

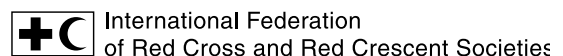
# **Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders**

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# FOREWORD

Management of the dead is one of the most difficult aspects of disaster response, and natural disasters, in particular, can cause a large number of deaths. Although the humanitarian community has been aware of these challenges for over 20 years, the massive loss of life following the South Asian tsunami in 2004 highlighted limitations in our current capacity to respond. Several large natural disasters in 2005, including Hurricane Katrina in the United States, Hurricane Stan in Central America, and the earthquake in Northern Pakistan and India, further reveal the need for practical guidance.

Natural disasters frequently overwhelm local systems that care for the deceased. Consequently, the responsibility for the immediate response falls on local organizations and communities. The absence of specialist advice or mass fatality planning amplifies the problems, often resulting in the mismanagement of human remains. This is significant because the way victims are treated has a profound and long-lasting effect on the mental health of survivors and communities. In addition, correct identification of the dead has legal significance for inheritance and insurance that can impact on families and relatives for many years after a disaster.

This manual marks an important step toward promoting better treatment of victims and their families. It recognizes the vital role of local organizations and communities and the exceptionally difficult task of managing human remains following disasters.

We are pleased that the principles outlined in this document are being implemented and promoted by a variety of organizations, including the Pan American Health Organization, the World Health Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.



Mirta Roses Periago  
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

This manual has two broad aims: first, to promote the proper and dignified management of dead bodies, and second, to maximize their identification. Following disasters, implementing simple measures early on can significantly improve the opportunity for successful identification. However, after the majority of disasters, the immediate management of human remains is done by local organizations and communities and not by specialist teams of national and international experts. Consequently, this manual focuses on practical recommendations for non-specialists.

Immediately after a disaster there is little time to read guidelines, so this manual dedicates one chapter for each key task and uses bullet-points for brevity and clarity. Local coordinators can photocopy and distribute the relevant chapters to individuals responsible for specific tasks, such as body recovery.

Throughout the manual we have chosen to use the term “dead bodies” instead of the more respectful and technically correct term “human remains,” because the term “dead bodies” is less ambiguous for readers whose first language is not English.

This manual does not provide a comprehensive framework for forensic investigation. However, following the recommendations will aid the work of forensic specialists when they arrive at the scene. These recommendations will also help communities for whom forensic expertise is unavailable to collect basic information that may aid identification of the deceased. Nevertheless, this manual does not replace the need for specialist forensic identification of victims.



# 2. COORDINATION

## Overview

- ◆ Immediately after a disaster, emergency response is often chaotic and uncoordinated.
- ◆ Coordination is needed at several levels: local, regional/provincial, and national.
- ◆ Disaster preparedness plans may already have identified a coordination structure.
- ◆ Early coordination is vital for the following tasks:
  - \* Manage information and coordinate assessment activities.
  - \* Identify required resources (e.g., forensic teams, morgues, body bags, etc.).
  - \* Implement a plan of action for the management of dead bodies.
  - \* Disseminate accurate information to families and communities about identification of the missing and management of dead bodies.

## Effective local coordination

- ◆ As soon as possible, and in accordance with existing disaster preparedness plans, identify an agency and name a person to serve as a local coordinator with full authority and responsibility for the management of dead bodies (e.g., local Governor, Police Chief, Military Commander, Mayor).
- ◆ The selection of Medical or Hospital Directors as coordinators should be discouraged as their primary responsibility is the care of the living and injured.
- ◆ Establish a team, within the Emergency Operations Center, to coordinate management of the dead. Include key operational partners such as the military, civil defense, fire service, local emergency or rescue organizations, National Red Cross/Red Crescent Society, and local funeral homes, morticians, and coroners, etc.

- ◆ Appoint persons to be in charge of one or more of the following tasks and provide them with a copy of the relevant chapter in this manual:
  - \* Body recovery (Chapter 4).
  - \* Storage (Chapter 5).
  - \* Identification (Chapter 6).
  - \* Information and communication (Chapters 7, 9 and 11).
  - \* Disposal (Chapter 8).
  - \* Support for families (Chapter 10).
  - \* Logistics (Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 8).

