



Rabat Process

Euro-African Dialogue on
Migration and Development

Thematic Meeting:

Bridging the gaps: Advancing cooperation on Missing Migrants in the Rabat Process Region

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**Outcome
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Overview

This Thematic Meeting, co-chaired by The Gambia and Switzerland, with the active support of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), brought together over **100 participants**, from **27 European and African partner countries**, including officially designated National Focal Points (NFPs) of the [Network for Missing Migrants](#), and leading experts from key national, regional and international organisations.

Building on Area 3 of the Cadiz Action Plan - particularly Objective 5b and Action 17 - and a shared commitment to preventing the loss of life along migratory routes, the meeting focused on strengthening regional and cross-border cooperation. It aimed to identify concrete policy and operational measures to prevent the occurrence of such tragedies, improve the search for and identification of missing migrants, and ensure meaningful support for affected families and communities.

As the first in-person gathering of NFPs for Missing Migrants, the meeting provided a platform for participants to strengthen cooperation and to put forward concrete, action-oriented recommendations, calling for principled, protection-focused migration governance. They stressed the need for robust national frameworks, trust-building between families and official government representatives including law enforcement services, cross-sectoral cooperation, and the strategic use of international tools and mechanisms.

This outcome document presents the **main discussions, conclusions, good practices, and key recommendations** from this Thematic Meeting.

1) High-level opening ceremony

The **high-level opening ceremony** was attended by H.E. Mamadou Tangara, Honourable Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and Gambians Abroad; H.E. Abdoulie Sayang, Minister for Interior; Ambassador Lang Yabou, Permanent Secretary and Head of the Diplomatic Service at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and Gambians Abroad; Grégoire Crettaz, Head of Bilateral Cooperation for Africa, Americas, and Oceania within the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration; Enrica Pellacani, Head of Cooperation at the EU Delegation to the Gambia; Jean-Nicolas Marti, Head of the Regional ICRC Delegation in Dakar; Dr. Fernando Jorge Alves d'Almada, Head of Social Affairs Division at the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) Commission; and Jean-Charles de Cordes, Senior Project Manager and Dialogue Coordinator at the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD).

The high-level representatives underlined the importance of this meeting as a founding moment for the Network of National Focal Points on Missing Migrants and called for action to prevent further loss of lives. They emphasised the urgent and heartbreaking reality of missing migrants, highlighting that over 76,000 people - including more than 3,400 children - have died or disappeared during migration since 2014, with 2024 marking the deadliest year to date¹.

H.E. Abdoulie Sayang underscored the severe impact on families and communities, stressing the human cost behind the statistics and called for strengthened international cooperation. The Minister called on participants to turn dialogue into action by enhancing data sharing, cross-border coordination, and support to affected families, while centring dignity, justice, and compassion in all efforts.

Grégoire Crettaz highlighted that the increasing number of recorded missing migrants underestimates the actual scale of the issue. In 2021, Switzerland put the topic of missing migrants for the first time on the agenda of the Rabat Process and advocated for its integration into the Cadiz Action Plan. Switzerland co-chaired the first Thematic Meeting on family separation and missing migrants in 2023 in Geneva, together with The Gambia and with support of the ICRC. He placed particular emphasis on the creation of the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants as a key achievement and stressed the importance of the meeting to consolidate the Network and develop new communication channels. He also underlined the need for a coordinated, interministerial approach. Switzerland will continue addressing the issue of missing migrants during its Dialogue Chairmanship in 2026.

Enrica Pellacani acknowledged the significance of holding this meeting in The Gambia, a country deeply affected by irregular migration, and expressed gratitude to The Gambia, Switzerland, the ICRC, and Nigeria for

¹ Data from the IOM indicates a continuing rise in the number of deaths and disappearances along migratory routes. As of the end of July 2025, the total number of people reported missing or deceased since 2014 has reached 76,162. (Source: [IOM Missing Migrants Project](#)).

their key roles in advancing the agenda. The EU underscored its ongoing support through initiatives such as Frontex joint operations, partnerships with African countries on search and rescue and protection programmes as part of Team Europe Initiatives, and upcoming projects by European Red Cross societies. The EU emphasised the need for a holistic and human-centred approach, including regional cooperation, human rights protection, enhanced search and rescue operations, legal pathways, and addressing root causes of migration.

Jean-Nicolas Marti emphasised the profound human impact behind the statistics, drawing attention to the deep anguish experienced by families searching for missing loved ones. He noted that since 2022, the ICRC has been actively working to establish the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants to enhance communication and coordination between states. Mr. Marti stressed that preventing disappearances and providing answers to families must remain central to collective efforts. Given the significant financial and operational challenges faced by humanitarian organisations in sustaining this work, he called on partner countries to ensure that efforts to prevent and resolve cases of missing migrants are first and foremost driven by States.

Dr. Fernando Jorge Alves d'Almada emphasised the critical role ECOWAS continues to play in addressing migration challenges across West Africa. While Objective 8 of the Global Compact for Migration calls for coordinated efforts to save lives and address the issue of missing migrants, progress remains limited in the region due to a lack of political engagement and gaps in reliable data. Nevertheless, steps are being taken: in 2023, with support from the IOM and the ICRC, ECOWAS began developing a regional strategy on missing migrants. The Commission reaffirmed its commitment to lead these efforts and urged ECOWAS and Rabat Process partner countries to enhance policies, data collection, and cross-sectoral cooperation.

Finally, **Jean-Charles de Cordes** commended the dedication of those working on the ground to prevent disappearances and support affected families, highlighting the crucial role of the Rabat Process in strengthening cooperation. He also acknowledged that major challenges persist and called for renewed commitments based on cooperation, solidarity, and shared responsibility.

2) Missing migrants in the Rabat Process region: understanding the landscape

During this discussion, distinguished speakers outlined global and regional trends on missing migrants, highlighting risk factors that can contribute to disappearances and deaths across the Rabat Process region, challenges that may hinder effective responses, and international legal frameworks that provide critical safeguards for the protection of people on the move.

Missing Migrants: a humanitarian emergency calling for solidarity and shared responsibilities – perspectives from the African Commission on Human and People's Rights

Hon. Commissioner Salma Sassi, Special Rapporteur on Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Internally Displaced Persons and Migrants in Africa, delivered a powerful keynote address highlighting the growing crisis of missing migrants along African and European migration routes. Drawing from the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights' mandate, she described the phenomenon as a **transnational human tragedy** and a **humanitarian emergency**, putting at risk the rights to life, safety, dignity and, in some instance, the principle of non-refoulement.

Each year, thousands of individuals go missing or lose their lives along perilous migration routes across Africa or *en route* to Europe – whether at sea, in the desert, or in remote transit zones – where their fate often remains unknown. Behind these figures are interrupted lives and families left in prolonged anguish, often unable to initiate mourning or healing processes in the absence of information about their loved ones.

These disappearances are not only **individual tragedies** but also reflect a **broader collective failure**: one where contemporary migration governance falls short in ensuring protection, dignity, and human rights for all. Migration policies, remain heavily dominated by security-driven approaches, often at the expense of solidarity, protection, and accountability.

Calling for a **shared and collective responsibility** among countries of origin, transit, and destination, the Commissioner urged a reorientation toward **migration governance frameworks grounded in solidarity, cooperation** and in the **prioritisation of the dignity and safety of migrants regardless of their legal status**.

The following key references were highlighted:

- [African Commission's Resolution 486 \(2021\)](#) on missing migrants and refugees in Africa and the impact on their families, recognised as a landmark in regional efforts to address the crisis.
- [African Guiding Principles on the Human Rights of All Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers \(2023\)](#), with particular focus on Principle 9, which specifically addresses missing migrants and disappearances.
- These instruments are rooted in the [African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights](#), particularly in Article 4 (right to life and integrity of the person), Article 5 (dignity), Article 6 (liberty and security), and Article 18 (protection of the family).

Beyond numbers: lives lost and grieving families – perspectives from IOM's Missing Migrants Project

Andrea Garcia Borja, Data Analyst for IOM's Missing Migrants Project, offered a compelling reflection on the role of data in shaping policy and advocating for the rights of missing migrants and their families.

The [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#) was presented not only as a **data-driven initiative**, but also as a **powerful advocacy tool**. Its open-access database serves as a critical resource for policymakers, researchers, and civil society actors seeking to inform evidence-based responses. Beyond data, the broader mission of the initiative remains to **uphold the dignity, recognition, and rights of missing migrants and their families**, placing human lives - not just statistics - at the centre of policy discourse.

