](http://refworld.org/pdfid/5db174a4.pdf)

When administrative and governance structures are not in place for dealing with dead migrants, many of whom have no identity documentation, like-minded individuals come together to set standards for the dignified treatment of missing or deceased migrants (Figure 5).<sup>46</sup> Along several migrant routes, individuals and small groups take on the grim task of finding corpses, looking for evidence of origin and identity, and providing a burial.<sup>47 48 49 50</sup> These lessons in humanity by ordinary people speak volumes about the lack of government action to ensure dignity in

death for people who must flee their homes and communities because of situations that are beyond their control.

There are also examples of collaboration between local governments and NGOs to find out what has happened to loved ones during migration journeys. For example, the Colibrí Center for Human Rights investigates cases of persons who have gone missing while crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.<sup>51</sup> It builds relationships with the families of



**Figure 5:** When the State fails, individuals take on responsibility for the dead.

Boubacar Wann Diallo is devoted to determining the names and origins of corpses that wash up on Morocco's shores and to giving them a decent final resting place. Recent declines in the number of crossings and fatalities on this route have fuelled his determination to identify the dead, giving families news of their loved ones, however heartbreaking. "To families, there is always some doubt that the person maybe didn't die," he said. "It's very hard to believe and accept that they're dead."<sup>52</sup>

In Colombia, Sonia Bermúdez set up a cemetery on the outskirts of her town, Riohacha, 20 years ago, when she became concerned there was no one caring for the people who died as unidentified "no names," victims of Colombia's 50-year conflict or from drug-related violence. More recently, she is using her *Gente Como Uno*, or People like Us cemetery to bury migrants and refugees from Venezuela, where the economic and political crisis has resulted in large numbers of migrants and refugees.<sup>53</sup>

In Calais, northern France, in an unofficial camp separated by a narrow strip of the North Sea from England, migrants seeking to make it to England risk their lives every day. Locals and aid workers seek to fill the gap and provide a decent burial for the dead. "They died in a lot of ways [...] some drowned trying to swim to the ferries at (Calais) port, others from electrocution because of the poor safety standards at the camp." Refugees remaining in the camp struggle to cover the costs of leasing a burial plot, coffin, transportation, etc., which they can ill afford.<sup>54</sup>

46 Greek Forum of Refugees. 2018. [refugees.gr/the-mytilini-declaration-declaration-for-the-dignified-treatment-of-all-missing-and-deceased-persons-and-their-families-as-a-consequence-of-migrant-journeys](https://refugees.gr/the-mytilini-declaration-declaration-for-the-dignified-treatment-of-all-missing-and-deceased-persons-and-their-families-as-a-consequence-of-migrant-journeys)

47 Alami, A. 2020. [nytimes.com/2020/08/28/world/africa/morocco-bodies-migrants.html](https://nytimes.com/2020/08/28/world/africa/morocco-bodies-migrants.html)

48 King, A. 2019. [edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/12/us/no-olvidado-missing-migrants-border](https://edition.cnn.com/interactive/2019/12/us/no-olvidado-missing-migrants-border)

49 Border Angels. [borderangels.org/about-us.html](https://borderangels.org/about-us.html)

50 Dixon, L. 2020. [pri.org/stories/2020-02-05/meet-woman-who-buries-forgotten-migrants-venezuela](https://pri.org/stories/2020-02-05/meet-woman-who-buries-forgotten-migrants-venezuela)

51 Colibrí Center for Human Rights. [colibrícenter.org](https://colibrícenter.org)

52 Alami, A. 2020.

53 Dixon, L. 2020.

54 Mandhai, S. 2016. [aljazeera.com/features/2016/4/6/burying-refugees-who-die-in-the-calais-jungle](https://aljazeera.com/features/2016/4/6/burying-refugees-who-die-in-the-calais-jungle)

the missing and with the forensic scientists who investigate unidentified remains. This relationship between a governmental office and a non-profit NGO is an innovative practice that protects the needs of families and honours forensic best practices.

