Counting the Missing Migrants

New technology and better cooperation can account for the dead, taking their families out of limbo.

Arriving at Piraeus, Greece, last week. Thousands of others asylum-seekers haven't survived the journey.

PHOTO: LOUISA GOULIAMAKI/AP/GETTY IMAGES

By WILLIAM LACY SWING and KATHRYNE BOMBERGER
Feb. 15, 2016 2:00 p.m. ET

Last year the International Organization for Migration, the world’s oldest migrant-aid agency, tallied a record number of 5,350 migrants reported missing or dead on the world’s many migratory routes. The real figure is probably much higher.

That’s because many migrant deaths, especially those occurring in remote border regions of the world, are never recorded. Tens of thousands go missing on journeys across inhospitable terrain, on the high seas aboard unsuitable and overcrowded vessels, and crossing dangerous borders often at the mercy of human-smuggling gangs. The fault lines between the developed and developing worlds have become dying zones. Victims, if they are found, often lack identification documents—sometimes they’re missing teeth, limbs and skin.
In many cases, the bodies of missing migrants are never found at all. A recent review of 3,000 cases in Europe between 1990 and 2013 revealed that fewer than half of all bodies found were identified. Thousands of families around the world are living in limbo, not knowing whether their loved ones are alive or dead.

The international community has yet to develop a coherent and effective strategy to deal with the problem of missing migrants. While governments dither, casualties continue to rise.

Consider what happens when there is a commercial aviation disaster. Legal and insurance liabilities mean that airlines, governments and other parties do everything in their power to ensure that all passengers are accounted for. This is as it should be. Air travelers are already well documented; they are likely to be carrying passports, and their names will be listed on a flight roster.

That doesn’t happen when a boat carrying irregular migrants capsizes. The passengers will not be listed on any roster and many, by virtue of their status as refugees or migrants, will not be carrying identity documents. And since these victims will not be subject to the same legal and insurance provisions, the pressure to account for them may be considerably reduced.

Challenges surrounding missing migrants and refugees are unusually complex. Refugees may be fleeing conflicts that are the subject of competing diplomatic interests and proxy conflicts. Sea crossings bring international maritime law into play. Human smuggling and human trafficking—two distinct but interconnected activities—demand different legal responses. And since migrants typically pass through several countries and jurisdictions before they reach their final destination, legal considerations in one country may impinge on different issues in a neighboring country when an undocumented individual goes missing.

IOM’s Missing Migrants Project tracks deaths of migrants and those who have gone missing along migratory routes world-wide. In addition, following shipwrecks, IOM offices work with multiple partners and the relevant authorities, even using social media, to assist those searching for missing loved ones. The International Commission on Missing Persons, or ICMP, is an organization that seeks the cooperation of governments and others in accounting for missing persons from conflict, human rights abuses, disasters, organized crime, irregular migration and other circumstances.

ICMP and IOM have joined forces to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the missing migrant and refugee situation in the Mediterranean region. Our dual objective is to reinforce the capacity of countries of arrival to meet their mandatory obligations to families of the missing, and to explore avenues for repatriation of the remains of the missing to countries of origin. IOM and ICMP propose to deploy ICMP’s Identification Database Management System to process missing persons data systematically, making it possible to establish a viable program of genetic sampling, testing and DNA matching. This will have a significant and rapid impact on the capacity of authorities to identify deceased migrants.
ICMP will gather information from families of missing migrants in countries of origin in conjunction with IOM’s field presence and in collaboration with other international organizations, nongovernmental organizations and community groups working with families of missing migrants, as well as government authorities. ICMP will also reach out to survivors of events in the Mediterranean where lives have been lost, in order to gather information that can help identify the missing.

A comprehensive overview of the situation will make it possible to identify the needs of families and draw up an effective strategy which, in the mid- to long term, will include protecting the rights of migrants and survivors and ensuring access to justice; providing psycho-social assistance; assessing the financial impact of communities; determining legal and cultural implications in countries of origin including marital status and guardianship; and weighing the long-term effect on communities.

Around the world today we are witnessing tectonic shifts in population. Governments have scrambled to formulate adequate responses to the social, economic and, above all, human costs of these population shifts. But there are practical steps that can be taken to manage population movements and diminish the terrible attendant human suffering. We believe that with focused and sober assessment and a systematic strategy based on good science and the rule of law, governments and other stakeholders can quickly begin to resolve the unfolding migration crisis.

Mr. Swing is Director-General of the International Organization for Migration. Ms. Bomberger is Director-General of the International Commission on Missing Persons.