In her presentation, Ms. Garcia Borja highlighted the **scale of fatalities in North, West and Central Africa, where over 14 500 deaths and disappearances have been recorded since 2014**, including more than 1 600 women and more than 800 children. Two particularly alarming figures were presented: more than 4 300 individuals whose remains remain unrecovered mostly in the Sahara Desert - accounting for 30% of all fatalities in the region, and nearly 2 000 individuals for whom no demographic information could be recorded. These figures indicate that **many families may still be unaware of their loved ones' fate**. Anecdotal accounts suggest more lives may be at lost in the Sahara than in the Mediterranean, yet these deaths are not recorded.

Beyond the intra-African context, **50% of all global migrant fatalities recorded by the Project occurred on maritime routes to Europe - amounting to more than 37 000 deaths**. This figure reflects both the dangerously high number of preventable deaths but also the comparatively stronger monitoring capacity along these routes. The **Central Mediterranean remains the deadliest corridor**; however, the **Atlantic route to the Canary Islands has seen a significant rise in fatalities since 2020**, with more than 1 200 deaths documented in 2024. It was stressed that many incidents likely remain unrecorded, particularly those involving "invisible shipwrecks", where vessels disappear without a trace and leave no survivors or documentation.

Ms. Garcia Borja also made a compelling case for the link between **improved data collection and more humane, effective migration governance**. In many cases, basic information such as the migrant's age, gender, or country of origin is missing, which makes it difficult to tailor prevention and response mechanisms and to uphold the rights of the deceased and their families.

The presentation concluded with **concrete recommendations**, including **strengthening the documentation of migrant fatalities**; and **enhancing the effectiveness of data sharing** to support family tracing and identification of the deceased, and to inform policies to prevent migrant deaths. In this regard, the **Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants** was highlighted as a **vital catalyst for action** - helping to foster political commitment, raise awareness among relevant authorities, and ultimately save lives.

Rights-based approach to migration governance can save lives – perspectives from the United Nations Special Procedures

Prof. Siobhán Mullally, Chairperson of the Platform of Independent Experts on Refugee Rights (PIERR) and UN Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, delivered a comprehensive overview of the international legal frameworks applicable to the prevention of disappearances and trafficking situations in the context of migration.

At the core of her intervention was a strong reaffirmation that **international legal frameworks** – including **international human rights law, refugee law, international humanitarian law, the law of the sea, and instruments addressing transnational organised crime** – remain fully and consistently applicable in the context of migration and mixed movements.

It was further underscored the imperative to uphold the fundamental rights enshrined in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), including the right to leave any country, including one's own; the right to return to and enter one's country; the right to seek asylum; and the protection of family unity.

The **principle of non-refoulement** was highlighted as a cornerstone of international protection - recognised as customary international law and codified in [Article 33 of the 1951 Refugee Convention](#), [Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture](#), and [Article 16 of the Convention on Enforced Disappearances](#). Prof. Mullaly also recalled the binding obligations set out in the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#), which guarantees core rights such as non-discrimination, equality before the law, the right to life, the prohibition of arbitrary detention, and the protection of family life.

In addition, Prof. Mullaly highlighted the legal obligations under the **law of the sea**, in particular the duty to render assistance to persons in distress at sea and to ensure their disembarkation in the nearest place of safety, in accordance with the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#), the [International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue](#) (SAR Convention), and the [International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea \(SOLAS\)](#). It was recalled that these obligations apply to all maritime actors, regardless of the legal status of those in distress.

Special attention was drawn to **individuals in situations of heightened vulnerability**, including children, women, and persons with disabilities. The **best interests of the child** were highlighted, as outlined in the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) and further elaborated in [General Comment No. 6 of the CRC Committee on the treatment of unaccompanied and separated children outside their country of origin](#).

The rights of **refugee and asylum-seeking women** were also recalled, with reference to [Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women \(CEDAW\)'s General Recommendation No. 32](#), which addresses the gender-related dimensions of refugee status, asylum, nationality, and statelessness. The rights of persons with disabilities were emphasised as well, drawing on Article 11 of the [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities \(CRPD\)](#) and related thematic studies on the protection of persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies. The work of the [UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities](#) was referenced in this regard, with a reminder that persistent misperceptions - such as the assumption that those who migrate by choice or force do not include **persons with disabilities** - continue to hinder inclusive protection efforts.

Ms. Mullaly also recalled the **potential applicability of international criminal law** in migration contexts, including under the jurisdiction of the [International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#). Reference was made to preliminary examinations undertaken by the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor, highlighting the gravity of violations that can occur during cross-border movements.

The [Global Compact for Migration \(GCM\)](#) and the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) were cited as complementary instruments that reinforce existing international standards. Particular attention was drawn to GCM's Objective 5, which promotes the availability and flexibility of safe and regular migration pathways; Objective 8, which calls to save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants; Objective 9, which aims to strengthen transnational action against migrant smuggling; and Objective 10, focused on preventing, combating, and eradicating trafficking in persons in the context of international migration.

In addition, attention was drawn to the **growing intersection between trafficking in persons and migrant disappearances**, particularly along unsafe migration routes, with restricted access to protection, and increasing criminalisation of irregular migration. Trafficking was described as a process, whereby individuals - though they may initially consent to migrate - can become trapped in cycles of debt, coercion, and exploitation.

It was emphasised that **international and regional human rights law** provides critical **safeguards for trafficked persons**, including the **principle of non-punishment**, which protects individuals from being penalised for acts committed as a direct consequence of their exploitation. The Special Rapporteur expressed concern over the increasing tendency to criminalise irregular entry and stay, even in cases where the individuals concerned may be victims of trafficking. It was stressed that **such individuals should be treated first and foremost as victims in need of protection**, rather than as persons lacking valid documentation.

The [UNODC's Global Report on Trafficking in Persons](#) reported a **25% increase in the global detection of trafficking victims compared to pre-pandemic levels**. It highlighted that African victims are being trafficked along a wider range of international routes. Child trafficking rose by over 30%, with an even sharper increase among girls. These trends underscore the heightened risks faced by women and girls, particularly in the absence of safe and regular migration pathways grounded in human rights and humanitarian principles.

Finally, the Special Rapporteur drew a **direct link between trafficking and migrant disappearances**, noting that policies restricting access to asylum, limiting safe and regular migration options, and criminalising human rights defenders and humanitarian actors engaged in life-saving operations contribute to people being forced into increasingly dangerous routes - often resulting in situations of trafficking, deaths, and disappearances.

The Special Rapporteur also recalled that, in its [General Comment No. 1 on enforced disappearances in the context of migration](#) (2023), the Committee against Enforced Disappearances (CED) observed that increasingly securitised migration and border governance policies - combined with broader trends of deterrence and criminalisation of migrants and those who assist them - can indirectly contribute to migrant disappearances, as they may force individuals to take increasingly dangerous routes and/or to turn to criminal networks of smugglers or traffickers, thereby exposing them to risks of human rights violations, exploitation, and the risk of becoming victims of enforced disappearance.

To address these challenges, the Special Rapporteur stressed the importance of **comprehensive prevention measures**, including the **expansion of rights-based, safe and regular migration opportunities, effective access to asylum, and pathways for family reunification and resettlement**. Without these structural interventions, efforts to combat trafficking and prevent disappearances will remain ultimately insufficient.

Bridging the gap between political commitment and operational implementation - Insights from the Central Tracing Agency of the International Committee of the Red Cross

Florian von König, Global Advocacy Lead at the ICRC's Central Tracing Agency shared key reflections on the evolving political and operational landscape around missing migrants. He noted that while global and regional attention has grown, a **substantial gap remains between high-level political engagement and the concrete realities of people on the move**.

Several **recent developments** reflect this growing political awareness and commitment, including:

- [Resolution 486 of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) on missing migrants and refugees in Africa and the impact on their families;
- [Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 2569 \(2021\)](#) and [Recommendation 2284 \(2024\)](#) on Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers - A call to clarify their fate;
- [Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants](#) (2025) on the phenomenon of migrants going missing or being subjected to enforced disappearance;
- Strengthened institutional engagement from the UN Secretary General, the European Commission, the Council of Europe, and the Rabat Process.

Despite these advances, there is a pressing need to transform political momentum into concrete, protection response measures.

