

VOICES AND PERSPECTIVES

“All I want is to know”: Testimonies of the families of missing migrants in Zimbabwe



A homestead in Gwanda where a family has lived for five years without knowing the fate of one of its members – a daughter, mother, sister and aunt – who went missing and whose whereabouts remain unknown. Photo by Jesilyn Dendere, © ICRC.

Every day, people all over the world leave their homes in search of a better life. On the road, many go missing. The mandate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence includes, in certain contexts, protection of vulnerable migrants. The ICRC missing migrants pilot project aims to locate or clarify the fate of Zimbabwean migrants who went missing in South Africa, on behalf of their families. The ICRC aims to work with South African and Zimbabwean authorities to support and enhance existing systems, tools and resources used for locating missing relatives, living or dead. Additionally, the ICRC carries out and supports the activities of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies in the region to restore contact between and where possible reunify family members, in particular children, who have been separated by conflict, migration, displacement or natural or man-made disasters.

The Review has chosen to open this issue with the stories of family members of missing migrants in Zimbabwe. The section aims to show the everyday struggle, sometimes lasting for many years, of those that live with continuous uncertainty regarding the fate and whereabouts of their loved ones. As a result of the disappearances associated with migration, families searching for missing relatives often face a range of needs and challenges. These persons chose to share their life stories with the Review, allowing our readers to understand the intricate balance of uncertainty, hope and the “need to know” that family members of missing migrants live with every day. The testimonies were given to the ICRC in Zimbabwe in November 2017. In order to protect the families, their names have been omitted.

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Mr S. N. *is 80 years old. He has been looking for his grandson, who went missing in 2007.*

The last time I saw my grandson was in 2007. Since then, we have not seen or heard from him. I cannot say I remember the exact day he went missing, because when he left the homestead, it was to work in Beitbridge [the main town on the Zimbabwean border with South Africa]. A bus came and picked up a lot of young men for manual labour in Beitbridge. At that time, as a family we were not very worried because this is what young men do – they look for work to fend for themselves.

During the time that he was in Beitbridge, he used to communicate with me. In 2007, when his contract with the company that he was working for ended, he asked me to send him his passport and other identification documents so that he could start looking for another job. Genuinely believing that he wanted to look for another job, I sent him the documents he needed. This was the last time I spoke to him. I had no idea what his plans were.

After a couple of months, I realized that he had not made contact with us here at home. I tried calling him on the number that he used but I could not get through. I then started asking his friends and former workmates about his

whereabouts. That is when I started hearing stories that he had said goodbye to his friends and told them he was going to look for a job in South Africa. I was told that he had left Beitbridge.

I continued asking relatives and his friends in South Africa if he had arrived to look for a place to stay or at least to visit them. The answer was the same each time: “We have not seen him.” South Africa is a big country; I did not even know where to start looking for him. Look at how old I am. I

am 80 years old now and do not have the physical energy to cross the border and look for him. Even if I wanted to send a relative to look for him, where would they start?

We did not at any point report him to the police as a missing person. I didn’t think it was necessary because all young people from this area were travelling to South Africa to look for jobs. This is common practice in this part of the country. Also, I thought he was going to come back. However, I realized after several months that he was now a missing person and I thought it was already too late to report him as missing to the police.

I do not know what happened to him. My heart hurts so much because I could not do anything to find him when there was still time. Perhaps he drowned while trying to illegally cross into South Africa. But he had a passport – why would he have used that route? I don’t know what happened to him. We all loved him. I would want him to come back home. I hope that he will come back to us alive.

I am grateful to the ICRC for the search that they have initiated; it gives us hope that finally a search for him is going to be started. It has been ten painful years for me. The greatest source of pain is not knowing whether he is alive or not. I may not ask him to come back home immediately, but all I want is to know.

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Ms M. N. lives in Zimbabwe. Her daughter went missing in 2012.

My daughter has been missing for the past five years. On the day she went missing in 2012, we left our home together and took the same bus from Zimbabwe to the South African border. I was headed to my workplace, a farm in South Africa. My daughter had also been working in South Africa since 2008. We took a second bus that took us towards Johannesburg, and after we crossed the border, we were going to disembark at different stops. When I got to my destination, I got off and left her to proceed with her journey. Her last words were, “I will call you as soon as I arrive.”

A few days later she still had not called. I received a call from her employer informing us that she had not turned up for work, and that she had not communicated a reason for not being at work. At that time, I did not panic. I was confident that she was fine and had just been delayed.

Later, when her employer advised us to report her to the police as a missing person, I became nervous. I sent her sister to South Africa to file a police report. The police advised her to go back to the border of South Africa and Zimbabwe and liaise with the police. She did this. She was able to check the identification of people who had been arrested by the South African police while trying to cross the border illegally from Zimbabwe. Her sister was not there.

She then checked the mortuary in Musina, the main town along the South African border with Zimbabwe. There, she was told that a female body had been found in the river, possibly trying to illegally cross into South Africa. She went to where the body had been found, and discovered that it was not her sister.

“These have been the most painful years, not only for me as a mother but for all of us as a family. When your child goes missing, not a day passes by without thinking about it and reliving the pain.”

In the first months following her disappearance, there was a lot of activity from the police in South Africa. Our family was hopeful that she would be found. Our home area in Zimbabwe is quite remote, so we could not do much ourselves to look for her. We depended on police updates. However, as months moved on there was no news. My heart sank and I began to lose hope. Months turned into years. But there is never a day that I do not think about my child.

In 2014, one of our relatives told us he had spoken to her on Facebook. She had told him she would be coming home soon. My hope was revived and we anxiously waited for her to come back. After that there was no sign of her return.

My daughter left me with her son. He is six years old now. She was the family breadwinner and life has not been the same since she went missing. We are struggling to feed the children and take them to school. I wouldn't want to speculate about what could have happened to her. I don't want to think about it, but if she is somewhere, what could have happened to the love she had for her child? I know she would have come back to her only child.

It has been hard. In all these years, I wanted to do something to try and find my child but I did not know what to do or where to start. I know that I can't just sit and do nothing, but no one has offered to help us.

When the ICRC arrived to tell us that they were assisting families who have missing family members, I did not think twice about registering. I am not sure where this search will lead us, but it has given me hope. I can now hold onto the knowledge that something is being done to find out what happened to my daughter. As a family, we will accept whatever outcome we are provided with. We have waited for a long time for any news about what happened to her.

But I can never forget the past five years. These have been the most painful years, not only for me as a mother but for all of us as a family. When your child goes missing, not a day passes by without thinking about it and reliving the pain.