

# Identification of Victims of a Terrorist Attack in an Urban Agglomeration – Report from the International DVI Training „Urban Disaster 2025”

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## Abstract

This article presents the specific characteristics of Disaster Victim Identification (DVI) operations conducted in the context of terrorist attacks, emphasizing the differences from standard Interpol DVI procedures typically applied during natural or technical disasters not caused by deliberate human action. Key operational aspects are discussed, including conducting DVI activities in a high-risk environment, the need for rapid perpetrator's identification, priority transmission of high-value identification data, and the social and media pressure associated with terrorist incidents. The article is based on practical experience gained during the international exercise “Urban Disaster 2025” held in Lešť, Slovakia, which enabled practical improvements of procedures dedicated to victim's identification of terrorism-related disasters.

**Keywords:** disaster victim identification, DVI team, terrorist attack, Interpol DVI procedures, fast track identification

## 1. Introduction

Disaster Victim Identification (DVI), carried out in accordance with Interpol standards, constitutes an internationally recognized framework for managing mass-fatality incidents. Classical DVI procedures - developed primarily from experiences with natural disasters (e.g., earthquakes, floods, landslides) and technical incidents (e.g., building collapses, transport accidents, industrial failures) - assume that operations take place in challenging environments, yet the conditions surrounding terrorist attacks differ profoundly.

Terrorist incidents exhibit a dynamic and unpredictable course, and their operational and societal consequences require a more complex and adaptive approach. Above all, the disaster scene may be affected by secondary hazards, including the risk of further explosions, concealed improvised explosive devices (IEDs), or the presence of per-

petrators who may still be in the vicinity, capable of carrying out additional attacks, taking hostages, or conducting suicide operations. Under such circumstances, DVI operations begin only after the threat has been neutralized by counterterrorism units and the scene has been formally transferred during a controlled handover to emergency responders, followed by forensic examination teams and DVI units.

Despite this, the possibility of subsequent attacks cannot be completely ruled out, meaning that the post-mortem phase of the DVI process must be conducted under conditions posing potential risk to personnel. Simultaneously, critical physical evidence must be secured, and the rapid identification of perpetrators becomes a parallel priority. This requires specific tactical considerations and operational readiness.

Globally, the level of terrorist threat has remained consistently high. Many countries experience

both isolated ideologically motivated acts of violence and large-scale attacks targeting critical infrastructure or crowded public spaces. Such incidents generate significant numbers of fatalities and substantial pressure on security and emergency services. Their psychological and societal impact necessitates rapid, coordinated, and transparent action. From an operational perspective, the victim identification process runs concurrently with perpetrator's identification and efforts to prevent further attacks.

Unlike natural or technical disasters - where the primary focus is on systematic scene examination and reliable collection of post-mortem (PM) and ante-mortem (AM) data - terrorist incidents require the immediate analysis of evidential material, including items of high identification value. This facilitates not only faster confirmation of victim identities but also contributes to the identification of perpetrators, their networks, and potential accomplices.

Rapid victim identification has significant social implications. Following an attack, families seek immediate and reliable information regarding the fate of their relatives, while the public demands transparency and credible communication. In these circumstances, response time becomes not only an indicator of operational efficiency but also a determinant of public confidence and post-attack stabilization. As such, the continuous development and refinement of specialized

DVI procedures tailored to terrorism-related incidents are essential for modern preparedness strategies.

These issues formed the primary focus of the "Urban Disaster 2025" training exercise, which demonstrated, in practical terms, how DVI procedures performed during a terrorist attack differ from those applied during other mass-fatality incidents. The objective of this article is to outline and discuss the key procedural differences in DVI operations during a terrorist attack, with particular emphasis on practical solutions tested during the international training held in Lešť, Slovakia. Highlighting the significance of these adapted procedures is an important step toward further enhancing identification standards in high-risk environments.