## IMPACT OF CRISES ON CRVS SYSTEMS

Even in countries with well-established CRVS systems, maintaining functionality during crises and emergencies is hugely challenging for operational and political reasons. In Ukraine, for example, the civil conflict in the eastern part of the country has brought death, damaged infrastructure, and disrupted daily life for millions of people. Since December 2014, the Ukrainian state authorities have stopped providing civil registration and other services in the non-government-controlled areas (NGCA). Ukrainian authorities do not recognize documents that attest to identity, births, and deaths issued by the authorities in NGCA. That means NGCA residents who need to replace their lost, damaged, or expired civil documents have to take costly and perilous journeys across one of the five entry-exit checkpoints along the 500 km-long contact line with a special permit system. As a result, birth and death registration have dramatically declined, and thousands of children risk becoming stateless.<sup>55</sup>

During conflicts, the CRVS system may stop working altogether. State archives and civil registries may be damaged or destroyed (sometimes deliberately), making it impossible for people to get copies of documents that attest to

vital events. For example, in 2007 Syria had almost complete birth registration; death registration was reported at 75 percent.<sup>56</sup> Since then, the years of conflict have led to many civil registration offices being destroyed. Even where the CRVS system is working, continuous power shortages stand in the way of timely registration and data entry.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen, countries with long-running civil conflicts, CRVS systems were and remain weak. In Iraq, a 1971 civil registration law assigned responsibility for birth and death registration to the Ministry of Health; birth and death registration was estimated at 68 percent and 34 percent, respectively. However, the system was never fully functional, and it broke down after 1990 with the start of the conflict. In 2009, the UN described the CRVS system as unreliable, with responsibilities not clearly outlined between different agencies, limited geographic distribution of registration facilities, and underqualified and inexperienced registrars.<sup>57</sup> When resilient statistical and health systems are lacking, it is impossible to have accurate counting of deaths and related characteristics. In Yemen, the UN estimates that only around 17 percent of children have a birth certificate<sup>58</sup> and only 1 death in 10 is registered.<sup>59</sup> The UN reports no registration data for Somalia, where no CRVS system or law is in place.

Disruption and damage to CRVS systems may also occur through political manipulation. For example, in some instances, registration records have been used to target particular ethnic or population groups.<sup>60</sup> This violates a core principle of civil registration: confidentiality of

55 Norwegian Refugee Council. 2018.

[nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/ukraine/briefing-note\\_civil-registration.pdf](https://nrc.no/globalassets/pdf/briefing-notes/ukraine/briefing-note_civil-registration.pdf)

56 United Nations Statistics Division. 2017. [unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/crvs/#coverage](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/crvs/#coverage)

57 United Nations. 2009. [unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/CRVS/Technical%20report%20ESCWA%20Final.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/CRVS/Technical%20report%20ESCWA%20Final.pdf)

58 UNICEF. 2018. [unicef.org/yemen/stories/yemeni-children-are-receiving-their-passport-life](https://www.unicef.org/yemen/stories/yemeni-children-are-receiving-their-passport-life)

59 United Nations Statistics Division. 2017.

60 Minority Rights Group International (MRG). 2017.

[documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/246/55/PDF/G1824655.pdf?OpenElement](https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G18/246/55/PDF/G1824655.pdf?OpenElement)

individual records. Such situations could diminish people's trust in official institutions, as people may be unwilling to register vital events if there are suspicions about how the information will be used.

Where CRVS systems are dysfunctional, families cannot register a newborn baby, a marriage or divorce, or the death of a family member. This means these vital events cannot be counted accurately. During conflict, not all parties may recognize documentation of vital events, which means their usefulness for legal purposes is limited.<sup>61</sup> Accurate counts of deaths are particularly difficult and at risk of being politicized during conflicts. In Afghanistan,<sup>62</sup> Iraq,<sup>63</sup> and Syria,<sup>64</sup> debate is ongoing on the number of deaths due to military interventions involving both State and non-State actors. Uncertainty in the death counts increases mutual distrust between communities and makes it harder to regain public confidence in governmental institutions.

## HARNESSING SYNERGIES BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN ACTION AND CRVS

It can seem as if humanitarian action and CRVS systems inhabit different worlds. International agencies and NGOs are often the first on the scene when crises occur, whether due to war, civil conflict, disaster, or other emergencies. They aim to provide immediate relief when established social mechanisms and State institutions have become dysfunctional, and trust in government has been eroded. By contrast, civil registration functions are most effective in settings that are socially and politically stable, where the timely registration of vital events is seen as integral to



Photo: Dominic Chavez / World Bank

good governance and sound administration, and in which there is widespread public trust in State institutions. Humanitarian action steps in when these essential elements are damaged and degraded, especially during civil conflict. Humanitarian interventions aim to meet basic population needs such as survival, health, nutrition, and social and psychological support in times of crisis. Providing documentation for the living – such as birth certificates or certificates of refugee status – is a priority, as it makes it possible to identify those who are eligible for assistance. CRVS systems, on the other hand, are foundational for legal identity from birth to death. These systems help a person gain access to a wide range of entitlements and socioeconomic and political rights throughout their life, as well as generating vital statistics for the population.

