Like armed conflicts and natural disasters, the present migration tide has been splitting up countless families. People suffer tremendously when they do not have contact with, or news from, their loved ones. The need to communicate with the loved ones is as acute as the needs for food, water and shelter.

That is why restoring and maintaining contact between family members is a key activity of the Family Links Network of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The Family Links Network helps people look for family members when they have lost contact due to armed conflict or other situations of violence, natural or man-made disasters, or migration, as well as in other situations of humanitarian need. We pay special attention to looking for the family members of unaccompanied or separated minors and other vulnerable persons in an emergency.

The role of Red Cross/Red Crescent National Societies in Restoring Family Links

As members of the Family Links Network of the Movement, National Societies play a crucial role in helping people who have become separated from members of their families or are without news of them.

They search for family members, restore contact between family members and, if possible, help reunite families. These activities may extend well beyond the end of a conflict or a natural disaster.

Each National Society has the responsibility to organize Restoring Family Links services within their Society as needed. It cooperates with the Central Tracing Agency of the ICRC in Geneva and with other National Societies. National Societies help each other when searching for separated family members across borders, share experiences and sometimes support each other in the development of the services.
In each country in Europe, national Red Cross societies have been providing regular services for many years to help find missing family members, restore contact and try to help to reunite families.

In the current situation with tens of thousands of migrants crossing through several European countries, Red Cross societies along the migratory routes are mobilized and have deployed staff and volunteers to various locations such as border crossing points, train stations, and other locations where migrants are passing through or are accommodated.

In recent months, large numbers of migrants have transited several countries very rapidly. This makes the tracing work difficult in such transit countries, because people who have contacted the Red Cross will often have moved on to a different location when the Red Cross is trying to get back in contact with them.

According to a Spanish Red Cross tracing service professional with 12 years of experience in case work in RFL, her mission to support colleagues on the Western Balkans route has been "a plunge..."
into turbulent waves” – since everything is moving so fast at critical points, you have to “act fast, improvise, and be quick, imaginative and resolute” if you want to prevent separation and facilitate swift reunification of family members.

**The tools we use vary according to the situation and the particular needs**

**Telephones**

Telephones are often the most direct and rapid means of restoring contact and reassuring families. We often provide people from the areas affected by conflicts or disasters, as well as migrants, with free telephone calls in the emergency phase of a crisis so that they can call their relatives. We also strive to make sure that they are able to use their own telephones by providing them with the possibility to charge them or to use the most economical SIM cards.

**WiFi spots**

As most migrants are equipped with modern communication tools, their access to internet is vital for them to maintain contact with their loved ones. We assist in setting up free WiFi spots so that they can make use of their appliances.

**Prevention of separation**

The critical points at which most family separations take place in the fast and continuous movement of people are the points where the police carries out their registration, where migrants board trains or buses or when somebody needs to get medical treatment while the rest of the family has to move on. Often with the best intention to give a preferential treatment to the most vulnerable, notably women and children, actors engaged at such points separate them from the rest of the family or group they travel with, and thus actually and involuntarily cause more distress than relief. The Red Cross staff and volunteers have incessantly dialogued with everyone working with migrants to make them understand this point and in many cases it has borne fruit.
The Red Cross also provides practical advice to migrants on how not to lose track of each other, especially where children are concerned, as well as who and how to approach if the separation does occur. It also maintains continuous contact with the police, social services and relevant authorities, as well as other Red Cross points along the route in order to be able to locate people torn apart in the movement and bring them together again.

It is of utmost importance for preventing family separation and loss of contact along the route to make it possible for the trained RFL staff of the Red Cross to be:
- Visible at critical points so that people in need of their help can reach them
- Able to access every camp sector
- In immediate contact with all actors in the camp and with other camps in and outside their county

Such simple measures will facilitate this aspect of RC work and contribute to avoiding unnecessary anguish and to a truly humane treatment of these unfortunate people.

Tracing

Once they arrive in their country of destination or longer stay, migrants can open a tracing request for a missing family member with the local Red Cross. The information collected are treated with utmost respect for personal data protection regulations and requirements and is used exclusively for the purposes of searching for the lost person. The considerations for the best interest of the sought person, the consent of the enquirer and the purely humanitarian purpose of the tracing process are meticulously upheld.

In the country of destination or along the route, migrants also have the possibility to use on-line tracing tools, such as Trace the Face. It enables them to, with the help of the Red Cross personnel on the spot, upload their own photo and the nature of relationship with the sought person. Posters with Trace the Face photos are on display at Red Cross RFL points along the migration route.

With the adaptation of the tools used in tracing to both new circumstances and new technological possibilities, the approaches and methodologies are constantly getting upgraded.

For more on our activities worldwide, visit: www.icrc.org
For more on restoring family links, visit: familylinks.icrc.org