



The Last Rights Project

Statement regarding the COVID-19 virus pandemic

and the situation of deceased, missing and bereaved migrants and their families

24th March 2020

TO ALL GOVERNMENTS

URGENT

The COVID-19 virus pandemic is affecting all countries of the world and does not discriminate as to its victims. Since December 2019 and the first identification of this novel coronavirus, thousands have died, hundreds of thousands have contracted the virus and millions have been placed in conditions of containment in attempts to restrict its spread and reduce casualties. States across the world have been increasing emergency measures to fight the virus and its grim consequences.

In the coming weeks there will be inevitably many more deaths irrespective of those measures and the suffering of individuals, their families and communities will be felt harshly. Many millions of people across the globe have travelled as refugees and undocumented migrants, many forcibly dispersed or making informal migration journeys. Living in camps and slum conditions, incarcerated, without status and access to the facilities and rights enjoyed by the settled community, all are exposed to a higher degree of risk. Where resources are already being stretched to breaking point those who are more invisible and on the margins of our societies and deliberately excluded by immigration policies will suffer a disproportionate impact in terms of access to material assistance, health care and their basic human rights. As others have already said, everyone in every society must be treated without discrimination in relation to the measures put in place to address this pandemic.

Assisting migrants to avoid and mitigate the virus is in the public interest of everyone.

This applies also to situations of death and bereavement.

The Last Rights Project, www.lastrights.net coordinated by the charity Methoria, is a global project which promotes the rights of bereaved missing and deceased migrants and calls on States and their agencies to act in accordance with well-established international human rights norms in establishing good practice in this regard. *[The Mytilini Declaration for the Dignified Treatment of all Missing and Deceased Persons and their Families as a Consequence of Migrant Journeys](#)* sets out the key principles and measures States and their agencies should take to ensure that respect for

the dignity of the deceased and their bereaved families is met at all times and the practical steps needed to deliver these standards to all families.

We encourage all States to adopt and embody these principles and measures in their emergency work on the pandemic and especially in the context of the death and bereavement of migrants whilst outside their countries of origin.

It is imperative that where a migrant person dies as a result (directly or indirectly) of COVID-19, the responsible State takes all necessary steps to identify the deceased, preserve information and post-mortem data and store such data securely and with sufficient traceability to the deceased. In large scale tragedies where States may need to accelerate and attenuate normal funeral procedures and regulations, every effort must be made to preserve the identity and location of the deceased, their burial site and data, including DNA samples preserved that may be needed to trace and identify them to their families. GPS location markers should be allocated for each burial and individual record of death. Every effort must be made to find families where these are not immediately known, and to establish an independent system for families to be able to search for their loved ones. This must include also families searching for missing relatives as well those known to be deceased.

Where funerals attended by relatives cannot be held for public health reasons, such burials and services should be carried out in accordance with the culture and beliefs of the deceased where this is known and culturally appropriate burial sites established.

Every opportunity and assistance must be given to families to mourn their loved ones and in due course, once restrictions are lifted, to travel to the place of death, to receive their mortal remains and property and to facilitate repatriation and burials.

As with all members of society, refugees and migrants should have equal access to a transparent legal process of independent investigation, inquiry or inquest for ascertaining the cause(s) of death and be enabled to participate in those procedures. Emergency measures should not curtail such procedures.

It is imperative that all States immediately establish the necessary recording and data preservation systems to ensure that these basic human rights measures are fulfilled and that information is published to enable families, wherever they may be located to access information, in their own languages about tracing, mourning and representing their loved ones in death.

If this fails to be done, injustice will be added to the burden of grief and loss felt by families.

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