During the early stages of a crisis, relief agencies focus on collecting information on deaths primarily to guide health programming and for advocacy purposes.<sup>65</sup> The issuing of administrative and legal documentation on deaths

61 Salahi, A. 2020b.

[english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/1/28/how-many-people-have-died-in-syria-since-2011](https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/1/28/how-many-people-have-died-in-syria-since-2011)

62 Crawford, N. C. 2016. [watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE\\_FINAL.pdf](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2015/War%20in%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan%20UPDATE_FINAL.pdf)

63 Fischer, H. 2010. [fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40824.pdf](https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40824.pdf)

64 McPherson, K. 2005. [ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC554014/pdf/bmj33000550.pdf](https://ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC554014/pdf/bmj33000550.pdf)

65 Checchi, F. and Roberts, L. 2008.



Photo: Vincent Tremeau / World Bank

is often seen as a lower priority, even though such documents can be essential for surviving family members. Some efforts to gather mortality data among specific population subgroups, such as children and women of reproductive age, may end up creating parallel – often temporary – systems for producing data, but they do not provide individuals with documentary evidence of a death and are not linked to the CRVS system.

In principle, ad hoc systems for counting deaths, such as mortality surveillance, should have a legal basis so they can eventually be integrated into the local CRVS system.<sup>66</sup> Even if civil registration systems have been weakened by the conflict, they can still provide the basis for creating an archive of deaths. For the surviving family, the death record is important for legal reasons and for claiming certain rights based on parentage or marriage. Having political leaders acknowledge deaths can help to repair community relationships after the conflict.<sup>67</sup>

Where international agencies and NGOs are involved in assisting refugee populations, they should follow international standards that recognize the responsibility of States to provide refugees and displaced persons with access to documentation of vital events.<sup>68</sup> The UN emphasizes that to prevent discrimination, the identity credentials issued to asylum seekers and refugees should be equivalent to those issued to the host population. Also, the births of refugee children and the deaths of refugees should be registered in the civil registration system of the host state.

While birth registration does not necessarily lead to conferring nationality to the children of refugees and migrants, it helps to recognize their legal status and provide the basis for any future claims of citizenship based on residence.<sup>69</sup> When deaths occur, humanitarian agencies should take measures to ensure that surviving family members receive valid documentation of the death and the circumstances around it that will be acknowledged as valid in both the host country and the country of origin, should the family decide to return at the end of the conflict.

Improved links between civil registration, humanitarian relief, and health and statistical systems will be important for the future, because all the signs show that civil conflict and climate change will continue to drive the migration and displacement of many millions of people around the world. Large population movements are now endemic due to economic, political, and moral failures. To meet these challenges demands a change in mindset, where it is acknowledged that population displacement is not a temporary phenomenon but one that will require long-term interventions to ensure the safety and stability of

66 Bowden, S. et al. 2012. [doi.org/10.1186/1752-1505-6-11](https://doi.org/10.1186/1752-1505-6-11)

67 Genocide Archive of Rwanda. 2015. [genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Memorials](https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Category:Memorials)

68 United Nations. 2020. [unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/UNCT-Guidelines.pdf](https://unstats.un.org/legal-identity-agenda/documents/UNCT-Guidelines.pdf)

69 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2017.

both migrants and inhabitants of host countries. It will be essential to work with State and non-State actors to generate trust and foster harmonious relations between displaced people and the local communities.

The civil registration of vital events among refugee and migrant populations is a moral issue and a fundamental human right: the right to be recognized. The right to recognition as a person before the law is enshrined in Article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in Article 16 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.<sup>70</sup> The International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families contains this right in Article 24: "Every migrant worker and every member of his or her family shall have the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law." The civil registration system is the instrument that ensures this right can be realized.

## BUILDING CRVS SYSTEMS AFTER CRISES

CRVS systems are recognized as foundational for effective State building, peace, and good governance.<sup>71</sup> Yet crises and emergencies, especially those that are conflict related, often destroy the very basis that functional CRVS systems depend on: confidence and trust within society. Johan Galtung has described trust as the "foundation of social cooperation and positive peace."<sup>72</sup> Trust is particularly important when reaching out to remote and marginalized groups,

who often suffer the most during conflicts and crises. They tend to be absent from the national CRVS system, which compounds their isolation and neglect. Failure to build trust can diminish the legitimacy of government institutions; augment hostility to government interventions, including the civil registration system; and drive people to evade legal requirements to register vital events or even to engage in violent opposition to CRVS, as occurred in northeastern Brazil in the late 19th century.<sup>73</sup>