Mr. von König also underscored the growing recognition that **restrictive border control policies do not save lives**, whereas **humanitarian approaches are far more effective in preventing deaths and disappearances**. Mr. von König recalled that elements of contemporary migration governance, particularly those with strong emphasis on security, continue to contribute to preventable loss of life. Noting the highly politicised nature of discussions around migration, Mr. von König regrettably emphasised that discussions tend to focus more readily on the identification of deceased persons rather than on measures aimed at **preventing such tragedies from occurring in the first place**.

Mr. von König called for this paradigm to be shifted. **Rather than restoring humanity posthumously, "reducing the number of people dying must be the number one priority"** he stressed. He noted that **there was no shortage of recommendations** - many already exist, including from the UN Secretary-General Special Rapporteur on the rights of migrants, Member of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights - **but that their implementation was lacking**.

Turning to practical steps, he pointed out that addressing **search and identification's challenges** requires a **clear national policy framework and strong international cooperation**. While the technical knowledge and guidelines to handle cases of missing or deceased persons are already available, the real obstacles lie in the absence of resources and political will.

To illustrate positive progress, Mr. von König highlighted **promising practices**, such as the creation of a network of officers across different regions in **Senegal**, which provides families with accessible entry points for

reporting cases and supports tracing efforts. He also referred to collaborative efforts in **Central America**, where civil society organisations and government ministries have developed a shared database containing information on thousands of missing persons and their families.

In relation to the identification and management of the deceased, Mr. von König pointed to highly effective practices across Europe. Countries such as the **United Kingdom, Austria, France, and Greece** have repeatedly activated their **Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) capacities**, successfully identifying large numbers of missing migrants. These efforts have benefited from the standardised framework provided by INTERPOL, which facilitates comprehensive procedures, data collection, and international cooperation. Regrettably, Mr. von König recalled that such responses remain the exception rather than the rule, with activation often driven by media attention instead of systematic protocols. He stressed the importance of **institutionalised and systematic approaches, rather than ad hoc or reactive measures**.

On the African continent, **the Mediterranean coastal States** have employed consular channels and direct coordination with medico-legal institutions to exchange information with countries of origin in sub-Saharan Africa for identifying shipwreck victims. **Tunisia**, for example, has developed inter-agency procedures involving municipalities, coast guards, and ministries to ensure proper recovery and identification of bodies. Similarly, **The Gambia** has established an inter-ministerial task force to coordinate national policy and responses to the issue of missing migrants. **Nigeria** is working toward creating similar mechanisms, and **Djibouti** - despite limited institutional capacity - has implemented a system for recovering and identifying migrants who die within the country's territory.

This **growing catalogue of effective practices** can be adapted to various national contexts and should be shared with NFPs as actionable tools. While **humanitarian actors** play a vital role in providing technical guidance, facilitating dialogue, and supporting capacity-building, Mr. von König reiterated that they **cannot substitute for States** whose responsibilities must be fully upheld. He called for enhanced **peer-to-peer cooperation**, particularly in forensics, noting that European institutions possess advanced forensic expertise that could be shared more widely across regions.

In that sense, **NFPs have a critical role in promoting these initiatives, identifying and addressing capacity gaps, strengthening national coordination, and ensuring the effective transnational exchange of information and requests for assistance.**

Finally, Mr. von König urged a **broader reflection on resource allocation**. He invited participants to examine the vast sums invested in border and migration control policies and to consider whether part of such funding could be more effectively directed towards preventing deaths, supporting identification efforts, and mitigating the humanitarian consequences of current policies. His call was clear: **strong political decisions must be grounded in human dignity, solidarity, and a shared sense of responsibility.**

The human reality behind data: The families of the missing – EuroMed Rights, civil society perspective

Mahmoud Kaba, Project Coordinator at EuroMed Rights that unites more than 60 civil society organisations from 30 countries to promote and defend human rights across the Euro-Mediterranean region, drew attention to the enduring human reality behind the statistics, urging the international community to centre its focus on the countless **families who** - over more than two decades and continuing today - **remain without information on loved ones who disappeared during migration.**

In his intervention, Mr. Kaba stressed that in many cases, the deceased are buried unidentified, and individuals are held in detention without access to communication with their families. Simultaneously, families in search of their loved ones - alongside civil society actors - **frequently encounter criminalisation, bureaucratic obstacles, absence of institutional support, limited inter-State cooperation, and the absence of legal reporting mechanisms**, compounding their suffering and deepening their sense of injustice.

Despite these challenges, families and civil society have shown remarkable resilience and determination - creating informal mechanisms of cooperation and, in some cases, developing initiatives supported by institutional actors to locate the missing and advocate for their identification and return. These efforts have already delivered results for many, highlighting that **with sustained and structured investment by States in protection and cooperation mechanisms, far more families could receive support – and lives could potentially be saved.**

Mr. Kaba called for the development of a **principled and coordinated international framework** - anchored in solidarity and shared responsibility - bringing together countries of origin, transit, and destination, in partnership with regional and international organisations, civil society, and affected communities.

On **prevention**, EuroMed Rights advocated for the **expansion of safe and legal migration pathways**, with the long-term objective of facilitating freedom of movement between regions. Mr. Kaba underscored the obligation to ensure the **rescue and protection of all individuals in life-threatening situations, regardless of their migration status**. He further called for all **migration and border policies** to be developed and implemented through a **human rights-based approach**, to prevent exacerbating the risks and vulnerabilities faced by people on the move.

Regarding **search and identification**, Mr. Kaba urged **for enhanced inter-State cooperation with a dedicated focus on missing migrants** and called on States to adopt **national laws and procedures** that explicitly address the search for and identification of missing persons, ensure access to justice in cases of disappearance, and uphold accountability.

Recommendations that emerged from the panel discussion

- **Foster shared responsibility and solidarity** among countries of origin, transit, and destination in the prevention and response to the tragedy of missing migrants.
- **Reorient migration governance frameworks to prioritise the dignity, safety, and protection of all migrants**, regardless of their migration status. This includes comprehensive prevention measures such as the expansion of rights-based, safe and regular migration pathways; effective access to asylum; mechanisms for family reunification and resettlement; and the rescue and protection of all individuals in life-threatening situations, irrespective of their migratory status.
- **Bridge the gap between political commitments and lived realities**, ensuring that growing political commitments are translated into operational responses that effectively address protection gaps.
- **Reverse the current trajectory and adopt a preventive paradigm**: shift from limiting efforts on restoring humanity *posthumously* by managing disappearances and deaths, to proactively increasing efforts that can prevent these tragedies from happening in the first place.
- **Shift leadership from humanitarian actors to States in prevention and response**, leveraging the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants and peer-to-peer guidance to share, adapt and implement existing good practices tailored to national contexts.
- **Institutionalise and systematise the identification and dignified management of the dead**, moving beyond ad hoc or reactive responses.
- **Designate NFPs for the Network for Missing Migrants**, based on their demonstrated expertise on missing migrants and related human rights issues, disappearances, and/or international law enforcement or judicial cooperation as well as their ability to mobilise and coordinate relevant national actors.
- **Empower NFPs** to identify and address institutional and capacity gaps, facilitate cross-border information sharing, and coordinate national and international efforts efficiently. Ensure that their mandate is **supported by adequate institutional backing and operational capacities** to enable effective national engagement and meaningful contribution to the Network's objectives.

3) From prevention to response: Strengthening action to protect migrants and support families

Speakers discussed efforts to prevent migrants' deaths and disappearances through improved information, protection, and safe migration pathways, while also highlighting response mechanisms and the key role of the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants in fostering cross-border cooperation.

Capitalising on the Council of Europe's approach of standard-setting, monitoring, and cooperation

The Council of Europe, represented by **Rocio Cervera**, Deputy to the Executive Director of the North–South Centre, reaffirmed its core mandate to promote and protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law across its 46 Member States. The Council of Europe has a **strategic role in bridging the gap between international standards and national implementation** through its unique triangle of standard-setting, monitoring, and cooperation.

Ms. Cervera highlighted the relevance of several Council of Europe's instruments to the issue of missing migrants, including Article 2 of the [European Convention on Human Rights, Recommendation R\(99\)](#) on medico-legal autopsy rules, [Recommendation CM/Rec\(2009\)12](#) on the presumption of death of missing persons, and [Convention 108+](#) to facilitate secure and rights-based cross-border data sharing including for forensic identification purposes.

The presentation drew particular attention to [Resolution 2569](#) and [Recommendation 2284 \(2024\)](#) of the **Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, on Missing migrants, refugees and asylum seekers – a call to clarify their fate**. While non-binding, these instruments are politically significant as they call on national parliaments to raise awareness, strengthen legislative responses, and urge governments to harmonise procedures, enhance search efforts, and improve identification and management of deceased migrants.

