

## **DISASTER VICTIM IDENTIFICATION AT INTERNATIONAL LEVEL**

### **The role of INTERPOL – now and in the future**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

Almost every week natural and man-made disasters cause multiple deaths around the world. As they involve international travellers and as the numbers of people involved increases, so will INTERPOL's role become more important in recovering and identifying the victims.

#### **INTERPOL'S INVOLVEMENT IN DVI**

In 1978 a container truck loaded with fuel exploded near a camping site in Los Alfaques, Spain, killing more than 150 persons of different nationalities. The co-ordination of the identification of those casualties was not easy and from that moment the International Police Organisation (INTERPOL) became involved in the handling of disasters and in organising the identification process of the victims. In 1980 at its 49th session in Manila the General Assembly adopted a resolution to create the INTERPOL Standing Committee on Disaster Victim Identification.

The membership of that Committee has risen from an initial 10 countries, most of them western European, to the current 29 countries from all continents, and is composed of senior police experts, forensic odontologists, forensic pathologists and forensic anthropologists. Over the years, co-operation and working relations have been developed with other international organisations including the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the International Civil Aviation Organisation, the International Air Transport Association and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in The Hague.

Since 1994 the INTERPOL DVI Standing Committee has had annual meetings, with the overall aim of this Committee to facilitate the sharing of information and experience, to pass on the lessons learned from previous disasters, to refine common procedures and standards for the benefit of all 177 INTERPOL member countries and to promulgate good practice in victim identification.

#### **INTERPOL PROCEDURES AND STANDARDS**

One of INTERPOL's first acts in 1984 was the creation of the ante-mortem and post-mortem forms. This important step was followed in 1986 by the publication of the Manual on Disaster Victim Identification.

The post-mortem (PM) form is designed for listing all obtainable data about a dead body that may be used for identification and establishing the cause of death. The layout of the form is intended to correspond to the actual sequence of events and allows a simultaneous examination of effects, body and teeth. At the same time the pathologists are also looking for elements which could explain the cause of the accident or disaster. Their findings are then handed over to the judicial authorities in a separate report outlining the chain of events.

The ante-mortem (AM) form is designed for listing any information that may be obtained from relatives, friends, physicians and dentists of the presumed victim or missing person and that may assist in identification, in order to compare that information with the data on the PM form.



Initially based on the field experiences of the members of the Committee the AM and PM forms have been revised over the years, and lately on new developments in investigation techniques such as genetic identification (DNA), which from experience have proved to be very successful in many large-scale incidents. The forms have also been adapted to allow the use of computers and to facilitate the exchange of information, eventually overcoming language barriers.

As a result of these alterations the Manual has been developed into a fully-fledged Guide on Disaster Victim Identification and intended for use in any country that has to manage a disaster and/or would like to assemble a DVI Team. The guide describes in a practical way the INTERPOL DVI philosophy based upon a global interdisciplinary approach taking into account the different customs, cultural, religious and ethnic considerations with respect to the victims' families.

The work in the field is based upon five well known steps, that is recovery and numbering of remains, PM examination and recording, temporary storage of remains, AM records and AM and PM record comparison and identification.

Use of these simple steps in a structured and co-ordinated way usually rewards the team with its ultimate goal: the identification of all the victims, but in a less than ideal world the reality is somewhat different.

### **THE REALITY**

A number of well known problems have been experienced, namely, a lack of preparation, an excessive input of different agencies without the necessary co-ordination, an under-resourcing of personnel, especially forensic experts, a lack of adequate material resources, an unanticipated complexity of the situation, excessive fatigue and stress related and other factors, and all this despite the fact that internationally agreed standards and procedures are well established.

The problem almost all international organisations, and probably also all field workers involved in such disasters experience, is that as a general rule,

organisations such as INTERPOL can only make recommendations and have no real power of enforcement. Consequently, things change slowly and in the meantime, in many cases the victims' relatives are left in limbo.

### **THE FUTURE**

To facilitate the dissemination of the internationally agreed standards and procedures for police and experts involved in victim identification the Secretariat General of INTERPOL has included the AM and PM forms as well as the Guide on Disaster Victim Identification in their website at <http://www.interpol.int/>.

To facilitate an improved acceptance and usage of the DVI strategy at international level in the future all readers of this article, as a strategic target group, are asked to speak about the problem of victim identification in the many and varied contacts with their own authorities and to make them aware of the existence of internationally agreed AM and PM forms and procedures. This is not only in the interests of their own citizens who at any time can become primary or secondary victims of a disaster anywhere in the world but also in the interests of the people of those countries who cannot afford a DVI team because there are more urgent priorities; not to mention losing a loved one which carries grief common to every human being.

To those already involved in or interested in being involved in victim identification there is no better baseline to adopt than the established standards, especially in those cases where foreign nationals are involved. The INTERPOL AM and PM forms and the procedures can be used in cases involving single as well as multiple unidentified bodies. For a large number of bodies the only increased needs are more personnel, logistics and time.

It should however be remembered that, based upon the author's own experience and what he has been told by many police and experts working in the field: working in the area of victim identification will change one's life and the way one views people, and that is the reason all involved in DVI together with the INTERPOL Standing Committee should:

1. continue to promote the DVI philosophy and working procedures within the 177 member countries of INTERPOL,
2. promote the international DVI cause for those countries that are interested in creating their own DVI Team,
3. create the structures for an international DVI team composed of members and experts of national DVI teams who can be called in as a task force by those countries who are not in a material or economic position to create a team of their own and
4. continue to improve the standards and procedures and to refine the forms based upon practical experience gained from actual incidents and of developments in identification techniques.

### **CONCLUSION**

This author asks whether the requirements stated are too overreaching? Are these DVI matters of sufficient importance?

These will remain rhetorical questions but suffice it to say that at any moment, anywhere in the world, a relative and loved one could be a victim of a disaster. It is therefore reassuring to know that an organisation such as INTERPOL has spent time and resources focusing on DVI activities so that all nations can call on it for assistance and/or expertise in disaster management when needed.

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