Repairing and rebuilding governance and administrative and CRVS systems that have been weakened during conflict, emergencies, and crises is particularly challenging in settings where historically the CRVS system has been used to exclude particular ethnic or social groups. In apartheid South Africa, for example, civil registration was widely perceived to be an instrument of exclusion and domination of the Black majority.<sup>74</sup> One of the first actions of the post-apartheid government in 1991 involved measures designed to build trust and confidence among the population, such as improved health care access, child support grants linked to birth registration, simplified administrative systems, and mobile registration services for hard-to-reach populations.<sup>75</sup>

In a detailed study of Sierra Leone, Wong argues that listening and responding to the demands of people is the most effective way to restore trust and peace.<sup>76</sup> One way of listening is to help families track the fate of missing or dead relatives and ensure that these deaths are registered

70 Claiming Human Rights. 2018. [claiminghumanrights.org/person\\_before\\_law\\_definition.html](https://claiminghumanrights.org/person_before_law_definition.html)

71 Brolan, C. E. and Gouda, H. 2017. [doi.org/10.1093/medlaw/fwx021](https://doi.org/10.1093/medlaw/fwx021)

72 Galtung, J. 1969. [jstor.org/stable/422690](https://www.jstor.org/stable/422690)

73 Loveman, M. 2006. [doi.org/10.1017/S0010417507000394](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417507000394)

74 Fataar, R. 2020. [reasonstobecheerful.world/south-africa-universal-birth-registration](https://reasonstobecheerful.world/south-africa-universal-birth-registration)

75 Munk School of Global Affairs. 2013. [munkschool.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/South-Africa-Reach-Report-compress.pdf](https://munkschool.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/South-Africa-Reach-Report-compress.pdf)

76 Wong, P. H. 2016. [doi.org/10.1177/0022343316659334](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343316659334)

and the remains buried.<sup>77 78</sup> This can matter to people for many years after the events that led to the deaths of their loved ones. As well as contributing to healing among survivors after their loss, this process can provide a vivid illustration of the government's commitment to national reconciliation, fairness, and equity across the country.

When seeking to rebuild CRVS after conflicts and crises, involving civil society actors – including traditional leaders, women's groups, youth groups, and faith-based organizations – is key. An accumulating body of experience shows the important role that civil society can play in conflict transformation by promoting reconciliation, dialogue, networking, and conflict resolution.<sup>79</sup> At the same time, it is essential to involve NGOs, the private sector, parliamentarians, and non-State actors if the population is to trust CRVS and related identity systems.

Development agencies and NGOs can contribute to the peace process by supporting representatives of different communities and factions through dispute resolution processes. The aim should be to reach a common understanding of the contribution of CRVS to peace and State building, as well as to the more immediate benefits of legal

documentation for individuals, the establishment of individual identity, and population statistics. Governments, refugees, displaced persons, and irregular migrants need to work together and with governments to address the policy and institutional challenges and recreate mutual trust across populations and with political elites.

Health sector interventions can help to offset the negative impacts of conflict and emergencies on administrative and governance structures, including CRVS. However, success requires close cooperation and exchange with other aid and development actors across the spectrum and with actors across the different communities.<sup>80 81</sup> As part of this, it is essential that vital events in refugee, displaced, and migrant populations are officially registered and that these populations receive recognized identity documentation.<sup>82</sup> Maintaining or re-establishing CRVS systems requires effective liaison with strong coordination mechanisms of humanitarian assistance, investments in public administration, and work with communities and civil society. Emergencies can also provide an opportunity to strengthen State systems, where the State sustains investments in increased human resources, capacity building, and the revision of work protocols, bringing in more long-term results.

77 Niksic, S. and Emric, E. 2020. [washingtonpost.com/world/europe/25-years-on-srebrenica-dead-still-being-identified-buried/2020/07/09/16515280-c1b8-11ea-8908-68a2b9ea9e0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/25-years-on-srebrenica-dead-still-being-identified-buried/2020/07/09/16515280-c1b8-11ea-8908-68a2b9ea9e0_story.html)

78 Bronwen, M. 2016. [documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/375811469772770030/pdf/Identification-in-the-Context-of-Forced-Displacement-Identification-for-Development-ID4D.pdf](https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/375811469772770030/pdf/Identification-in-the-Context-of-Forced-Displacement-Identification-for-Development-ID4D.pdf)

79 van Tongeren, P. et al. 2005. [riener.com/title/People\\_Building\\_Peace\\_II\\_Successful\\_Stories\\_of\\_Civil\\_Society](https://www.riener.com/title/People_Building_Peace_II_Successful_Stories_of_Civil_Society)