The exercises entitled „Urban Disaster 2025” were carried out as part of the TERRORISM – DVI project (project no.: 408020A497), financed by the Slovak Internal Security Fund, and concerned the strengthening of international cooperation in the activities of DVI teams from Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. Representatives of the Polish side: exercise coordinator from the Central Forensic Laboratory of the Police– Maj. Magdalena Jabłońska-Milczarek, PhD, Eng., member of the DVI Interpol working group on genetic identification, expert in the Information Security and Supervision Department of the CLKP, and members from Polish regional DVI units: I Regional DVI Unit - WO Maksymilian Stachura, officer of the



**Fig. 1.** Participants of DVI teams from Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Switzerland taking part in the international training „Urban Disaster 2025” in Lešť, Slovakia

Criminal Department of the Regional Police Headquarters in Katowice, II Regional DVI Unit - SWO Tomasz Jurga, forensic technician from the Forensic Technology Department of the Regional Police Headquarters in Szczecin, III Regional DVI Unit – 2nd LT Łukasz Słomiński, officer of the Investigation and Inquiry Department of the Regional Police Headquarters in Białystok, V Regional DVI Unit, CWO Artur Stępień, forensic technician from the Investigation and Inquiry Department of the Municipal Police Headquarters in Warsaw.

Participants of the event were able to improve their practical skills in cooperation in all phases of the DVI process: PM (post-mortem data collection), AM (ante-mortem data collection) and reconciliation process. The exercise scenario concerned a disaster in an urban agglomeration and enabled the exchange of experiences between DVI specialists and experts from different countries in the field of activities undertaken during the identification of a large number of victims as a result of terrorist attacks. The member countries of Interpol – the International Criminal Police Organisation – use unified protocols and methods for identifying disaster victims to ensure consistency of action when an event is international in nature. This is a multi-stage process using forensic techniques and international cooperation to effectively and quickly identify family members of different nationalities who died in the attack. The five-day training course (12-16 May 2025) consisted of both lectures and practical sessions covering best practices for organising DVI activities at the scene of an incident and post-mortem examinations of victims, as well as the collection of ante-mortem identification data.

## 2. Day one (12 May 2025)

The first day was devoted to organisational issues and organisers from the Slovak Institute of Forensic Sciences welcomed the representatives of DVI teams from Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Switzerland. During the introductory meeting, the schedule of activities for each day was presented and the participants were divided into exercise groups. The aim was to mix people from different countries in task forces as much as possible, which was to promote the development of the training participants' skills in cooperating in international DVI teams. The first day was devoted to getting to know each other and exchanging experiences in the field of national guidelines for activities aimed at identifying disaster victims. The discussion focused mainly on situations requiring rapid action, e.g. in the event of a terrorist attack resulting in a large number of human remains and corpses, where it is extremely important to take action as quickly as possible.

## 3. Day two (13 May 2025)

The training began with a presentation of the scenario for the exercises taking place on 13 May 2025, the main objective of which was to carry out the first phase of the DVI process in international teams during the inspection of the site of a simulated terrorist attack

at a railway station with fatalities. The participants were transported to a military training area in Lešť in Slovakia, where they were divided into five groups of seven people, with specific roles assigned to each team:

TL (team leader) – team leader,  
S (scribe) - person filling in the DVI form,  
PH (photographer) - photographer,  
H (handlers) – persons securing the bodies/body parts and personal belongings.

The scene of the incident was a training railway station, arranged for the purposes of conducting training at a military training ground. The station was divided into 5 sectors: A-E with mannequins simulating victims of an attack, with 2 bodies/body parts per sector. As each team was to perform a visual inspection of each sector, this gave them the opportunity to practise DVI procedures on 10 different bodies/body parts. The victims were marked with consecutive numbers, which had to be included in the recovery form – the booklet describing the body/body parts at the scene.





Fig. 2a-2f. of the exercise on 13 May 2025 – Phase I DVI: recovery of the terrorist attack site

The training participants were instructed to first measure the distances between the bodies/body parts in a given sector and between relevant items that could be used for identification. In addition, the group leader's task was to designate reference points and segregate the items found in the sector into:

- items that are neither logically\* nor physically\*\* related to the bodies/body parts – in this case, a precise, detailed description should be made at the scene and they should not be taken away with the human remains at the end of the post-mortem examination,
- items related to the corpse/remains (e.g. shoes)
- for which there is no need to make a detailed description at the place where they were found, as they will be taken away in a bag together with the bodies or body parts, which will allow for their later detailed description in the autopsy room during the examination of human remains and corpses.

[\* An example of a logical connection would be a pair of shoes, where one shoe from the pair is on the corpse/remains and the other is lying nearby (the same model, size, material and color of the shoe, as well as its degree of wear) ;

\*\*A physical connection occurs when objects/items of clothing are directly connected to the body].