These build upon global frameworks including the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration and national developments across Europe (e.g. deployment of the Greek DVI team following the Pylos shipwreck; appointment of NFPs for Missing Migrants in several countries, including Spain, Malta, Switzerland, Germany, and the Czech Republic; and national-level forensic collaboration in Spain).

Ms. Cervera underscored that **search and identification processes must be protection-oriented, free from immigration enforcement, and respectful of families' rights and data privacy**. She emphasised that families must be recognised as rights-holders as well as key contributors in identification efforts. To enable their participation, it was further recommended to direct trust-building efforts between authorities and families, including through the establishment of firewalls to ensure that reporting of a disappearance does not trigger legal or administrative consequences for families lacking regular status of entry or stay. The principle of non-discrimination was also recalled as a key principle noting that every deceased person has the right to identification and a dignified burial, regardless of origin, status, or circumstance.

To support States in these efforts, Ms. Cervera highlighted a range of **practical tools and mechanisms** from the Council of Europe, including:

- The **Network of Prosecutors**, which can support cross-border investigations and prosecution on migrant smuggling while promoting a human rights-based approach;
- The **Network of NFPs**, facilitating real-time coordination on **migration governance and protection**.
- Country-specific legal profiles and practical information compiled through the **Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA)**;
- A **practitioner's guide on administrative detention**, widely used by governments and civil society;
- Financial support through the **Council of Europe Development Bank**, which disbursed over €2 billion in loans since 2015 for projects supporting migrants and displaced persons.

Looking ahead, it was emphasised that the Council of Europe will continue to advance this agenda through legal innovation and strengthened cooperation. The Committee of Ministers has notably mandated the European Committee on Crime Problems to draft a new legal instrument to enhance criminal law responses to migrant smuggling. This future text is expected to include provisions on international cooperation, investigative tools, victim protection and may also address the challenges States face in locating and identifying missing migrants, particularly regarding jurisdiction and prosecutorial action.

Finally, the Council of Europe is scaling up its cooperation with countries beyond Europe, through its [Neighbourhood Policy](#) - migration will be introduced as a key thematic priority in the upcoming 2026-2029 programming cycle - and deepen engagement with countries in the MENA region.

Insights from a country of origin and transit – Perspectives from The Gambia

Musa Camara, Minister Counsellor and Deputy Head of the Mission of the Republic of The Gambia to Belgium and the European Union, provided an overview of national efforts undertaken to address the issue of missing migrants. As both a country of origin and transit, The Gambia has undertaken important **institutional steps** aimed at prevention, protection, and coordination:

- The creation of the **National Coordination Mechanism (NCM) on Migration and its eight thematic working groups**, which aims at protecting and directing assistance to migrants in situation of vulnerability, including victims of human trafficking.
- The establishment of a **National Task Force on Missing Migrants**, under the leadership of the Gambian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which works as an interministerial organ that brings together key national institutions, including the Ministry of Justice, police services, the Red Cross, and others key partners.
- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also works in close collaboration with **Gambian communities and associations in the diaspora** to help identify and register cases of missing migrants.

The Gambia intends to **address remaining gaps** to ensure adequate protection at the national level and facilitate international cooperation efforts. In particular, the absence of specific legislation criminalising migrant smuggling continues to limit the ability of law enforcement authorities to effectively prosecute perpetrators and dismantle smuggling networks undertaking activities across the mediterranean sea and the Sahara Desert. This legal gap also creates a **risk of criminalising victims**, due to the lack of safeguards that would prevent trafficked or smuggled persons from being prosecuted, detained, or punished for acts directly linked to their victimisation.

To respond to these challenges, The Gambia is working towards the **adoption of a comprehensive legal framework**, including the swift adoption of an anti-smuggling bill which will include the non-punishment principle. This would significantly strengthen the Gambia's capacity to combat migrant smuggling while ensuring the protection of victims' rights.

Insights from a country of transit and destination – Perspectives from Switzerland

Pia Weber, Specialist for Special Situations/Missing Persons at the Federal Department of Justice and Police of Switzerland, shared insights on Switzerland's national response to the issue of missing migrants, emphasising Switzerland's position as both a country of transit and destination.

Switzerland has established a **structured and coordinated response to cases of missing persons**, which falls primarily under the competency of law enforcement authorities. In the European context, police typically serve as the first point of contact when someone is reported missing. Ms. Weber explained that while anyone can report a disappearance, families are particularly encouraged to do so, as they often hold crucial information that can help investigations. The Swiss approach is grounded in the recognition of the **right to disappear**, while also ensuring that law enforcement can act when there are legitimate concerns about the missing person's safety or well-being.

Ms. Weber outlined key steps followed in Switzerland **when a case of disappearance is reported to police forces**. Usually, law enforcement authorities begin by assessing the nature of the disappearance. **In case the disappearance is deemed 'worrying'**, the missing person's data is entered into the national database and then shared with the Schengen Information System to increase the likelihood of locating the individual. Authorities may also request a Yellow Notice from INTERPOL to circulate the case internationally. In addition, DNA samples from relatives can be collected and submitted to [INTERPOL's I-Familia database](#), or sent directly to the country where the missing person was last seen, to support identification and tracing efforts.

The Swiss law enforcement cooperates closely with partners such as the ICRC, which can accompany families when they engage with local police.

Leveraging INTERPOL capabilities to support national prevention and response efforts.

M. Isaac Espinosa Delgado, Criminal Intelligence Analyst at INTERPOL, underscored INTERPOL's capabilities in and commitment to supporting States in addressing the issue of missing and deceased migrants through a **dual-track approach**: preventing and responding to migrant smuggling and human trafficking; and supporting the identification and tracing of missing persons and unidentified remains.

[INTERPOL](#), the world's largest international criminal police organisation with 196 member countries, enables real-time information exchange, police cooperation, coordinated operations, and provides investigative and operational support in the fight against trafficking and migrant smuggling.

INTERPOL coordinates **global specialised networks** such as [INTERPOL's Specialised Operational Network against Migrant Smuggling \(ISON\)](#) and the Human Trafficking Experts Group (HTEG). These platforms are designed to build law enforcement capacity and facilitate cooperation with regional and international stakeholders from various sectors, providing more holistic support to INTERPOL member States.

In the area of **identification of missing persons or remains**, INTERPOL offers a range of **specialised tools** to support international efforts. These include **Yellow Notices**, used to locate missing persons or to identify individuals unable to self-identify, and **Black Notices**, used to share biometric data related to unidentified deceased persons. Both are international alerts issued through INTERPOL's National Central Bureaus - the national focal points for all INTERPOL activities.

In addition to these notices, [I-FAMILIA](#), a **unique global DNA database** launched by INTERPOL in 2021, can allow for DNA matching between biological relatives of missing persons and unidentified human remains. Available to all 196 INTERPOL member countries, the database is entirely independent from other INTERPOL systems and contains no nominal data - only genetic information. To date, over 70 countries contribute to I-FAMILIA, which continues to grow and deliver results. Moreover, INTERPOL offers **technical expertise** to member countries in disaster victim identification, facial recognition, DNA analysis, and digital forensics.

Mr. Espinosa Delgado strongly encouraged national representatives to raise awareness and fully use the international tools available - both through INTERPOL and other mechanisms - and to strengthen national operating procedures for addressing cases of missing migrants and unidentified bodies. The intervention concluded with the **principle of non-discrimination underpinning INTERPOL work**: everyone has the right to be located and identified, regardless of wealth, ethnicity, or the circumstances of their disappearance.

Recommendations that emerged from the panel discussion

- **Adopt a principled and rights-based approach to search and identification:** Ensure that all national and international processes are protection-oriented and uphold the rights and dignity of missing persons and their families. This includes upholding the right of every deceased person to be identified and afforded a dignified burial, regardless of nationality, legal status, or other circumstance. Firewalls should guarantee that reporting a disappearance does not trigger legal or administrative consequences for families or relatives without regular migration status. Families must be recognised both as rights-holders and key partners in resolving missing persons cases.
- **Establish and institutionalise standard operating procedures for responding to missing or deceased persons,** ensuring systematic response rather than relying on ad hoc measures.
- **Leverage the Council of Europe's expertise, tools and cooperation avenues** to bridge protection gaps between political commitments and operational implementation. Fully harness its capacity to support the development of comprehensive national policy, legislative frameworks, and institutional prevention and response measures. Actively engage with the relevant networks - *highlighted in the above section*.
- **Utilise INTERPOL's expertise, tools and cooperation avenues:** Leverage INTERPOL's investigative, analytical, and operational support to prevent and respond to trafficking in persons and migrant smuggling. Capitalise on INTERPOL's specialised networks - *mentioned in the above section*. Promote the effective use of INTERPOL's notices mechanism, the I-FAMILIA DNA database, and forensic identification expertise to enhance national efforts in identifying and tracing missing migrants and unidentified remains.