80 Erismann, S. et al. 2019. [health-policy-systems.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12961-019-0420-7](https://www.health-policy-systems.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12961-019-0420-7)

81 Philips, M. and Derderian, K. 2015. [doi.org/10.1186/s13031-015-0039-4](https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-015-0039-4)

82 Fifth Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration. 2019. [apai-crvs.org/sites/default/files/public/CRVS-V-Importance%20of%20CRVS%20and%20ID%20Management%20for%20durable%20solutions%20for%20refugees.pdf#overlay-context=CR5](https://apai-crvs.org/sites/default/files/public/CRVS-V-Importance%20of%20CRVS%20and%20ID%20Management%20for%20durable%20solutions%20for%20refugees.pdf#overlay-context=CR5)

## INTERNATIONAL INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT CIVIL REGISTRATION DURING CRISES

Amid the growing realization that core civil registration activities must continue during crises, some countries and international partners have made recommendations on strategies and actions to ensure that vital events are registered for populations affected by crises and emergencies. Here is a summary of the key recommendations:

- The Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) in Asia and the Pacific emphasizes the need for universal civil registration of births and deaths, with particular attention on hard-to-reach and marginalized populations and special measures to register currently unregistered populations.<sup>83</sup>
- The Human Rights Council in 2014 identified the priority for birth registration and the right of everyone to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.<sup>84</sup>
- The UNHCR Global Action Plan to End Statelessness 2014–2024 highlights examples of how States, UNHCR, and other stakeholders have addressed statelessness in a number of countries.<sup>85</sup>



Photo: Salah Malkawi / UNDP

- The World Bank Global Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) Scaling Up Investment Plan 2015–2024 describes activities needed to reach the goal of universal civil registration of births, deaths, marriages, and other vital events, including reporting cause of death, and access to legal proof of registration for all individuals by 2030.<sup>86</sup>
- The fourth Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration in 2017 drew attention to the importance of registering vulnerable children such as street children, ensuring timely and compulsory civil registration for all refugee children, and including nationality and origin in the registration of vital events of refugees.<sup>87</sup>

83 Ministerial Conference on Civil Registration and Vital Statistics (CRVS) in Asia and the Pacific. 2014. [getinthepicture.org/sites/default/files/resources/Ministerial.Declaration.English.final\\_\\_o\\_o.pdf](https://getinthepicture.org/sites/default/files/resources/Ministerial.Declaration.English.final__o_o.pdf)

84 United Nations. 2014. [ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session27/\\_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session27/Documents/A\\_HRC\\_27\\_22\\_ENG.doc&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1](https://ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session27/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session27/Documents/A_HRC_27_22_ENG.doc&action=default&DefaultItemOpen=1)

85 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2017.

86 World Bank. 2014. [worldbank.org/en/topic/health/publication/global-civil-registration-vital-statistics-scaling-up-investment](https://worldbank.org/en/topic/health/publication/global-civil-registration-vital-statistics-scaling-up-investment)

87 Fourth Conference of African Ministers Responsible for Civil Registration. 2017. [apai-crvs.org/sites/default/files/public/Nouakchott%20Declaration%20-%20Dec2017-English.pdf](https://apai-crvs.org/sites/default/files/public/Nouakchott%20Declaration%20-%20Dec2017-English.pdf)

- The UNICEF 2017 Global Programme Framework for Children on the Move includes six “policy asks” on migration and displacement:<sup>88</sup>
  - Protect child refugees and migrants from exploitation and violence;
  - End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating;
  - Keep families together;
  - All refugee and migrant children keep learning and have access to health and other quality services;
  - Press for action on the underlying causes of large-scale movements of refugees and migrants; and
  - Promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination, and marginalization in countries and areas of transit and destination.
- The 2018 Intergovernmental Conference adopted the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration which is designed to address the challenges associated with today’s migration, and to strengthen the contribution of migrants and migration to sustainable development.<sup>89</sup>
- The World Health Organization’s 72nd World Health Assembly in 2019 endorsed a global action plan to promote the health of refugees and migrants. The action plan is designed to address the health and wellbeing of refugees and migrants, and achieve universal health coverage and the highest attainable standard of health for these vulnerable populations.<sup>90</sup>

- The Regional Platform for refugees and migrants from Venezuela was set up to coordinate the national and regional governments’ responses in line with the New York Protocol on the Status of Refugees and Migrants.<sup>91</sup>