During the sectoral inspection of the scene, in addition to the standard DVI booklets, the training par-

ticipants also received abbreviated „fast track” forms containing information about the items found, including information important for identification purposes, e.g. ID documents (ID card, student ID, driving licence, information about distinctive tattoos or birthmarks). The leader of a given sector team may decide to send quick information to the AM team (ante mortem data collection team) and note down information requiring quick transmission on a separate „fast-track” form (form for quick transmission of important identification information). The form used by the DVI team from Slovakia is presented on photos 3a and 3b.

The above-described methodology for conducting the first phase of the DVI process – consisting of collecting items/clothing together with the bodies from the scene in a single bag and leaving items not logically or physically related to the bodies at the scene for later examination, allows for faster removal of bodies from the scene and their transport to the mortuary for further identification procedures and a faster comparison of relevant PM data with AM data, resulting in faster identification of victims.

Examples of information that should be prioritised for transfer to the subsequent phases of the DVI process (i.e. to the mortuary, where PM data is collected, or directly to the forensic laboratory (for DNA and fingerprint analysis), as well as to the AM phase coordinator, where ante mortem data is collected) include:

- fingerprints, DNA, odontological data,
- information in the form of photographs of distinctive tattoos, birthmarks,
- items with high identification value: ID documents, bank cards, verifiable serial numbers or codes found on items that were physically linked to the victim.

The „fast track” form allows for the priority transfer of information to the AM team, which can search for and compare the information obtained in databases, lists, inventories and other documentation. The Slovak system allows the use of private cameras (e.g. in mobile phones) to take and save photographs of high value for identification in the DVI process, depending on specific circumstances and with the permission of the commanding officer. Such photographs may only be taken for DVI and judicial purposes and, after being used for these purposes, must be immediately deleted from private devices and cloud services.

#### 4. Day three (14 May 2025)



Fig. 3a and 3b. The so-called „fast track” form used by the Slovak DVI team during the examination of the scene



Fig. 4a-4c. of the exercise on 14 May 2025 – Phase II DVI: examination of corpses and human remains in the autopsy room – collection of PM data

On the next day, the practical exercise scenario involved the examination of corpses and human remains in the autopsy room, which was a continuation of the sectoral inspection of the scene at the railway station. As on the first day of the training, the participants were divided into five teams of seven and were tasked to carry out phase II of the DVI process, which consisted of collecting PM (post-mortem) data. There were five autopsy rooms available, each with two bodies or body parts. The participants in the PM team were divided according to their functions:

- in the so-called „dirty zone“:
- team leader and photographer (in the dirty zone, but not touching the corpses or remains),
- a person who has contact with the corpses, takes measurements and moves the corpses and remains,
- a person who secures objects, personal belongings, clothing,
- forensic doctor, experts in fields such as odontology.

In the so-called „clean zone“:

- person filling out the pink PM form (Photo 4.),
- the person filling in the list of items secured from the corpse/remains (Photo 5.).

During the examination of the body in the autopsy room, the Interpol PM form was filled in. Each item secured from the body was assigned an individual number (which was linked to the body number) and a summary list of all personal items/clothes was created. A separate examination table was used for the examination of items, where photographic documentation of the items was also carried out. For items with high identification value, such as identity cards, a separate container was available (for quick transfer), while the rest of the items were collected in a separate package.

An important issue emphasised by the training instructors was not only the correct completion of the body and body parts examination forms and the rapid transfer of information on important identification issues, but also the fact that during identification activities, DVI team members should ensure that the dignity of the victims whose identity they are trying to establish is preserved. Respect for the deceased is an important aspect of DVI training, which can raise awareness among those who will be involved in identifying victims in the future with establishing the identity of victims.

INTERPOL DVI Form - Unidentified Human Remains

Place of disaster: RAILWAY STATION PM Nbr: 42100088B  
 Nature of disaster: URBAN  
 Date of disaster: 15 05 2025