## **Effective regional and national coordination**

- ◆ As soon as possible, name a person as a national or regional coordinator and provide him or her with the appropriate authority for the management of dead bodies (e.g. Minister, Governor, Police Chief, Military Commander, Mayor).
- ◆ Refer to the mass fatality section of your disaster response plan or major incident procedures manual, if available.
- ◆ Establish a coordination group including key individuals to advise on:
  - \* Communications with the public and the media.
  - \* Legal issues about identification and death certification.
  - \* Technical support for identification and documentation.
  - \* Logistical support (e.g., military or police).
  - \* Liaison with diplomatic missions, inter-governmental and international organizations (for example, United Nations, World Health Organization, International Committee of the Red Cross, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and INTERPOL).

# 3. INFECTIOUS DISEASE RISKS

## Overview

- ◆ After most natural disasters there is fear that dead bodies will cause epidemics.
- ◆ This belief is wrongly promoted by the media, as well as some medical and disaster professionals.
- ◆ Dead bodies do not cause epidemics after natural disasters.
- ◆ The political pressure brought about by these rumors causes authorities to use unnecessary measures such as rapid mass burials and spraying so-called “disinfectants.”
- ◆ The consequences of mismanagement of the dead include mental distress and legal problems for relatives of the victims.
- ◆ The surviving population is much more likely to spread disease.

## Infections and dead bodies

- ◆ Victims of natural disasters are normally killed by injury, drowning, or fire—not by disease.
- ◆ At the time of death, victims are not likely to be sick with epidemic-causing infections (i.e., plague, cholera, typhoid, and anthrax).
- ◆ A few victims will have chronic blood infections (hepatitis or HIV), tuberculosis, or diarrheal disease.
- ◆ Most infectious organisms do not survive beyond 48 hours in a dead body. An exception is HIV, which has been found six days postmortem.

## **Risk to the public**

- ◆ The risk to the public is negligible because they do not touch dead bodies.
- ◆ There is the potential (but as yet undocumented) risk of drinking water supplies contaminated by fecal material released from dead bodies.

## **Risk to body handlers**

- ◆ Individuals handling human remains have a small risk through contact with blood and feces (bodies often leak feces after death) from the following:
  - \* Hepatitis B and C.
  - \* HIV.
  - \* Tuberculosis.
  - \* Diarrheal disease.
- ◆ Body recovery teams work in hazardous environments (e.g., collapsed buildings and debris) and may also be at risk of injury and tetanus (transmitted via soil).

## **Safety precautions for body handlers**

- ◆ Basic hygiene protects workers from exposure to diseases spread by blood and certain body fluids. Workers should use the following precautions:
  - \* Use gloves and boots, if available.
  - \* Wash hands with soap and water after handling bodies and before eating.
  - \* Avoid wiping face or mouth with hands.
  - \* Wash and disinfect all equipment, clothes, and vehicles used for transportation of bodies.
- ◆ Face masks are unnecessary, but should be provided if requested to avoid anxiety.
- ◆ The recovery of bodies from confined, unventilated spaces should be approached with caution. After several days of decomposition, potentially hazardous toxic gases can build-up. Time should be allowed for fresh air to ventilate confined spaces.
- ◆ See Chapter 4 (Body Recovery) for recommendations about the use of body bags.

# 4. BODY RECOVERY

## Overview

- ◆ Body recovery is the first step in managing dead bodies and is usually chaotic and disorganized.
- ◆ Many different people or groups are involved in body recovery. Communication and coordination with them is often difficult.
- ◆ This part of the process can be essential for identification and should be read in conjunction with Chapter 6, Identification of Dead Bodies.
- ◆ Body recovery only lasts a few days or weeks, but may be prolonged following earthquakes or very large disasters.

## The aim of body recovery

- ◆ Rapid retrieval is a priority because it aids identification and reduces the psychological burden on survivors.
- ◆ Recovery of bodies should not interrupt other interventions aimed at helping survivors.