- **Foster national cross-institutional coordination:** The panel underlined the need for inter-institutional task forces to coordinate a whole-of-government response to the issue of missing migrants. It further recommended exploring the creation of communication channels between INTERPOL National Central Bureaus (NCBs) and the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants. This would enhance coordination and information exchange at the national level, particularly as law enforcement actors often act as first responders in cases of missing or deceased individuals.

4) Towards trust and resilience: need to know, upholding rights of families and strengthening multi-stakeholder cooperation

This session explored the challenges faced by families of missing migrants and emphasised the importance of trust-building, civil registration systems, and strengthened multi-stakeholder coordination to ensure families' access to rights, justice, and support.

Addressing the legal challenges of migrant disappearances

Pauline Warnotte, Regional legal expert at the ICRC, highlighted the **main legal challenges faced by the families of missing migrants**. In addition to emotional distress, families face **administrative uncertainty over the status and property of missing persons**, compounding their material, financial, and psychological burden. Despite the wide variety of legal systems worldwide (civil law, common law or Islamic law), families encounter similar challenges in accessing information, having their rights recognised, and receiving support in the search for their missing loved ones.

These legal and practical difficulties can be grouped into four main areas:

- **Property rights:** Uncertainty over who is entitled to manage and access the property of missing persons in their absence.
- **Marital and family rights:** Ambiguity regarding the legal status of spouses and children of missing persons, including children born after their disappearance. Challenges also arise concerning parental authority in the absence of the father, particularly in jurisdictions recognizing only paternal authority.
- **International legal barriers:** Obstacles to the identification, repatriation, and burial of deceased migrants, often due to the lack of cooperation mechanisms or bilateral agreements for handling cross-border cases, which can complicate families' grieving process.
- **Language barriers and lack of familiarity with legal, institutional, and digital systems:** In Europe, families of missing persons often face additional challenges in reporting disappearances due to language barriers; limited knowledge of legal and institutional procedures; the loss or absence of identity documents; difficulties in replacing or validating such documents further hindering access to services; and increasing reliance on digital procedures which also creates barriers for families with limited technological skills.

Ms. Warnotte emphasised that while challenges are often similar, their causes, scale, and solutions vary by context. She stressed the importance of understanding national legal and institutional frameworks, engaging local stakeholders, and tailoring responses accordingly. The **ICRC's Guiding Principles and Model Law on the Missing** were highlighted as a useful tool to strengthen national responses.

The ICRC has developed guiding principles and a Model Law to help States legislate on missing persons. This framework promotes a comprehensive approach that includes measures to prevent disappearances and to protect the rights and interests of missing persons and their families.

Content of the Model Law:

- Chapter 2: Basic rights and measures
- Chapter 3: Legal status of missing persons and related rights
- Chapter 5: Provisions related to search, recovery, and treatment of the dead
- Annexes: practical tools such as the Certificate of Absence (Annex 2, p.58). This tool has been successfully used in several contexts and has led to significant legal changes for the families concerned.



To support authorities, the ICRC conducts, in collaboration with local legal experts and Red Cross specialists, **compatibility analyses of national laws** which aim at assessing the extent to which national legislation meets international obligations and the guiding principles included in the model law cited above. They lead to **recommendations shared with authorities** to help them adapt legal frameworks, establish priorities, and develop action plans to address families' needs and clarify the fate of missing persons. These include measures such as **declarations and certificates of absence**, enabling procedures to protect both the rights of missing persons (e.g. designation of a representative for asset management) and their families (e.g. parental authority).

Ms. Warnotte highlighted the need for **centralised databases and registers of missing persons** to facilitate certificates of absence and support search efforts. She emphasised the **importance of bilateral, regional, and international cooperation for information exchange and repatriation**. Concluding, she stressed the need for **context-specific legal solutions** that are practical and avoid placing additional administrative or financial burdens on affected families.

Senegal's approach: proximity, trust, and protection

In Senegal, **Ambassador Ibrahima Cissé** from the Ministry of African Integration and Foreign Affairs emphasised that **families of missing migrants face four major challenges**:

- **Access to information:** Families often do not know which institution to contact to report a disappearance. Information is largely spread through word of mouth.
- **Socio-economic consequences:** The departure of a migrant, often funded by the family, is part of a broader community dynamic. When the migrant goes missing, it not only extinguishes hope but also removes a potential source of income, destabilising the family's economic balance.
- **Psychosocial suffering:** The uncertainty surrounding the migrant's fate, whether they are alive or deceased, causes profound emotional distress, made worse by the absence of an official response.
- **Administrative and legal challenges:** A disappearance triggers a complex process involving declarations of absence or death, followed by inheritance procedures.

The Senegalese government has established **Offices for Reception, Orientation, and Monitoring (BAOS)** in all 14 regions of the country. These offices are tasked with welcoming and supporting migrants and their families; facilitating the search for and identification of missing persons; maintaining close contact with families to ensure personalised follow-up.

Amb. Cissé put forward **strategies to restore trust between families and authorities**:

- **Acknowledge the trust gap:** This requires understanding its roots - lack of information on one side, mistrust and fear of stigma on the other. Recognising this reality is a first step toward rebuilding the relationship.
- **Field presence and direct dialogue:** Involving families in discussion forums (expert meetings, public dialogues, etc.) is essential. Physical proximity, particularly through BAOS, is key to restoring trust.
- **Awareness-raising:** Families must be informed that they have the right to report a disappearance and to request both administrative and psychological support.

Protection of personal data

- In certain contexts, the concept of privacy is not highly valued. For example, in Senegal, the notion of private life differs within family settings. It is crucial to explain that **protecting data** also means **protecting the missing person and their loved ones**.
- While States need data to monitor migration trends, this must be done without compromising individual privacy. **Clear firewalls** must be established between support services and law enforcement or immigration authorities.
- Special care must be taken in how information is shared after a death. **Training journalists on data protection** is essential to ensure respectful and responsible communication.

Restoring Family Links - The Gambia Red Cross Society & The Spanish Red Cross

In The Gambia, families of missing migrants endure deep emotional distress and confront numerous practical challenges as they search for their loved ones. **Fatou Camara**, Restoring Family Links (RFL) Officer categorised these challenges as follows:

- **Emotional Challenges:** Ambiguous loss, guilt and blame, stigma, psychosocial stress.
- **Practical Challenges:**
 - o **Limited access to reliable information:** Accurate updates on the missing remain challenging.
 - o **Legal invisibility:** Without official confirmation of death, families, especially when the missing person was the head of household, cannot access certain legal rights or benefits.
 - o **Fear of authorities:** Particularly for undocumented individuals, there is a significant lack of trust in official systems.
 - o **Lack of documentation:** Missing or unavailable documents hinder access to assistance and legal procedures.

The [Restoring Family Links](#) Unit (RFL) works to prevent separation and disappearances, search for missing persons, restore and maintain contact between family members, and clarify the fate of persons reported missing. The [Global RFL strategy](#) looks at prevention, accessibility, providing answers, and support to families.

Currently, the **Gambian Red Cross Society** (GRCS) manages 216 active cases, including 156 within The Gambia. Most reports involve disappearances along migration routes such as the Sahara Desert, Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea. However, limited funding - particularly for operations in countries like Mauritania and Morocco - has reduced the RFL Unit's capacity to respond to all cases effectively.

The GRCS ensures **effective communication with communities** through the following methods:

- **Humanitarian Service Points (HSPs) and community channels:** GRCS operates both fixed and mobile HSPs along migration routes. Staffed by trained volunteers, these points provide migrants and families with access to essential services and support. Radio broadcasts are used across regions to raise awareness when disappearances occur.
- **Community presence and trust:** GRCS volunteers are embedded within local communities, speak local languages, and are seen as neutral and trustworthy. These volunteers lead information sessions about available RFL services and how to access them confidentially and safely.
- **Active listening:** Beyond distributing information, GRCS listens to the concerns, fears, and expectations of families. This approach helps tailor support to actual needs and fosters mutual trust.
- **Confidentiality and respect:** All information shared by families is treated with the highest level of confidentiality, reinforcing trust and protecting them from potential harm.

