

State will assist families identify remains of Lagos deaths

Minister in the Presidency, Jeff Radebe, has assured South Africans that government will help families to repatriate mortal remains of those citizens, who died in Lagos.



Minister in the Presidency, Jeff Radebe says government is working hard to ensure that the remains of all those killed when a church in Lagos collapsed will be repatriated to South Africa as soon as possible. Image: GCIS

On 12 September, 84 South Africans died when a building at the Synagogue Church of all Nations in Nigeria collapsed. Last week, 25 injured South Africans returned home, while one remained in Lagos.

Radebe said of the patients admitted to the Steve Biko Academic Hospital, two are still in critical care, two have been transferred to private facilities at the request of their families and four patients have been discharged.

"On behalf of government and the people of South Africa, we wish the patients who remain in the care of the medical staff at the Steve Biko Academic Hospital a speedy recovery," Radebe said.

Radebe, who is the head of the Inter-Ministerial Task Team on the Nigeria tragedy, updated media on the identification process being used in Lagos.

"We want to assure the nation that we will ensure that the deceased are repatriated. We believe the repatriation of the deceased is the crucial in helping the families find closure in the aftermath of this terrible tragedy.

"We will make sure that all deceased persons are repatriated and that the correct body is handed over to the family. It is important to note that specialised scientific processes will be used to identify the remains," Radebe said.

He said the South African team of experts on the ground in Nigeria is working closely with officials from the Nigerian Federal Government as well as the State of Lagos.

The South African team is led by Brigadier Leone Ras, an international expert in body identification from the South African Police Service. She is supported by Professor Gert Saaiman, Chief State Pathologist from South Africa.

Processes used

Radebe said the identification process is done through:

- **Direct Identification:** Where the body may be identified by next of kin, if they are present in Lagos. "This is often a very traumatic and painful process. Because of the nature of injuries in this incident, only a limited number of the bodies may be identified using this method," he said.
- **Photo Identification:** Photos of a person are used to compare mainly facial features of the bodies in the mortuary. "If a match is found, the identification is then confirmed using fingerprints and other bodily characteristics," he said.
- **Fingerprint Data Base Comparison:** The fingerprints from the deceased are compared with the fingerprint databases from the Department of Home Affairs and the South African Police Service. "This is done by fingerprint experts and it takes a considerable amount of time. This is a reliable method that is commonly used in identifying deceased persons. However, in some instances due to the injuries sustained, this method may not be viable," he said.
- **Dental Record Comparison:** If fingerprint database comparison does not succeed in the identification of the deceased, the dental characteristics of the body are compared with dental records of individuals prior to the event.



The Synagogue Church of all Nations in Lagos where 84 South Africans lost their lives and 25 were injured, some critically. Image: [Funmi Scripted](#)

"This method is only possible where the dental records can be accessed from the dentist that the deceased person visited. We, therefore, appeal to the family members of unaccounted South Africans who are presumed to have died to provide Police with information of the dentist or dental clinic their relative had visited over the past 8 years," he said.

- DNA samples: If no identification can be reached with any of the above methods, a DNA sample of the body is compared with a DNA sample collected from a close relative. "For this purpose, experts from the SA Police Service are currently visiting families and are collecting DNA samples. It is important to note that the process takes time," he added.

"As we strive to ensure that the body identification is completed as soon as possible, we have to make sure that the processes are done in line with Lagos State and Nigerian Federal laws," Radebe said.

Radebe appealed to the families to bear with them and allow their team in Nigeria the necessary time to complete the process of identifying the bodies.

"It is clear from this information that we are adopting a methodical and time consuming identification process. While we may not be able to predict the exact timeframes for completion, all possible efforts are being made to do so as quickly as possible," he said.

He said as soon as the bodies are identified, a team of 70 experts from the South African Military Health Service and the Department of Health will depart for Lagos to bring the bodies home to South Africa.

Radebe thanked the South African National Defence Force for the successful evacuation of the injured South African citizens from Lagos. "They have indeed made all of us very proud as a nation," he added.

A national task team comprising Social Development, SAPS Chaplain Services and the Victim Identification Centre have been visiting families of people presumed to have died at the church. Other teams of social workers are providing psycho-social support to survivors and families of victims at the Steve Biko Hospital, OR Tambo International Airport and the DIRCO call centre.

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