## The workforce

- ◆ Body recovery is often done spontaneously by a large number of individuals, including:
  - \* Surviving community members.
  - \* Volunteers (e.g., National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies).
  - \* Search and rescue teams.
  - \* Military, police or civil defense personnel.

- ◆ Coordination of these groups is needed to encourage the use of procedures and health and safety precautions recommended in this manual.

## Methods and procedures

- ◆ Bodies should be placed in body bags. If these are unavailable, use plastic sheets, shrouds, bed sheets, or other locally available material.
- ◆ Body parts (e.g., limbs) should be treated as individual bodies. Recovery teams should not attempt to match the body parts at the disaster scene.
- ◆ Body recovery teams work most effectively in two groups: one to take bodies to a nearby collection point and a second to take them to identification or storage areas.
- ◆ Noting the place and date where the body was found helps identification (see Annex 1, Dead Bodies Form).
- ◆ Personal belongings, jewelry, and documents should not be separated from the corresponding remains during recovery, but only during the identification phase (see Chapter 6, Identification of Dead Bodies).
- ◆ Stretchers, body bags, and flatbed trucks or tractor-trailers can be used to transport bodies. Ambulances should not be used for this purpose as they are best used to help the living.

## Health and safety

- ◆ Body recovery teams should wear protective equipment (heavy-duty gloves and boots) and wash their hands with soap and water after handling dead bodies (see Chapter 3, Infectious Disease Risks).
- ◆ Recovery teams often work among debris or collapsed buildings. First-aid and medical treatment should be available in case of injury.
- ◆ Tetanus may be a particular problem in unvaccinated workers. Local medical teams should be on the alert for tetanus prone injuries.



Source: Oliver Morgan

*Protective equipment used for body recovery, Banda Aceh, Indonesia, 2005.*

# 5. STORAGE OF DEAD BODIES

## Overview

- ◆ Without cold storage decomposition advances rapidly.
- ◆ Within 12 to 48 hours in hot climates, decomposition will be too advanced to allow facial recognition.
- ◆ Cold storage slows the rate of decomposition and preserves the body for identification.

## Storage options

- ◆ Whichever storage option is used, each body or body part should be kept in a body bag or wrapped in a sheet before storage.
- ◆ Waterproof labels (e.g., paper in sealed plastic) with a unique identification number should be used (see Box 6.1 in Chapter 6, Identification of Dead Bodies). Do not write identification numbers on bodies or body bags/sheets as they are erased easily during storage.

## Refrigeration

- ◆ Refrigeration between 2°C and 4°C is the best option.
- ◆ Refrigerated transport containers used by commercial shipping companies can be used to store up to 50 bodies.
- ◆ Enough containers are seldom available at the disaster site and alternative storage options should be used until refrigeration becomes available.

## Temporary burial

- ◆ Temporary burial provides a good option for immediate storage where no other method is available, or where longer term temporary storage is needed.

- ◆ Temperature underground is lower than at the surface, thereby providing natural refrigeration.
- ◆ Temporary burial sites should be constructed in the following way to help ensure future location and recovery of bodies:
  - \* Use individual burials for a small number of bodies and trench burial for larger numbers.
  - \* Burial should be 1.5m deep and at least 200m from drinking water sources (see Chapter 8, Long-term Storage and Disposal of Dead Bodies).
  - \* Leave 0.4m between bodies.
  - \* Lay bodies in one layer only (not on top of each other).
  - \* Clearly mark each body (see Chapter 6, Identification of Dead Bodies) and mark their positions at ground level.



AFP/Getty Images

*Temporary burial of dead bodies in Thailand following the tsunami disaster on 26 December 2004.*

## **Dry ice**

- ◆ Dry ice [carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) frozen at -78.5°C] may be suitable for short-term storage.
  - \* Dry ice should not be placed on top of the bodies, even when wrapped, because it damages the body.
  - \* Build a low wall of dry ice (i.e., 0.5m high) around groups of about 20 bodies and cover with a plastic sheet, tarpaulin, or tent.
  - \* About 10 kg of dry ice per body, per day is needed, depending on outside temperature.
  - \* Dry ice must be handled carefully as it causes “cold burns” if touched without proper gloves.
  - \* When dry ice melts it produces carbon dioxide gas, which is toxic. Closed rooms or buildings should be avoided when using dry ice in preference to areas with good natural ventilation.

