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## RECORD NUMBERS OF REFUGEES ASK RED CROSS TO FIND FAMILY MEMBERS

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The German Red Cross expects around 3,000 calls for help by the end of 2016 from refugees who have lost track of family members on their perilous journey. A large number of requests come from minors.

The German Red Cross Search Agency helps people who have lost their families while fleeing war, armed conflict or natural disasters. In the first half of 2016 they have already received requests for help from 1,401 people and they expect to reach around 3,000 requests by the end of the year - a record number.

"That's an increase of almost 90 percent compared to 2015," German Red Cross (DRK) president Rudolf Seiters said at a press conference in Berlin on Thursday. "In almost half the cases, the Red Cross Search Agency was able to help family members get in touch with each other or to clear up the fate of the missing persons."

Cell phones can help

Due to the ongoing refugee crisis, the number of people losing track of their loved ones on their harrowing journey is higher than ever. Most search requests come from Afghan families and many concern unaccompanied minors, Seiters said. In the first half of this year, almost 500 requests came from parents who were looking for their children or underage refugees who were looking for their families.

Mesovic: The disaster of separated families would be even bigger without cell phones

One of the reasons that the number isn't even higher is due to the near-ubiquity of communication devices, says Bernd Mesovic, deputy director of the refugee aid organization Pro Asyl.

"Today, almost 100 percent of refugees, including the minors, have cell phones," Mesovic told DW. "It used to be totally different. Communication networks have grown by leaps and bounds."

Database of unidentified dead persons 'crucial'

One of the biggest challenges the current situation presents: identifying the bodies of those who died on their way to Europe. That includes refugees who drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean as well as those who didn't survive the grueling walk along one of the land-based routes through conflict zones in the Middle East to the EU.

The DRK is pushing for a Europe-wide database of unidentified persons to aid relatives in their search for family members. Only when they can identify the body of a loved one and bury them, can they really find closure.

"In the face of thousands of dead refugees in the Mediterranean over the last few years, we believe a database like this is crucial," Seiters said.

According to the DRK, the German government pushed for such a system years ago, but the European Union denied the request for financial reasons.

Mesovic said for such a database to really work, DNA would have to be taken from all bodies. He also points out that not all places where refugee boats sink in the Mediterranean, for example, can be localized with the resources currently in play.

"Since you can't retrieve all bodies, there'll always be a gap," he said. "I think part of the unwillingness among Europe's governments [to move forward with the database] has to do with the technical questions. It would be really complex to implement - definitely not a small project"

The Red Cross helps refugees who cross the Mediterranean to reunite with their families

Searching for and finding missing family members has been part of the Red Cross mission since the early days: In 1859, Red Cross founder Henry Dunant collected messages of wounded and dying soldiers after the battle of Solferino, a village in Italy where Austrian troops fought an alliance of the French and Sardinian armies. Dunant then delivered the information to the troops' families.

In 2015, the 190 national Red Cross and Red Crescent organizations across the world reunited 1,074 people with their families. The aid organizations received 129,778 messages for missing family members and managed to find the person in question and deliver the message 106,108 times that year. That amounts to a success quota of almost 82 percent.

Many of those messages go out to people who are held in prisons, often without their families' knowledge. The Red Cross and Red Crescent delivered roughly 10,600 messages to prisoners, about half the amount they had received.

The German Red Cross' press conference on Thursday was held in anticipation of the occasion of the International Day of the Disappeared which falls on August 30. The day was created to draw attention to the fate of individuals who are imprisoned under bad conditions and in places unknown to their families and their legal guardians - if they have any.

Online searches a big step forward

The DRK also emphasized how important online portals are in the search for missing persons. On the "Trace the face" website, people who have lost their family can upload their photo so that relatives can find them. They can also browse hundreds of photos of people who are looking for a

lost father, mother, brother or sister. There is a separate, password-protected, portal for children and youth.

Together, these two services "have significantly expanded and improved the search opportunities for adult and underage refugees," according to the German Red Cross.

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