EFFECTS (possibly carried on person or in luggage)	Nbr: 1	Type/style	2	Main colour	3	Brand/make	4	Material	5	Size	a b c			
											a	b	c	
<b>300 Clothing items</b>														
<b>Head and neck</b>														
<b>Upper part of the body and arms</b>														
201 Sleeve														
202 Overcoat														
203 Coat/Jacket														
204 Cardigan														
205 Waistcoat														
206 Braces														
207 Pullover														
208 Blouse														
209 Shirt														
210 T-shirt														
211 Undershirt														
212 Brassiere														
299 Other														
<b>Lower part of the body and legs</b>														
301 Belt														
302 Trousers														
303 Shorts														
304 Skirt														
305 Tights														
306 Socks														
307 Stockings														
308 Underpants														
398 Other														
<b>The whole of the body</b>														
401 Body suit														
402 Dress														
403 Religious/Cultural/Traditional														
404 Uniform														
405 Swimming attire														
499 Other														
<b>305 Footwear</b>														
01 Boots														
02 Open footwear														
03 Shoes														
99 Other														

Registered by: [Name], Address, Phone / Email  
 Duty title: [Name], Address, Phone, email  
 Date: 14.05.2025

Fig. 5. Interpol form for the examination of human remains and corpses (pink PM form)

DVI List of items PM Number: 42100088 B

Item Number	Description of item	Seal Number	Registered by
1.	Yellow seal 014138	UC0067411	Michal Juhás
2.	Yellow bag + key	UC0047551	Michal Juhás
3.	Smartphone Huawei	UC0067411	Michal Juhás
4.	Blue Jacket Orsay	UC0047551	Michal Juhás
5.	Blue Pullover Lacoste	UC0067413	Michal Juhás

Received by: \_\_\_\_\_ Date and time: 14.5.2025 Page No: 1/3  
10:50

Duty title: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name: Michal Juhás  
Address: DVI Slovakia  
Phone, email: \_\_\_\_\_

Fig. 6. List of items secured from corpses/remains in the mortuary

## 5. Day four (15 May 2025)

The first two days of the training were devoted to post-mortem activities (phase I DVI – visual inspection of the scene and phase II DVI – collection of PM data in the autopsy room), while on the third day of the exercise, 15 May 2025, phase III of the DVI process began, where, in specially prepared rooms, participants were to collect ante mortem data, i.e. data obtained during the victim's lifetime, most often from family members and relatives of the victims. Working in teams of two, the participants were tasked with analysing the police report with the previously collected information about the missing person. On this basis, they had to fill in the appropriate fields in the yellow Interpol AM form (photos 6 a-c). At the end of the training, all DVI teams gathered in the conference room, where they practised the final, fourth phase of the DVI process, known as reconciliation, which involves comparing the ante mortem (AM) and post mortem (PM) information obtained. This stage was carried out by eliminating discrepancies in the post-mortem and ante-mortem information obtained, i.e. the organisers read the data from the pink form for the examination of bodies/body parts for a specific case, while the teams that found discrepancies didn't continued to analyse their yellow form about the missing person.

As a result of these actions, only one team remained at the end with an AM form that matched all the data on the PM form read by the organisers. An important lesson learned from this stage of the training

was the observation that it is necessary to provide very precise information on both the PM and AM forms, as different nomenclature, phrases or laconic information made it very difficult to compare both types of data.

At the end of the training, participants had the opportunity to listen to a presentation prepared by Mr Adrien Mathieu, a representative of the DVI Team from Switzerland, who shared his experience in comparing post-mortem and ante-mortem data using KMD Plass-Data software.

The programme offers three different search methods:

1. a simple search using the file manager,
2. search using a text phrase using the file manager or main menu,
3. advanced search using programming.

There are four different statuses for completing the data comparison process in PlassData. These are: AWCA (Awaiting Comparison Report) - awaiting a comparison report, AWID (Awaiting Identification Report) - awaiting an identification report, FIID (Final Identification) – final identification, RJD (Rejected Identification). In his speech, the representative of the DVI team from Switzerland also gave the participants an overview of the history and functioning of the DVI team in his country, which was established on 1 January 2001 and has 402 members, including: 65% police officers, 25% forensic doctors and 10% dental experts. In each of 16 cantons there is a DVI coordinator. The DVI Team Management Board includes representatives of the police, forensic medicine and members of the general management board. The team's mission is to identify large numbers of victims in Switzerland and to operate abroad when Swiss citizens are victims. The second lecture of the day was given by a representative of the Polish DVI team, Mjr Magdalena Jabłońska-Milczarek, PhD, Eng., who, at the request of the organisers, presented the process of implementing Interpol DVI standards in Poland and discussed the structure and training experiences of the Polish DVI team.