## **Ice**

- ◆ The use of ice (frozen water) should be avoided where possible because:
  - \* In hot climates ice melts quickly and large quantities are needed.
  - \* Melting ice produces large quantities of dirty waste water that may cause concern about diarrheal disease. Disposal of this waste water creates additional management issues.
  - \* The water may damage bodies and personal belongings (e.g., identity cards).



# 6. IDENTIFICATION OF DEAD BODIES

## Overview

- ◆ Identification of dead bodies is done by matching information from the deceased (physical features, clothes, etc.) with information from individuals who are missing or presumed dead.
- ◆ Mobilizing forensic resources may take several days. This means that early opportunities to help identify bodies may be lost as the bodies decompose.
- ◆ Visual recognition of cadavers or their photographs by acquaintances of the deceased is the simplest form of identification, but this is prone to errors. Therefore, whenever possible, it should be complemented with other means of forensic identification, albeit at a later stage.
- ◆ Forensic procedures (autopsies, fingerprinting, dental examinations, DNA) can be used after visual identification of bodies or photographs becomes impossible.
- ◆ The early work of non-specialists in managing the dead (especially proper recovery, documentation and storage methods) will determine much of the success of future identifications by forensic specialists.
- ◆ The Dead Bodies Identification Form in Annex 1 can be used to collect basic and invaluable information that will aid later forensic identification procedures.

## General principles

- ◆ Sooner is better for victim identification. Decomposed bodies are much more difficult to identify and require forensic expertise.
- ◆ The key steps to identification as described below are: Unique reference number, Label, Photograph, Record, and Secure.
- ◆ It should be appreciated that visual recognition, while simple, can result in mistaken identifications causing serious embarrassment, distress to the bereaved and legal difficulties. It is always preferable to ensure that accurate identification is achieved by evaluating a combination of criteria and not solely on visual recognition.

- ◆ Injuries to the deceased, or the presence of blood, fluids, or dirt, especially around the head, will increase the chance of mistaken visual recognition.
- ◆ Any separate body part which proves that a person is dead can aid in the identification and should therefore be managed as though it is a whole body (i.e., using a unique reference number).

## **Processes**

### **Unique reference (mandatory)**

- ◆ Assign a sequential, unique reference number to each body or body part. Reference numbers must not be duplicated. (see Box 6.1, page 17 for a recommended numbering system).

### **Label (mandatory)**

- ◆ Write the unique reference number on a waterproof label (e.g., paper sealed in plastic) then securely attach it to the body or body part.
- ◆ A waterproof label with the same unique reference number must also be attached to the container for the body or body part (e.g., body bag, cover sheet or bag for the body part).

### **Photograph (mandatory – if photographic equipment is available)**

- ◆ The unique reference number must be visible in all photographs.
- ◆ If available, digital cameras allow for easier storage and distribution of photographs.
- ◆ Clean the body sufficiently to allow facial features and clothing to be properly represented in the photographs.
- ◆ In addition to the unique reference number, the photographs should include at least:
  - \* A full length of the body, front view;
  - \* Whole face;
  - \* Any obvious distinguishing features.
- ◆ If circumstances permit, or at a later time, additional photographs can be included with the unique reference number of the following:
  - \* Upper and lower part of the body;
  - \* All clothing, personal effects, and distinguishing features.

- ◆ When taking photographs the following should be considered:
  - \* Blurred photographs will not be useful.
  - \* Photographs must be taken close to the dead body; when photographing the face, it should fill the entire picture.

<b>Minimum photograph set required for visual identification</b>	
<p><b>A) Whole Face</b></p> 	<p><b>B) Whole Body</b></p> 
<p><b>C) Upper Body</b></p> 	<p><b>D) Lower Body</b></p> 

Source: Pongrak Sitbanditmongkol / Photographer: Kunt Tongtarn Na Ayudhaya

Note: For the purpose of demonstration, photographs were taken of a volunteer and not of a deceased individual.

