

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

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'Making a match is incredibly satisfying ... until you have to inform the family'
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/migrants-mexico-invisible-journeys-2013-10-15>

A scar, a tattoo, broken bone, a toothbrush kept in a small bag, a set of teeth.

These are the some of the clues anthropologist Robin Reineke looks out for every time she is faced with a set of human remains of one of the hundreds of people who die every year while attempting to cross the Arizona desert.

Robin is part of the "Missing migrants project", a team that works at the Pima County Morgue in Arizona.

Their job is to try to identify the corpses of the hundreds of men and women who perish each year in their search for a better life in the USA. The task is to match the remains with thousands of reports of missing people.

The office currently houses the remains of 800 unidentified individuals, as well as reports about 1,500 missing people. Most of them come from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, amongst other countries.

The scenario is so horrifying it is almost impossible to believe.

Between 1998 and 2008, at least 3,557 people died in the desert, according to the USA's Customs and Border Protection Agency. Human rights groups, however, put the figure at close to 5,300.

Robin says that, over the summer, her office receives several calls a day. Sometimes, the person on the other end of the phone alerts them that someone got separated from the group or got left behind, never to be seen again.

She knows that walking many kilometres under the blazing sun, with little to drink and few directions, the odds against survival are high.

"In 2001 the numbers of dead migrants spiked drastically. It was overwhelming. People were dying in very remote spots of the desert. Decomposition was quick, so the primary challenge became identification," Robin told Amnesty International.

Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, have reported that some of the deaths might be caused by US border control policy since 1994, through which border patrol agents divert migrants attempting to enter the USA into treacherous and extremely dangerous routes.

Following the implementation of the plan, the ratio of migrant deaths to arrests grew steadily. According to official figures, in 1996, there were fewer than two deaths for every 10,000 migrants apprehended. By 2009, the figure had increased to 7.6 per 10,000 arrests.

Reading bones

Every time they receive a human body or a set of remains, forensic and cultural anthropologists like Robin develop a detailed profile. They look at key features such as any abnormalities, height and weight.

"We are using traditional forensic anthropology techniques to compare the missing to the dead.

Ideally it would be great if you could pour everybody's DNA samples into one database and then elicit blind matches but it's extremely expensive," Robin told Amnesty International.

If the details look similar to those from an individual who has been reported missing, the forensic team organizes a DNA comparison with the relatives, in the hope of confirming an identity.

But, for hundreds of families, finding out what happened to their loved ones sometimes feels like an impossible dream.

The last time "Marcela" and "Carolina" heard from their mother "Mayra" was in 2009. The girls, originally from Mexico, were living in the USA with their father and their mother had planned to join them.

But without papers, the hellish journey is likely to have been a death-trap.

Mayra's family knows that she set out on foot to cross the Mexico/USA border and the Arizona desert.

But, like hundreds of others every year, she was never seen again.

Her daughters are still looking for her or even hoping to find her remains.

"Missing people are not dead to the families. It's tough, hope can be destructive in this context. Sometimes, after many years, families tell me 'maybe she got apprehended by border patrol and they are keeping her in a secret prison, maybe she went off and got a job and she doesn't want to talk to me'. That's all possible, but the circumstances of the disappearance in a lot of cases make that highly unlikely," Robin explained.

Sometimes matches are found and Robin, together with embassy representatives, are charged with informing families. This often happens over the phone, in what is usually the toughest call that family will have to deal with.

"All of the day-to-day work has to do with trying to find matches. It's like a puzzle and then you make a match and that's incredibly satisfying. It feels really good for about two minutes and then you have to inform the relatives, which is always incredibly painful."

Amnesty International calls on the US authorities to revisit their border control policies and ensure they respect and protect the right to life. Specifically, the United States should revise its policy of "prevention by deterrence" which forces migrants into more hostile terrain, and places them in "mortal danger".

The organization also found that thousands of irregular migrants suffer routine abductions, sexual violence, forced recruitment into criminal gangs, people trafficking and murder when they cross Mexico on the way to the USA. Amnesty International urges the Mexican authorities to implement federally led measures to prevent, investigate and punish these abuses.

Even one more death would be a death too many.