## EXAMPLES OF STRATEGIES TO FACILITATE CIVIL REGISTRATION AMONG VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

### Preventing the spread of COVID-19 among vulnerable populations

The COVID-19 pandemic has not spared vulnerable populations such as undocumented migrants and refugees. Unregistered migrant workers may be particularly exposed to infection due to crowded living conditions and their inability to take preventive measures. They also often face challenges in accessing social and health services. In Singapore, for example, initial success in containing the spread of COVID-19 was halted when the virus spread among thousands of migrant workers living in crowded conditions.<sup>92</sup> Emerging evidence suggesting that the second wave in Europe originated in vulnerable migrant populations in Spain.<sup>93</sup> Some people suspect that these outbreaks among migrant workers are linked with those in slaughterhouses in Europe; in both cases, the workforce is largely undocumented migrants who don’t have formal contracts.<sup>94</sup> These examples highlight the vulnerability of migrant workers, many of whom are undocumented and have trouble accessing health services due to bureaucracy and local

88 UNICEF. 2017. [unicef.org/media/62986/file](https://www.unicef.org/media/62986/file)

89 International Organization for Migration. 2016. [iom.int/global-compact-migration](https://iom.int/global-compact-migration)

90 World Health Organization (WHO). 2019. [apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf\\_files/WHA72/A72\\_25-en.pdf](https://apps.who.int/gb/ebwha/pdf_files/WHA72/A72_25-en.pdf)

91 Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela. 2020. [r4v.info/en/situations/platform](https://r4v.info/en/situations/platform)

92 Han, E. et al. 2020. [thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)32007-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)32007-9/fulltext)

93 Ibid.

94 Ferrer, S. 2020. [eldiario.es/sociedad/leccion-oculta-coronavirus-genoma-controlar-pandemia-hay-proteger-desfavorecidos\\_1\\_6377692.html](https://eldiario.es/sociedad/leccion-oculta-coronavirus-genoma-controlar-pandemia-hay-proteger-desfavorecidos_1_6377692.html)

administrators' disinterest.<sup>95</sup> Some countries have developed strategies to protect vulnerable populations and thus slow the spread of COVID-19 into the wider population. For instance, Portugal and Italy have made efforts to regularize all migrants who had applied for residence; the aim was to ensure citizen rights in the country during the pandemic.<sup>96 97</sup>

### Improving the lives of Rohingya refugees

The Rohingya population in Myanmar has suffered ongoing discrimination. Their right to be registered, vote, or participate in civic life is limited.<sup>98</sup> As a result of violent attacks during 2016 and 2017, over 1 million Rohingya fled their homes; most of them went to Bangladesh. Amnesty International has documented human rights violations against Rohingya populations in Myanmar, including lack of citizenship and identity cards; extortion and arbitrary taxation for registration; and a requirement for permission to marry.<sup>99</sup> Rohingyas living in Bangladesh refugee camps receive limited health services, lack legal status, and have restrictions placed on their movements. UNHCR has expressed concerns about the increased gender-based violence toward women and girls from the unregistered Myanmar Rohingya population.<sup>100</sup>

The creation and implementation of identity cards for registering Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh is an example of collaboration and bilateral agreement between UNHCR and the government of Bangladesh. It allows for the

protection, identity management, documentation, provision of assistance, and population statistics of the Rohingya displaced population.<sup>101</sup> Amnesty International has suggested that the Myanmar government amend or repeal its citizenship laws to bring them in line with international standards. It has also asked the international community to take action to ensure that UNHCR is given resources for its mandate with persons who have been rendered effectively stateless in Myanmar. UNHCR has called for

- a national asylum mechanism and refugee legislation to ensure unhindered access of persons who need international protection to the territory of Bangladesh and full compliance with the principle of non-refoulement;<sup>102</sup>
- measures to ensure that all refugee and stateless women and girls have effective access to interventions that address the root causes of trafficking and exploitation of prostitution by regularizing the status of unregistered Rohingya;
- the effective implementation of nationality legislation so that children born to Bangladeshi and Rohingya parents, who are entitled to Bangladeshi nationality, can effectively acquire it; and
- amendments to the 1951 *Citizenship Act* to allow children born to Bangladeshi mothers before 31 December 2008, to acquire Bangladeshi citizenship.