- \* The photographer should stand at the middle of the body when taking the picture, not at the head or feet.
- \* The photograph must include the visible unique reference number, to ensure that identification made using the photograph matches the correct body, and a scale, to calculate the size of features in the photo.

### **Record (mandatory)**

- ◆ If photographs have been taken, record the following data together with the unique reference using the form in Annex 1: (Dead Bodies Identification Form):
  - \* Gender (confirmed by looking at the genital organs).
  - \* Approximate age range (infant, child, adolescent, adult, or elderly).
  - \* Personal belongings (jewelry, clothes, identity card, driver's license, etc.).
  - \* Obvious specific marks on the skin (e.g., tattoos, scars, birthmarks) or any obvious deformity.
- ◆ If no photographs have been taken, also record:
  - \* Race.
  - \* Height.
  - \* Color and length of hair.
  - \* Color of eyes.

### **Secure**

- ◆ Personal belongings should be securely packaged, labeled with the same unique reference number, and stored with the body or body part. *This is mandatory.*
- ◆ Clothing should be left on the body.

### **Identification and release of body to relatives**

- ◆ To increase reliability of visual recognition, viewing conditions should minimize emotional stress to bereaved relatives.
- ◆ Although there may be no alternative following large disasters, the psychological impact of viewing dozens or hundreds of dead bodies may further reduce the validity of visual recognition.
- ◆ Viewing photographs of the highest possible quality may be a better approach.

◆ Release of a body:

- \* A dead body should only be released when identification is certain.
- \* Visual recognition should be confirmed by other information such as identification of clothing or personal effects.
- \* Information collected about missing people can be used to cross-check visual recognition (see Annex 2, Missing Persons Form).
- \* A body should only be released by the responsible authority, which must also provide documentation of the release (a letter or death certificate).
- \* Record the name and contact details of the person or relatives who claimed the body together with the body's unique reference number.

**Box 6.1 Unique reference numbering for dead bodies**

Each body or body part **must** have a unique reference number. The following is recommended.

PLACE + RECOVERY TEAM/PERSON + BODY COUNT

For example:

Colonia San Juan - Team A-001

OR

Chaing Mai Hospital - P. Sribanditmongkol-001

**PLACE:** Where possible, all bodies should be assigned a unique reference number indicating place of recovery. If recovery place is unknown, use instead the place where the body was taken for identification/storage.

**RECOVERY TEAM/PERSON:** Person or team numbering the body.

**BODY COUNT:** A sequential count of bodies at each site (e.g., 001 = body number one). See Annex 3 for a list of sequential numbers.

**Note:** Details about where and when the body was found and the person/organization who found it should also be recorded on the Dead Bodies Identification Form (see Annex 1).

- \* Bodies that can not be recognized by visual means, should be properly stored (see Chapter 5, Storage of Dead Bodies) until forensic specialists can investigate.
- \* Care should be taken before releasing bodies that are not whole, as this may complicate subsequent management of body parts.

# 7. INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

## Overview

- ◆ State authorities bear primary responsibility for the proper handling of information about the dead and missing in disasters.
- ◆ A large amount of information is collected about the dead and missing, even after relatively small disasters. Necessary resources (human, technical, and financial) for information management must be provided.
- ◆ Management of information is a key role for coordination (see Chapter 2, Coordination).

## Organizational arrangements

- ◆ Information centers should be established at regional and/or local levels.
- ◆ Local centers act as focal points for collection and consolidation of information on the dead and for attending to the public. They are particularly necessary for receiving tracing requests, leaving photographs and information about the missing, and for the release of information on persons found or identified.
- ◆ A national system for management and coordination of information should centralize all information on the dead and missing in disasters. Tracing services of the International Committee of the Red Cross and National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies may assist in this task.
- ◆ Data should flow in both directions between the national and local level.

## Information for the public

- ◆ The population should be promptly and clearly informed about the response and procedures adopted for:
  - \* Searching for the missing.

- \* Recovery and identification of dead bodies.
- \* Collection and release of information.
- \* Support for concerned families and communities.
- ◆ Information can be provided through the local or regional centers.
- ◆ A wide range of media can be used:
  - \* The Internet.
  - \* Notice boards.
  - \* Newspapers, television, radio, etc.