The Spanish Red Cross, represented by **Carmen-José Segovia Bernabé**, presented the Missing Migrants Project established to respond to families facing the ambiguous situation of not having any information about their missing loved ones (ambiguous loss). The project represents a paradigm shift from individual searches to event-based searches (missing boats; boats arriving with people who have disappeared during the journey; boats arriving with deceased persons). Using information obtained from internal and external sources (including testimonies from survivors), it attempts to develop a hypothesis of what may have happened and communicate the information obtained to the families. The Spanish Red Cross has an agreement with the Ministry of Justice to collaborate and exchange information with the Institutes of Legal Medicine. The Spanish Red Cross considers critical raising awareness on the entities involved in supporting these families and in the activities available for the search and identification of missing persons.

To **strengthen trust between families and state institutions**, humanitarian actors, such national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, should:

- **Engage consistently** with government actors, not only to coordinate tracing efforts but also to build a shared understanding of the families' rights and needs. -- The GRCS maintains a strong collaborative relationship with the Ministry of Interior, Gambian Immigration, and IOM through a **technical working group** where stakeholders regularly exchange information and coordinate responses. The Spanish Red Cross has a strong collaboration with the Ministry of Justice.
- **Advocate for state capacity-building**, particularly in the ethical use and protection of personal data.

- **Promote privacy protections:** When families are assured their data is safe and will not be misused, they are more likely to come forward, share crucial information, and seek help - without fear of stigma, discrimination, or legal consequences.
- **Provide answers to families** based on event-based searches, using information from internal and external sources.

In addition, special attention must be given to **unaccompanied or separated minors**, who face double vulnerability - as both children and migrants. It is important to **raise awareness** about their rights, as enshrined in the [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), and to encourage partner countries to proactively share information with the Red Cross when such cases arise.

Enhancing multistakeholder forensic cooperation across migration corridors: lessons from the Americas applied to the African-European border - [Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team \(EAAF\)](#)

Drawing from over a decade of experience in Latin America, the EAAF is currently adapting its multistakeholder forensic coordination model to the African-European Western Border. The objective is to support families of missing migrants in scientifically identifying deceased loved ones and facilitating the dignified return of remains.

The initiative builds on **EAAF's forensic coordination project** developed in the Central America-Mexico-United States corridor (2010-2025). This model aimed to establish a regional mechanism for information exchange on missing migrants and unidentified remains, based on good forensic practices and the rights of families to truth, justice, and dignity.

Despite the existence of large volumes of data, the identification of missing migrants faces systemic barriers that go far beyond technical capacity. EAAF underscored **major challenges in tracing missing migrants**, including fragmented coordination among diverse actors, lack of national strategies, unsystematised data, inconsistent identification protocols, and legal or political barriers to effective cross-border cooperation.

Recommendations and approaches:

- **Adopt an integrated investigation model:** The identification of missing migrants requires an end-to-end approach - from investigation and recovery to analysis and data sharing. A robust information management system should go beyond a database and align with the search mechanisms in place.
- **Formalise cooperation through agreements:** In Latin America, the EAAF facilitated the creation of forensic data banks managed jointly by State and non-State actors, supported by Memoranda of Understanding and protocols for the search of missing migrants.
- **Address structural, not just technical, barriers:** The identification of remains is not merely a technical task - it is deeply linked to institutional structures, national coordination gaps, and political commitment. Sustainable solutions require long-term structural investment.
- **Build on existing regional efforts:** Feasibility assessments are underway in The Gambia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Spain to explore extending this model. In Spain, the collaboration between the Spanish Society of Forensic Pathology (SEPAF) Working Group and EAAF on migrant identification in border regions illustrates a successful, context-specific adaptation of forensic practices.
- **Recognise the critical role of NFPs for Missing Migrants:** Designated NFPs for Missing Migrants are essential to ensure continuity, accountability, and coordination at national and regional levels.
- **Prioritise the rights of families:** All efforts must centre on the rights of families to know the fate of their loved ones and to participate meaningfully in the search process.

Nigeria's coordinated response: building institutional frameworks and regional cooperation

Nigeria, a country of origin, transit, and destination faces serious challenges related to missing migrants driven by economic hardship, insecurity, and dangerous migration routes. Many migrants go missing or die, causing emotional distress and uncertainty for families.

To address this, Nigeria established the **Forum on Missing Migrants** in June 2025, led by the National Commission for Refugees, Migrants and Internally Displaced Persons (NCFRMI), uniting government agencies, law enforcement bodies, such as the Nigeria Immigration Service (NIS), Nigeria Police Force, and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP), along with civil society and

international partners. Furthermore, Nigeria's revised **National Migration Policy**, pending formal adoption, now explicitly addressing the issue of missing migrants, ensuring policy-level recognition and action. Additionally, Nigeria is working closely with the Nigerian Red Cross Society, which has established Humanitarian Service Points (HSPs) in key migration transit locations. These HSPs provide **toll-free telephone services**, tracing assistance, and other basic support services to migrants and their families. Plans are underway to replicate such services at the NCFRMI level, including the introduction of a toll-free national hotline for missing migrant cases.

The panel highlighted several critical **insights and experiences** across regions:

- **Burkina Faso** underscored the need to recognise and uphold the intrinsic and equal value of every human being regardless of their nationality, ethnicity, wealth, or any other socio-economic circumstances. If not valued as human beings - first and foremost - when crossing continents, their disappearance risks being dismissed.
- **Equatorial Guinea** highlighted the need for collaboration with all actors. In the country, both police and gendarmerie coordinate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to investigate missing migrant cases.
- **Regarding data collection**, the EAAF stressed the importance of defining the purpose of data collection for missing and unidentified persons - *what is the minimum necessary information to help investigation and identification?* The EAAF emphasised setting minimum standards through consultation with various organisations and CSOs in Senegal. Mapping and diagnosis are essential before any transregional data sharing can occur.
- **EuroMed Rights** has created coordination spaces among civil society organisations in the Mediterranean and is currently expanding to West Africa. Despite the challenge of aligning diverse organisational perspectives, they highlight the potential for deeper dialogue between states (particularly national focal points) and civil society organisations that can act as a bridge-builder between families and official authorities.
- **IOM initiative:** With Swiss government support, IOM will be launching a project to support national focal points in The Gambia and Mauritania in adopting a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach. The project will consider the needs and challenges of families and involved organisations. This project is part of IOM's efforts to operationalise its Missing Migrants Project beyond data collection and called on partner countries to express interest and share their needs.
- **The Swiss Red Cross** shared their **national model of interagency cooperation**, initiated after a joint pledge at the 2016 International Conference of the Red Cross. Since then, the Swiss Red Cross coordinates a national working group, which meets three times a year. The foundation is a dialogue on concrete cases of missing migrants, which built trust and sustained cooperation among national stakeholders.

Key takeaways from this panel include:

- **Information sharing and coordination** are essential at both national and regional levels, including collaboration with civil society and family associations.
- The **Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants** is a step towards improved coordination. NFPs have the responsibility to foster interagency collaboration within their own country and across regions.
- Addressing missing migrant cases requires **more than technical tools** - it demands empathy, trust, face-to-face engagement, and long-term cooperation across borders and sectors.
- **Restoring trust between families and authorities** requires physical presence and proximity as well as trust between authorities and NGOs that act as intermediaries.
- **Building community trust** is crucial - humanitarian actors, especially the Red Cross, must be seen as neutral and reliable intermediaries.
- **Data protection** must remain central to all efforts to ensure families feel safe sharing information.

5) Mapping the landscape and strengthening cooperation

Through interactive breakout group discussions, the session explored national responses to missing migrants, highlighting the need for cross-border and stakeholder coordination, and identifying practical ways to build trust and strengthen collaboration.

Insights from the participants' contributions during the group exercise are **annexed to this document** (see pages 20-21).

Scenario-building exercise - from reflection to practice

Management of the dead (MotD) in emergencies: Humanitarian Forensic Action

Herbert Mushumba, Forensic Specialist at the ICRC, discussed the role of humanitarian forensic action in managing the dead during emergencies, particularly in the context of missing migrants, highlighting that forensic practice like autopsies, use of dental records, and DNA analysis – as used in criminal forensic casework – are also applicable in humanitarian contexts.