**Fig. 7a-7c.** Teams of two AM officers completing the yellow Interpol's *ante mortem* form

## 6. Day five (16 May 2025)

The training ended on 16 May 2025 with the presentation of commemorative certificates to the participants, thanks for their involvement in the individual training blocks, the exchange of valuable experiences in the field of DVI activities and the methodologies and forms used, but above all for their ability to international cooperation and their ability to communicate at various levels of the process aimed at identifying mass victims.

## 7. Conclusions

1. The participation of representatives of the Polish Police in international simulated DVI (disaster victim identification) operations is an opportunity to improve the professional competence of DVI Team members and to exchange experiences in the field of cooperation at the disaster site, during the collection of post-mortem and ante-mortem data, and during the reconciliation phase between services from different countries. It is recommended that the Polish DVI team's competence in conducting activities aimed at identifying the bodies of disaster victims be continuously improved during international training courses, as this will better prepare police officers for the potential conditions of operations in the event of an incident where the victims may be citizens of different countries.

2. In view of the large number of terrorist attacks around the world, the preparation of a so-called „fast

track” for action during the disaster site inspection phase will not only enable the potential perpetrator of the incident to be identified more quickly, but will also contribute to maintaining the principle of respect for the victims of the incident by streamlining the process of delivering corpses and human remains to the morgue, where it is possible to carry out a detailed examination and undertake identification tests more quickly. In the event of a terrorist attack resulting in a large number of victims, where there is often considerable pressure both politically and from the families of the victims, the introduction of new, faster algorithms for DVI team operations seems to be a good solution. Individual DVI teams from countries using the methodology recommended by Interpol have already implemented or begun the process of implementing the rapid, urgent transfer of important identification data on specially designed forms (in accordance with the recommendations of the new Interpol methodology, issued at the end of 2023). If the DVI team management unit accepts this type of tactic, work should be undertaken to amend the provisions of the current „Methodology for the examination of crime scenes of a terrorist nature and disasters” and „Methodology for the identification of disaster victims” and to develop so-called „fast track” forms for use at the scene of a disaster.

3. In the AM (*ante mortem*) phase, collecting items to match them to the victim's data is a complex process that can involve additional difficulties. Sources from which items or property can be collected may include the victim's home, their family's home, or other locations, such as the hotel where the missing person last stayed. Furthermore, items secured during the disaster site inspection and during the post-mortem examination of the body are also secured and recorded. Property found at the disaster site is often significantly damaged: scattered, intermingled with human remains, partially burned, mechanically degraded, or contaminated with environmental materials, which in many cases prevents clear assignment of individual items to a specific victim. For this reason, examination of clothing and personal belongings conducted in the mortuary is also crucial, providing an additional source of identification information. The problem of a large number of items belonging to victims, combined with their damage and mixing, remains one of the more complex aspects of post-mass casualty procedures. Finally, the reconciliation phase may encompass responsibility for managing the property during its return to the victim's family. The management of secured evidence and items belonging to missing persons or disaster victims is regulated by criminal procedural law, internal regulations of the Chief of Police, and office instructions. Therefore, it is important and advisable to refine the provisions in the current „DVI Methodologies” regarding managing the circulation of personal items of disaster victims to enable monitoring and coordination of activities at all stages of the DVI process that concern property. This approach will improve the

standardization of recording, storing, tracking, and ultimately, the return of property.

4. The migration crisis, which is one of the most serious global and humanitarian crises of the current century, generates a need to support identification activities both at the national level and through international cooperation by participating in coordinated initiatives (meetings, training sessions, projects) that can support international identification processes.

## 8. Conclusion

Although Interpol's standard DVI procedures are designed to be universal, they do not fully reflect the specific operational demands associated with dynamic, high-risk environments typical of terrorist attacks. In such contexts, procedures must enable the rapid transmission of key identification data, efficient sorting

and documentation of property, immediate linkage of AM and PM records during the reconciliation phase, and close international cooperation facilitated by DVI Command Management Teams. The training demonstrated that the identification of victims of terrorist attacks requires more dynamic and integrated methods than those applied during classical mass-fatality incidents. Critical elements include the close integration of DVI procedures with counterterrorism operations, rapid acquisition of high-value identification data, the use of fast-track identification pathways, and maintaining readiness to operate under hazardous conditions. The findings of the exercise confirm the need for continuous development and updating of DVI procedures, as well as the implementation of tools and workflows that enhance both victim identification and the determination of individuals responsible for the attack.