## **Information about dead bodies**

- ◆ Basic information must be collected about all dead bodies when possible (see Chapter 6, Identification of Dead Bodies, and Annex 1, Dead Bodies Identification Form).
- ◆ Early data collection may use paper forms (see data collection forms in Annex 1, Dead Bodies Identification Form and Annex 2, Missing Persons Form) and this information may be entered into an electronic database at a later stage.
- ◆ Information is likely to include valuable personal items and photographs.
- ◆ A chain of custody is required to avoid misplacement of information and ensure the availability of evidence.
- ◆ Centralization and consolidation of information about the dead and missing is essential for increasing the possibility of finding a match between tracing requests for missing persons and available/known information of dead bodies (see Annex 1, Dead Bodies Identification Form and Annex 2, Missing Persons Form).

# 8. LONG-TERM STORAGE AND DISPOSAL OF DEAD BODIES

## Overview

- ◆ All identified dead bodies should be released to relatives or their communities for disposal according to local custom and practice.
- ◆ Long-term storage will be required for remaining unidentified bodies.

## Method of disposal/Long-term storage

- ◆ Burial is the most practical method as it preserves evidence for future forensic investigation, if required.
- ◆ Cremation of unidentified bodies should be avoided for several reasons:
  - \* Cremation will destroy evidence for any future identification.
  - \* Large amounts of fuel are needed (usually wood).
  - \* Achieving complete incineration is difficult, often resulting in partially incinerated remains that have to be buried.
  - \* It is logistically difficult to arrange for the cremation of a large number of dead bodies.

## Location of burial sites

- ◆ Careful thought must be given to the location of any burial site.
- ◆ Soil conditions, highest water table level, and available space must be considered.
- ◆ The site should be acceptable to communities living near the burial site.
- ◆ The site should be close enough for the affected community to visit.
- ◆ The burial site should be clearly marked and surrounded by a buffer zone that is at least 10m wide to allow planting of deep-rooted vegetation and to separate the site from inhabited areas.

## Distance from water sources

- ◆ Burial sites should be at least 200m away from water sources such as streams, lakes, springs, waterfalls, beaches, and the shoreline.
- ◆ Suggested burial distance from drinking-water wells are provided in the following table. Distances may have to be increased based on local topography and soil conditions:

### Recommended distance of graves from drinking water wells

Number of bodies	Distance from drinking water well
4 or less	200m
5 to 60	250m
60 or more	350m
120 bodies or more per 100m <sup>2</sup>	350m

## Grave construction

- ◆ If possible, human remains should be buried in clearly marked, individual graves.
- ◆ For very large disasters, communal graves may be unavoidable.
- ◆ Prevailing religious practices may indicate preference for the orientation of the bodies (i.e., heads facing east, or toward Mecca, etc.).
- ◆ Communal graves should consist of a trench holding a single row of bodies each placed parallel to the other, 0.4m apart.
- ◆ Each body must be buried with its unique reference number on a waterproof label. This number must be clearly marked at ground level and mapped for future reference.
- ◆ Although there are no standard recommendations for grave depth, it is suggested that:
  - \* Graves should be between 1.5m and 3m deep.
  - \* Graves with fewer than five people should allow for at least 1.2m (1.5m if the burials are in sand) between the bottom of the grave and the water table, or any level to which ground water rises.
  - \* For communal graves there should be at least 2m between the bottom of the grave and water table, or any level to which groundwater rises.
  - \* These distances may have to be increased depending on soil conditions.

# 9. COMMUNICATIONS AND THE MEDIA

## Overview

- ◆ Good public communication contributes to a successful victim recovery and identification process.
- ◆ Accurate, clear, timely, and up-dated information can reduce the stress experienced by affected communities, defuse rumors, and clarify incorrect information (see Chapter 11, Frequently Asked Questions).
- ◆ The news media (TV and radio, newspapers and the Internet) are vital channels of communication with the public during mass disasters. Journalists, both local and international, often arrive soon after the disaster.