At the core of humanitarian forensic action lies the **dignified management of the dead**, which is both a technical requirement and a humanitarian obligation. **Families of the missing** are not only stakeholders but **central to this process**, as they have a fundamental **need to know** the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. Upholding these rights requires a systematic and respectful approach to the recovery, transfer, and identification of remains as well as their eventual handover to their families.

These principles translate into **concrete objectives that guide MotD operations**: Legally pronounce death; Recover the Human remains; Establish the identity of the dead; Estimate the time of death; Determine the cause of death (drowning, violence...); Explain the possible circumstances leading to death; Prepare the remains for final disposal; Draw lessons from the event to aid in future prevention.

Achieving these objectives requires close collaboration among a **broad range of stakeholders**, including justice and legal institutions, investigative and security institutions, administrative institutions, medical systems, armed forces, emergency responders (civil protection, firefighters, emergency care teams).

Effective identification relies on a combination of both primary (scientific) methods - fingerprints, odontology, radiography, DNA analysis - and secondary methods, including visual identification, medical history, scars/marks/tattoos, personal effects, testimonies. While DNA is an important tool, it should not always be prioritised over other similarly reliable yet cost-effective methods.

To translate these principles into practice, participants engaged in **group discussions based on real-life scenarios**. Several key insights emerged from the discussions:

- **Family involvement** must be ensured at every stage of the process.
- The identification, **repatriation of remains** and preservation of personal effects are crucial for closure.
- Countries where bodies are recovered must collect detailed **post-mortem data as soon as possible to aid the eventual identification process**
- Countries of origin should take an active role in **reaching out to families in view of collecting ante-mortem data and biological reference samples**
- **Data protection** and responsible use of social media are essential to avoid harm.
- Key national and international actors must be identified to support **cross-border information exchange**.
- A **holistic investigative approach** is necessary, incorporating multiple disciplines.
- **Consistent communication** between countries is vital for coordination.
- Local authorities should update families regularly and **liaise with Interpol**.
- **Legal recognition of documents** (e.g. death certificates) should be facilitated by designated NFPs.

This session reinforced that forensic efforts require **cross-border cooperation, interdisciplinary coordination**, and above all, a commitment to **human dignity** and **truth** for the families left behind.

Coordinated response and family support: lessons from the Swiss Red Cross

The Swiss Red Cross presented a case involving the disappearance and eventual identification of an 18-year-old Cameroonian man, whose mother resides in Switzerland. The case illustrates the complexity of tracing and identifying missing migrants and highlights the critical role of coordinated action across borders and institutions. It involved collaboration with local and federal police, Interpol, the Croatian Red Cross, legal authorities, and psychological support services.

Several **good practices** were highlighted **for both authorities and families**, including:

- Assign institutional focal points and creating national working groups.
- Prepare police at the local level for handling missing persons cases.
- Offer families personalised support, from reporting to emotional care.
- Share useful tools such as e-learning on “ambiguous loss” and organise events for exchange between families of the missing.

This case underscores the importance of trust-based cooperation and tailored, compassionate support for families navigating ambiguous loss.

More details can be found in the presentation available on the Rabat Process website.

Insights from the JVAP Database on preventing and resolving cases of missing migrants

Since the adoption of the 2015 Joint Valletta Action Plan (JVAP), the [JVAP Follow-up](#) has served as a monitoring platform for partners of the Rabat and Khartoum Processes to closely follow the implementation of the JVAP, by collecting data on implemented projects and policies in the region.

- The JVAP Database currently lists **3 446 initiatives** (2 740 projects and 706 policies) approved between 2015 and 2024.
- A review of the JVAP database shows that **32** of the total **recorded initiatives address the issue of missing migrants**, with **€257.4 million** mobilised.
- **4 directly relevant initiatives** demonstrate how JVAP partners are beginning to tackle missing migrants head-on:
 - 2 initiatives explicitly target search-and-rescue at sea, in Tunisia and in Libya
 - ICRC-led family-tracing programme in Chad, through Restoring Family Links project
 - ICMP Missing Migrants Initiative
- **28 initiatives indirectly relevant to missing migrants:** while these projects do not explicitly address missing persons, they influence factors related to migrant disappearance. These focus on anti-smuggling and anti-trafficking, civil registry and documentation, border management and mobility governance, protection frameworks, migration policy measures.
- Key findings also show that most reported initiatives are concentrated in **North Africa**, with limited focus on family reunification or identification. There is significant room for improvement in data management and inter-agency coordination.
- The Rabat Process’s attention to missing migrants provides an opening: **JVAP partners can use this momentum to expand and better coordinate direct and indirect initiatives.**



6) Looking ahead: enhancing cooperation and further expanding the Network across other dialogues

In a spirit of shared responsibility, the Rabat Process Secretariat emphasised the importance of proactive engagement from partner countries and key stakeholders to **advance the operationalisation of the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants**. In line with the meeting's theme, the ICRC, acting as Secretariat of the Network of National Focal Points for Missing Migrants, emphasised the urgent need to **bridge the gap between policy commitments and concrete operational action**.

In this discussion, participants highlighted the importance of involving a **wide range of actors to ensure inclusive and effective decision-making**:

- **Families of missing migrants**, whose voices must remain central to all discussions and responses.
- **Civil society**, representing families and migrants themselves.
- **A wide range of State institutions**, ideally coordinated by a National Focal Point for Missing Migrants including **embassies and consular services**, vital for cross-border coordination and support to affected communities and **law enforcement agencies**. It is important to address factors which too often discourage families from reporting missing persons, notably by building capacity and confidence of the authorities in handling such cases; increasing families' certainty on the authorities' capacity and willingness to respond to missing migrants' cases; as well as addressing fears of repercussions (particularly in the absence of regular migration status) by establishing firewalls between reporting mechanisms and immigration services. An increasing interaction among NFPs and civil society that act as bridgebuilders for families could foster this trust.
- **International organisations**.
- **National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies**, whose technical expertise can complement and support state-led efforts.
- **Survivors of migration journeys**, whose perspectives should inform future meetings and policy decisions.
- **Diaspora communities**, often instrumental in tracing missing migrants and supporting families.
- **Universities and research institutions**, to contribute evidence-based insights and analysis.
- **Opportunities for broader engagement**: In her role as UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, Prof. Siobhán Mullally recommended closer collaboration with the Inter-Agency Group on Protection of Refugees and Migrants Moving by Sea, led by UNHCR, which includes key maritime organisations such as the [International Maritime Organization](#) (IMO). This platform offers valuable opportunities to share updates on the work of the Network, increase awareness among global maritime and protection actors, strengthen linkages ahead of the upcoming [Global Refugee Forum Progress Review 2025](#), particularly around pledges on protection at sea.

Looking ahead

Several countries shared valuable insights and recommendations to support the future strengthening of the Network. These contributions will help shape upcoming initiatives and ensure continued alignment between policy dialogue and practical action on the ground.

The need to adopt a **coordinated interagency cooperation** and a multistakeholder approach:

- Multiple participants stressed the importance to establish national platforms or taskforces to bring together State institutions, civil society, international organisations, families of missing migrants, such as the Taskforces on Missing Migrants in The Gambia and the Forum on Missing Migrants in Nigeria.
- Successful coordination models, such as Switzerland's dual focal point system (Federal Police and Federal Department of Foreign Affairs), were highlighted as examples worth replicating.
- Enhance cooperation among national authorities and civil society actors and/or national Red Cross and Crescent Societies, diaspora groups and community leaders that can act as bridgebuilders with affected families and help identify cases of missing migrants.

Recommendations

- Draw on existing models of effective multi-stakeholder coordination to develop national strategies and establish coordination mechanisms that bring together all relevant governmental and non-governmental actors, to foster inclusive and effective consultation and collaboration.
- Initiate national consultation processes among key stakeholders, prioritising the creation of coordination mechanisms across institutions and authorities.

Support to families of missing migrants

- There was a recurring call to ensure the inclusion and active participation of families of missing migrants and survivors in future meetings and decision-making processes.
- Providing mental health and psychosocial support to families was identified as a critical need.
- In some countries, families are afraid to speak out. Rebuilding trust between families of missing migrants and national authorities - by more actively involving civil society organisations as intermediaries- was seen as a path to more effective outcomes.

Recommendations

- Establish firewalls to ensure immigration enforcement authorities cannot access information on the immigration status of individuals or families reporting a missing person, fostering trust and enabling reporting without fear of legal or administrative repercussions.
- Develop and promote community-level sensitisation campaigns, including in countries of origin and transit, to inform about mechanisms and procedures available for reporting and responding when someone goes missing.
- Restore trust between families and authorities by conducting outreach activities and raising awareness on available support mechanisms and protection measures, leveraging the power of civil society actors as trusted intermediaries.

