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Challenges in Victim Identification in the Mediterranean Area, with a Focus on Italy and Policy Implication

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Abstract

Victim Identification (VI) and Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) in the Mediterranean region constitute a critical humanitarian and forensic challenge, particularly in the context of migration-related mass fatality incidents. Frontline countries such as Italy face increasing operational pressure due to rising maritime deaths, limited ante-mortem data availability, and complex cross-border coordination requirements. This study evaluates structural and methodological challenges in DVI practices and assesses alignment with international standards.

The study employed a qualitative analytical approach combining documentary review, comparative assessment, and case-study analysis of Italian DVI operations. National procedures were benchmarked against Interpol DVI guidelines, with specific attention to institutional coordination, forensic odontology integration, genetic identification processes, and data interoperability mechanisms. Findings indicate substantial forensic expertise and institutional capacity within the Italian framework. However, persistent challenges were identified, including fragmented interagency communication, inconsistent use of forensic odontology, limited access to ante-mortem data, and insufficient cross-border information exchange. Mediterranean migrant fatalities increased significantly between 2021 and 2023, intensifying identification demands. A considerable proportion of victims remain unidentified due to decomposition, documentation gaps, and resource limitations. Results show that strengthening harmonized forensic protocols, multidisciplinary identification strategies, and international cooperation mechanisms is essential to improve DVI effectiveness. Enhanced capacity building and data integration are critical to addressing systemic gaps, restoring dignity to deceased migrants, and supporting families affected by ambiguous loss.

Keywords: Disaster Victim Identification, Mediterranean Migration, Forensic Coordination, Mass Fatality Management, Humanitarian Forensics