## Working with the media

- ◆ Generally, most journalists want to report responsibly and accurately. Keeping them informed will minimize the likelihood of inaccurate reporting.
- ◆ Engage proactively and creatively with the media:
  - \* A Media-Liaison Officer should be assigned both locally and nationally.
  - \* Establish a Media-Liaison office (as near as possible to the affected area).
  - \* Cooperate proactively (prepare regular briefings, facilitate interviews, etc.).

## Working with the public

- ◆ An information center for relatives of the missing and the dead should be set up as soon as possible.
- ◆ A list of confirmed dead and survivors should be made available, and details of missing individuals recorded by official staff.

- ◆ Information should be provided about the processes of recovery, identification, storage, and disposal of dead bodies.
- ◆ Arrangements for death certification may also need to be explained.

## **Working with relief agencies**

- ◆ Humanitarian workers and relief agencies, including United Nations agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, have direct contact with affected communities and may act as a source of local information.
- ◆ Aid workers are not always well informed and may give conflicting information, especially about the infectious risks of dead bodies.
- ◆ Providing correct information to aid agencies on management of the dead will further help to reduce rumors and to avoid incorrect information (see Chapter 11, Frequently Asked Questions).

## **Information management**

- ◆ Care is needed to respect the privacy of victims and relatives.
- ◆ Journalists should not be allowed direct access to photographs, individual records, or the names of victims. However, authorities may decide to release this information in a managed way to help with the identification process.
- ◆ Soon after the disaster, a decision must be taken whether or not to provide information about the number of victims. The disadvantage of this is that these estimates will undoubtedly be wrong. The advantage is that official statistics may prevent exaggerated reporting by the media.

# 10. SUPPORT TO FAMILIES AND RELATIVES

## Overview

- ◆ The dead and the bereaved should be respected at all times.
- ◆ The priority for affected families is to know the fate of their missing loved ones.
- ◆ Honest and accurate information should be provided at all times and at every stage of the recovery and identification process.
- ◆ A sympathetic and caring approach is owed to the families throughout the process.
- ◆ Mistaken identification should be avoided.
- ◆ Psycho-social support for families and relatives should be considered.
- ◆ Cultural and religious needs should be respected.

## Identification of victims

- ◆ A family liaison focal point should be established to support relatives.
- ◆ Families should be informed about findings and the identification of their loved ones before anyone else.
- ◆ Families of the dead and missing must be given realistic expectations of the process, including the methods used and timeframes for recovery and identification of remains.
- ◆ Families should be allowed to report a missing relative and provide additional information.
- ◆ Identification should be conducted as speedily as possible.
- ◆ Children should not be expected to aid in the visual recognition of dead bodies.
- ◆ The need for relatives to view the bodies of their loved ones as part of the grieving process should be respected.

- ◆ Once identified, bodies should be released as swiftly as possible to their next of kin.

## **Cultural and religious aspects**

- ◆ The overwhelming desire of relatives from all religions and cultures is to identify their loved ones.
- ◆ Advice and assistance from religious and community leaders should be sought to improve understanding and acceptance of the recovery, management, and identification of the dead bodies.
- ◆ Undignified handling and disposal of dead bodies may further traumatize relatives and should be avoided at all times. Careful and ethical management of dead bodies, including disposal, should be ensured, including respect for religious and cultural sensitivities.

## **Providing support**

- ◆ Psycho-social support should be adapted to needs, culture, and context and should consider local coping mechanisms.
- ◆ Local organizations such as the National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, NGOs, and faith groups can often provide emergency psycho-social care for those affected.
- ◆ Priority care should be given to unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable groups. Where possible, they should be reunited and cared for by members of their extended family or community.
- ◆ Material support may be necessary for funeral rituals, such as burial shrouds, coffins, etc.
- ◆ Special legal provisions for those affected (i.e., rapid processing of death certificates) should be considered and publicized within the affected communities.

# 11. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## Information for the public

### 1. Do dead bodies cause epidemics?

Dead bodies from natural disasters *do not* cause epidemics. This is because victims of natural disasters die from trauma, drowning or fire. They do not have epidemic-causing diseases such as cholera, typhoid, malaria, or plague when they die.