95 Linde, P. 2020. [elpais.com/sociedad/2020-09-23/me-dijeron-que-no-podian-hacerme-la-pcr-por-no-tener-papeles.html](https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020-09-23/me-dijeron-que-no-podian-hacerme-la-pcr-por-no-tener-papeles.html)

96 Vargas, J. 2020. [publico.es/sociedad/regularizacion-migrantes-covid-19-espana-no-regularizar-migrantes-italia-portugal.html](https://publico.es/sociedad/regularizacion-migrantes-covid-19-espana-no-regularizar-migrantes-italia-portugal.html)

97 Republic of Singapore. 2020. [gov.sg/article/tackling-transmissions-in-migrant-worker-clusters](https://gov.sg/article/tackling-transmissions-in-migrant-worker-clusters)

98 Parmar, P. K. et al. 2019. [doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1610275](https://doi.org/10.1080/26410397.2019.1610275)

99 Amnesty International. 2004. [amnesty.org/download/Documents/92000/asa160052004en.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/92000/asa160052004en.pdf)

100 The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). 2007. [unhcr.org/46fa1af32.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/46fa1af32.pdf)

101 UN News. 2018. [news.un.org/en/story/2018/07/1014082](https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/07/1014082)

102 United Nations Human Rights. [ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Migration/GlobalCompactMigration/ThePrincipleNon-RefoulementUnderInternationalHumanRightsLaw.pdf)

The Bangladesh government has developed strategies to protect the Rohingya population in the country, including adopting a National Strategy on Myanmar Refugees and Undocumented Myanmar Nationals.

### Identifying the migrant dead

The Italian Special Commissioner represents an example of good practice in national coordination for identifying and registering migrants who perish during migrant journeys and whose bodies are recovered.<sup>103</sup> Coordination among the relevant public and private actors makes it possible to cross-check information on missing persons and unidentified bodies. This entails constant updates of the national database on missing persons and contact with the families of the disappeared. Because it is a centralized authority and because of its role and competences, this reduces the risk of fragmented approaches to identification and the sharing of information and data. The fact that it is a national institution that they can easily identify and contact for help and information can also be a point of reference for families, foreign authorities, and associations involved in searching.<sup>104</sup> The Commission also coordinates its work with academic institutions that analyze the data and create a database with autopsy results and anthropological information. A report with the results of the forensic and anthropological investigation is then sent to the public prosecutor's office in Catania, which relatives can consult upon request. There is no deadline for families to have access to information about the body.

As Frank Laczko and colleagues observe, these experiences have demonstrated

“the need for European States holding post-mortem data to have national structures that can centralize data, and for them to have access to ante-mortem data from a range of other sources, including potentially States of migrant origin, other European States and directly from families. This demands the creation of a global architecture that would enable the collection and storage of both ante- and post-mortem data concerning missing migrants from a range of sources, including State authorities and families. Matching of ante- and post-mortem data could be made either at national level or through some transnational structure.”<sup>105</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Death is inevitable, but the circumstances and causes of death are not. For people living through conflicts, crises, and disasters, death is too often premature, brutal, and hidden. The causes of humanitarian crises and emergencies are complex and will take time to resolve. In the meantime, each death should be formally acknowledged and counted so the corpse can be disposed of with dignity and humanity and so each surviving family has an official record of the existence and demise of a loved one.

103 Robins, S. 2018. [publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/identification\\_of\\_missing\\_migrants.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/identification_of_missing_migrants.pdf)

104 Romano, S. 2016.

[mediterraneanmissing.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Mediterranean-Missing-Italian-legal-memo.pdf](https://mediterraneanmissing.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Mediterranean-Missing-Italian-legal-memo.pdf)

105 International Organization for Migration. 2017. [publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/fatal\\_journeys\\_volume\\_3\\_part\\_1.pdf](https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/fatal_journeys_volume_3_part_1.pdf)

The recording of a death is not only for instrumental purposes such as assigning responsibility, important though that is; it is also an essential action that recognizes the inherent value of every life.<sup>106</sup> Recording key characteristics of the deceased – at a minimum, their age and sex – exemplifies the need to dignify every death by knowing as much as possible about the victim. This can be particularly important during emergencies and disasters when documentation about the decedent will likely not be available.<sup>107</sup> Functional CRVS systems that can register deaths, issue documentation to surviving families, and maintain archives over the long term are key to meeting these conditions.

The accompanying paper in this series, *Building Resilient CRVS Systems: Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic and Other Emergencies*, sets out a framework for resilient CRVS systems. These include:

- Core functions (equity, financing, governance and legal framework, human resources, operations, and monitoring and evaluation); and
- Associated core competencies (integrated, responsive, agile, efficient, essential, inclusive, and robust).

Guided by this framework, country decision-makers will be better prepared to function effectively in the face of future emergencies and shocks.