Data management, information sharing and awareness

- Participants stressed the need for standardised tools for NFPs and improved inter-agency data sharing, including cost-effective measures such as building on existing diplomatic networks.
- There was a strong call for the development of national databases on missing persons. Thereby, firewalls are essential in protecting migrants' sensitive data from misuse and unauthorised access by law enforcement agencies and immigration officers.
- The use of concrete case studies was recommended to support training and capacity-building among institutions and relevant actors.

Recommendations

- Establish and maintain national databases on missing migrants in line with human rights and data protection standards.
- Increase awareness and use of existing tools, such as the ICRC guidance material, among national authorities and stakeholders.
- Promote exchange between institutions and member States to share good practices and strengthen capacities.
- Strengthen prevention and awareness-raising on the risks associated with irregular migration, while exploring the expansion and diversification of legal pathways for migration based on human rights and humanitarian considerations.

7) Conclusions

To conclude, Switzerland - co-chair of the meeting - recognised that the issue of missing migrants represents one of the most tragic consequences of migration. It underlined the responsibility of national authorities to address this challenge with determination, courage, and empathy. The testimonies shared by families of missing migrants during the meeting served as a powerful reminder of this duty.

Switzerland emphasised that missing migrants represent not only a humanitarian failure but also a shortfall in migration governance and protection systems. Addressing this issue requires coordinated, multi-stakeholder and regional responses that also tackle the root causes of migration.

Two key recommendations were put forward for the Dialogue partner countries to operationalise their commitment to address the issue of missing migrants:

- Partner countries are encouraged to **join the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants** and consider appointing co-focal points from different institutions (especially law-enforcement representatives and representatives from Ministries of foreign affairs) to enhance interministerial coordination, as exemplified by Switzerland, which has a co-focal point consisting of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the Federal Police.
- Partner countries are also encouraged to **establish or reinforce national structures** that enable effective responses to cases of missing migrants, through improved coordination among relevant ministries, institutions, and existing national platforms.

Switzerland noted the current political momentum to move forward and reaffirmed its support to this issue, especially in view of its upcoming Chairmanship of the Rabat Process in 2026. The guiding principles must remain **dignity and justice** - for the missing, their families, and the broader communities affected.

The Gambia, host and co-chair of the meeting, acknowledged the intense and reflective discussions held in the capital, which addressed the realities, systemic gaps, and emotional toll of missing migrant cases. Despite the gravity of the issue, the discussions provided a sense of shared purpose and a clearer pathway toward more effective, coordinated responses.

Looking forward, The Gambia called on all participants to maintain their commitment: to remember the missing, to support affected families, and to strengthen national and regional systems. The overarching goal remains clear – **ensuring that no migrant is forgotten, no family is left without answers, and no effort is spared in preventing further tragedies.**

Participation and outreach

Participation

- The meeting attracted **over 100 participants from 27 European and African partner countries**, along with representatives from international and regional organisations, civil society organisations, and family members of missing migrants.
- Respondents to the online feedback form expressed overall high satisfaction. Aspects such as the thematic focus on missing migrants and quality of the presentations received high praise, with over 98% of respondents declaring they were “very satisfied” or “somewhat satisfied”.
- The meeting format, which combined presentations from key actors, practical exercises, and real-life testimonies, was appreciated. Participants highlighted the **benefits of concrete, solutions-oriented discussions** to practically advance cooperation and strengthen national systems.
- Participants particularly welcomed the opportunity for the Network of NFPs for Missing Migrants to meet in person. They described the meeting as a milestone and a **valuable networking opportunity**, allowing focal points to strengthen working relations, including with experts and civil society representatives, and to further operationalise the Network.

Outreach

- The event was covered on the Rabat Process social media channels, with 4 LinkedIn posts and 8 posts on X in English and French, resulting in 4,363 impressions on LinkedIn and 1,473 impressions on X. The Rabat Process social media profiles gained 427 followers in the context of the meeting.

Annex – Insights from the Mapping the landscape exercise

The following insights were gathered from participants' contributions during the group exercise. They do not represent an exhaustive overview of all challenges or measures in the Rabat Process region but are limited to the scope of the exercise.

<p>What are the main challenges your country encounters in addressing cases of missing migrants?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The lack of documentation makes tracing extremely difficult - often leaving forensics as the only viable method. - Families are often unaware of how or where to report a disappearance. - Communities and families face trauma, stigma, and emotional distress, often worsened by lack of closure. - There is often no shared understanding across government bodies on how to tackle the issue of missing migrants. - Both European and African authorities struggle to engage with local or remote communities. - Insufficient financial and human resources; tracing and identifying missing persons is costly. - Insufficient ability to register cases or conduct search and rescue operations. - Weak mechanisms for international cooperation and information exchange. - Lack of national databases to collect, store and manage relevant data to understand the scale of the problem. No systems in place to track migrants departing by sea. - Some countries lack the necessary legal frameworks. - Limited forensic and DNA capabilities in some countries. - Reluctance to engage with authorities: In Switzerland, for example, families may avoid contact with federal police due to irregular status.
<p>What concrete steps have been taken to address these challenges?</p> <p>Prevention measures</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Gambia established a national task force and adopted migration policies as a foundation for addressing missing migrants. - Niger integrated missing migrants into national consultation frameworks. - Switzerland: The Swiss Red Cross engages in community outreach and coordinates a multi-stakeholder working group with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, the State Secretariat for Migration, and the Federal Police. - Equatorial Guinea, as a transit country, provides support primarily to detained migrants and facilitates communication with their embassies. - Belgium implemented the <i>Reach Out Project</i> to improve information-sharing with communities and created help desks for families seeking updates. - The Alliance of Sahel States (AES)'s efforts to enhance cross-border coordination was mentioned, as they are harmonising travel and identity document standards across member countries. Following the rollout of a shared biometric passport, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger will soon adopt a common AES biometric ID card.

<p><i>Are there specific mechanisms in place for engaging with affected families?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging with families remains a challenge across all countries. - Switzerland: The Swiss Red Cross has set up dedicated information sheets for migrants and their families, organises family meetings to facilitate direct engagement, and offers support systems to help families access authorities. An e-learning programme for professionals about ambiguous loss and the impact on families will be released in autumn 2025. - In The Gambia, organisations such as the Red Cross and IOM, along with diaspora communities, play a key role in supporting families and tracing missing persons.
<p><i>What institutions are currently involved in search, identification, and response?</i></p> <p><i>Any bilateral agreements to facilitate information sharing and cooperation on cases of missing migrants?</i></p> <p><i>National coordination systems in place</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Gambia has several mechanisms in place: a registration system for missing migrants led by the government and civil society (notably the Red Cross), humanitarian service points, designated focal points both domestically and in embassies abroad, and a dedicated Task Force on Missing Migrants bringing together key ministries (Foreign Affairs, Justice, Interior, Migration), the Red Cross, and the Police. The Gambia also collaborates with Mauritania to identify migrants, particularly in the Gunjur area. - Liberia has established a National Task Force comprising multiple ministries, including Justice, Gender, Foreign Affairs, and the Immigration Department. - Ghana is addressing the issue through regulation of employment agencies, legal frameworks, and public awareness campaigns on TV and radio. It also promotes legal pathways through agreements with the EU and ensures strong interministerial coordination (Interior, Foreign Affairs, Gender, Children, and Social Protection). - Switzerland created a working group with key stakeholders and signed a pledge on deceased migrants and family information at the International Red Cross Conference. - Equatorial Guinea has bilateral data-sharing agreements, including on missing migrants, with Gabon and Cameroon. - Morocco addresses migration issues broadly, though not with a specific focus on missing cases. - Germany addresses cases through INTERPOL mechanisms.
<p><i>Network of National Focal Points for missing migrants</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As of July 2025, 24 partner countries across the Rabat Process region officially designated National Focal Points for Missing Migrants, including interim focal points. These are: Belgium, Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Central African Republic (CAR), Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Czech Republic, The Gambia, Germany, Greece, Guinea, Ireland, Liberia, Malta, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Spain, Switzerland, Togo. - Countries that have not yet designated a National Focal Point: Algeria, Austria, Benin, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, DRC, Estonia, Finland, France, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Libya, The Netherlands, Mali, Morocco, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Sao Tome, Tunisia. <p><i>Countries in bold were present at the thematic meeting.</i></p>