### 2. What are the health risks for the public?

The risk to the public is negligible. They do not touch or handle dead bodies. However, there is a small risk of diarrhea from drinking water contaminated by fecal material from dead bodies. Routine disinfection of drinking water is sufficient to prevent water-borne illness.

### 3. Can dead bodies contaminate water?

Potentially, yes. Dead bodies often leak feces, which may contaminate rivers or other water sources, causing diarrheal illness. However, people will generally avoid drinking water from any source they think has had dead bodies in it.

### 4. Is spraying bodies with disinfectant or lime powder useful?

No, it has no effect. It does not hasten decomposition or provide any protection.

### 5. Local officials and journalists say there is a risk of disease from dead bodies. Are they correct?

No. The risk from dead bodies after natural disasters is misunderstood by many professionals and the media. Even local or international health workers are often misinformed and contribute to the spread of rumors.

## Information for workers

### 6. Is there a risk for those handling dead bodies?

For people handling dead bodies (rescue workers, mortuary workers, etc.), there is a small risk from tuberculosis, hepatitis B and C, HIV, and diarrheal diseases. However, the infectious agents responsible for these diseases do not last more than two days in a dead body (except for HIV, which may survive up to six days). These risks can be reduced by wearing rubber boots and gloves and practicing basic hygiene (i.e. washing hands).

### 7. Should workers wear a mask?

The smell from decaying bodies is unpleasant, but it is *not* a health risk in well-ventilated areas, and wearing a mask is not required for health reasons. However, workers may feel better psychologically if they are using masks. The public should not actively be encouraged to wear masks.

## Information for authorities

### 8. How urgent is the collection of dead bodies?

Body collection is *not* the most urgent task after a natural disaster. The priority is to care for survivors. There is *no* significant public health risk associated with the presence of dead bodies. Nevertheless, bodies should be collected as soon as possible and taken away for identification.

### 9. Should mass graves be used to quickly dispose of the bodies?

No. Rapid mass burial of victims is not justified on public health grounds. Rushing to dispose of bodies without proper identification traumatizes families and communities and may have serious legal consequences (i.e., the inability to recover and identify remains).

### 10. What should the authorities do with dead bodies?

Dead bodies should be collected and stored, using refrigerated containers, dry ice, or temporary burial. Identification should be attempted for all human remains. Photographs should be taken and descriptive information recorded for each body. Remains should be stored (i.e., using refrigeration) or buried temporarily to allow for the possibility of an expert forensic investigation in the future.

**11. What are the potential mental health issues?**

The overwhelming desire of relatives (from all religions and cultures) is to identify their loved ones. All efforts to identify human remains will help. Grieving and traditional individual burial are important factors for the personal and communal recovery or healing process.

**12. How should bodies of foreigners be managed?**

Families of visitors killed in a disaster are likely to insist on the identification and repatriation of the bodies. Proper identification has serious economic and diplomatic implications. Bodies must be kept for identification. Foreign consulates and embassies should be informed and INTERPOL contacted for assistance.

**Information for responders****13. I am a volunteer; how can I help?**

To be helpful you should promote the proper recovery and management of dead bodies and assist in recording necessary information. You might also assist with the recovery and disposal of the dead, under the direction of a recognized coordinating authority. However, you would first need to be briefed, advised, equipped, and supported for this difficult task.

**14. I work with an NGO; how can I help?**

Providing support for families and collection of information in collaboration with the coordinating authority will best help the surviving relatives. You may also promote proper identification and treatment of the dead. NGOs should not be asked to carry out the identification of dead bodies unless they are highly specialized for this task and work for and under direct supervision of a legal authority.

**15. I am a health professional; how can I help?**

The survivors need you more than the dead. Any professional help in fighting the myth of epidemics caused by dead bodies will be appreciated. Talk about this to your colleagues and members of the media.

## **16. I am a journalist; how can I help?**

If you hear comments or statements regarding the need for mass burial or incineration of bodies to avoid epidemics, challenge them. Consult PAHO/WHO, ICRC, the IFRC or the Red Cross/Red Crescent locally. Quote this and other publications. Please do not jump on the band wagon of alarmists spreading incorrect information. Be professional.