In 2005, Hurricane Katrina swept through the southern United States. The scene that greeted rescuers was described as being “like a war zone.”<sup>108</sup> Counting and identifying all the dead and the causes of their deaths was extremely challenging, despite the available resources in the richest country in the world and guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.<sup>109</sup> A decade later, there remains uncertainty about the total number of deaths<sup>110</sup> and no comprehensive list of Katrina victims has been published by state or federal authorities. This remains a matter of regret. As Louisiana’s chief medical examiner pointed out, “I think it’s important for everybody to understand that it’s about the individual... We handle every person as the individual and with the dignity they deserve.”<sup>111</sup> Every death, wherever it occurs and whatever the circumstances, deserves this same respect.

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106 Fischhoff, B. et al. 2007. [cmu.edu/epp/people/faculty/research/Fischhoff-Counting-Casualties-JRU.pdf](https://cmu.edu/epp/people/faculty/research/Fischhoff-Counting-Casualties-JRU.pdf)

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108 Borger, J. 2005. [theguardian.com/environment/2005/sep/01/usnews.naturaldisasters2](https://theguardian.com/environment/2005/sep/01/usnews.naturaldisasters2)

109 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2005. [cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5435a5.htm](https://cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5435a5.htm)

110 Bialik, C. 2015. [fivethirtyeight.com/features/we-still-dont-know-how-many-people-died-because-of-katrina/](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/we-still-dont-know-how-many-people-died-because-of-katrina/)

111 O’Neill, A. 2005. [edition.cnn.com/2005/US/09/09/katrina.morgue/index.html](https://edition.cnn.com/2005/US/09/09/katrina.morgue/index.html)

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## ANNEX A: AGENCIES INVOLVED IN COUNTING DEATHS AMONG DISPLACED PEOPLE

Region	Name of Organization/Institution	Included in Count	Area Covered	Period		Frequency	Sources
				Start	End		
Global	International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Missing persons	Dead and missing persons as a result of armed conflict or a situation of internal violence; not focused on migrants specifically.	Global	1870	Ongoing	Records each incident discovered. Data available on request.	Families, direct witnesses, government authorities, and any other sources to help identify, track, report, and reunite missing people and families.
Europe/Mediterranean	UNITED for Intercultural Action	Deaths occurring en route to destination and attributable directly or indirectly to immigration policies once in destination. These include those whose bodies are found and those missing and presumed to be dead.	European borders (external and internal), Mediterranean, North Africa, Mayotte	1 January 1993	Ongoing	Reports each incident discovered.	Data is generally collected through media, own research, information received from the 550 network organizations in 48 countries, and from local experts, journalists, and researchers.
Europe/Mediterranean	Fortress Europe	All people dying to trying to enter Europe. These include, for instance, those who die while crossing the Mediterranean and those who die in Africa who are presumed to be on their way to Europe.	European borders, Mediterranean, North Africa, Mayotte	1 November 1988	Ongoing	Reports each incident discovered.	Media reports.

## ANNEX A: AGENCIES INVOLVED IN COUNTING DEATHS AMONG DISPLACED PEOPLE (CONTINUED)

Region	Name of Organization/ Institution	Included in Count	Area Covered	Period		Frequency	Sources
				Start	End		
Europe/ Mediterranean	Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Andalucía (ADPHA)	Deaths occurring en route to destination and attributable directly or indirectly to immigration policies once in destination. These include those whose bodies are found and those missing and presumed to be dead.	Southern border of Spain; Strait of Gibraltar.	1997	Ongoing	Annual report	Monitors and verifies data collected from governments, non-governmental organizations, media, and interviews.
Europe/ Mediterranean	Italian Special Commissioner for Missing Persons	Missing persons thought to have died at sea or on land; not focused on migrants specifically.	Italy (external borders and within the country)	31 January 2008	Ongoing	Periodically updated each verified incident discovered in national online registry; semi-annual and annual reports.	Public and private entities: media outlets, non-governmental organizations, and local government bodies.
Europe/ Mediterranean	The Migrant Files	Deaths occurring en route to destination and attributable directly or indirectly to immigration policies once in destination. These include those whose bodies are found and those missing and presumed to be dead.	European borders (external and internal), Mediterranean, North Africa, Mayotte.	1 January 2000	Ongoing	Reports each incident discovered.	Combines data from UNITED, Fortress Europe, and PULS.

Source: International Organization for Migration, *Fatal Journeys: Tracking Lives Lost during Migration*.  
[publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-tracking-lives-lost-during-migration](https://publications.iom.int/books/fatal-journeys-tracking-lives-lost-during-migration)





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