

Special report: Death in direct provision

In the first eight months of a new reporting system of deaths in direct provision, four deaths were notified. Mostafa Darwish investigates



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MOSTAFA DARWISH

Collection and publication of data on deaths in direct provision has been patchy since the system was established in 1999, with the United Nations calling on Ireland to ensure transparency in this regard.

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Video:

<https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/spotlight/arid-40322225.html>

The voices in this video have been changed on request from the interviewees.

MIRKO

In mid-April 2020, Mirko, a 19-year-old Bolivian asylum seeker died by suicide at the Central Dublin Hotel, a place that temporarily houses asylum seekers who are awaiting decisions on their asylum applications.

The Gardaí confirmed they were investigating the death of a male in his late teens that occurred at a property on Exchequer Street, Dublin. He had been pronounced dead at the scene and a post-mortem was conducted at Dublin City Mortuary.

In a statement, the Department of Justice (DOJ) said the death was a sad and tragic incident.

According to the DOJ, when a person dies while they are living in accommodation provided by the Department's International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS), the department works closely with the centre manager to assist the person's next of kin, if known, in accessing the supports provided by the State, and to ensure that any residents affected by the death are assisted in accessing services that can support them.



(Paintings by Mostafa Younis and Omar Emam as described by resident) Mirko hearing news from his family about his mother's death back home.

An African asylum seeker who lives at the Central Dublin Hotel and who asked to remain anonymous said Mirko had died by suicide the day after finding out that his mother, who still lived in Bolivia, had died.

Some other residents had gone to the deceased's room around 1pm to remind him to come for lunch as he had not come to breakfast. It was there they found him dead. The Gardaí and ambulance arrived by 1.30pm, but they didn't speak to anyone except the management and the deceased's roommate.

A resident claimed that a member of staff told residents in the dining room at dinner time that they should not worry as Mirko did not die of Covid-19, but had killed himself.

The Central Hotel's manager, Gary Morris, and the DOJ refused to comment on this assertion.

The resident said that he and other residents had been moved to that hotel two weeks before the incident due to Covid-19.

"We were expecting they were going to move the vulnerable people only," he said.

"They forced us to leave the centre where we were settled and moved us here. They were telling us it's for social distancing, but where I was living, there were two in each room. Here there are three and this doesn't make sense. Even in this hotel it's more crowded and we stand in a queue to get our meals and even the food is nasty", he added.

The DOJ currently has a six-month contract with the Central Hotel, which was procured as part of more than 1,550 permanent and temporary new Direct Provision beds added to the system during the pandemic, with 600 residents relocated to support social and physical distance in centres.

A former classmate of Mirko's who asked to remain anonymous said he studied gastronomy with him in Bolivia in 2015-2016 and had believed he died there.

"We were all shocked when we found out. He was pure to everyone and we never expected that could happen at this age," the former classmate added.

Lucky Khambule from Movement of Asylum Seekers in Ireland (MASI) said his group found out about the death through another resident in the Central Dublin Hotel.



The Central Dublin Hotel where 19-year-old Bolivian asylum seeker, Mirko, died by suicide.

The news went viral in WhatsApp groups associated with Direct Provision centres. MASI published it on Twitter, and received a written request from the DOJ to remove the tweet. The letter asked for the tweet to be removed to protect the family's privacy, although the dead man had not been named. MASI did not remove the tweet.

Mr Khambule said that there is no medical or psychological support given to those that suffer from mental health issues. He believes that disclosing the cause of death helps to expose flaws in the system.

"The easiest thing for the DOJ to do is just to keep quiet about it and suppress the information forever," he said.

"In other countries the coroner would indicate on the death certificate what the cause of death was and this detail is available to all. In some instances, they even write natural causes, which is acceptable," Mr Khambule said.

The Dublin coroner said the death that occurred in the Central Dublin Hotel is subject to inquest and this process may take 18-22 months from the date of death.

The DOJ said that the health and well-being of people in DP centres is of the utmost importance to the department.

“The healthcare needs of our residents are looked after through the Department of Health and the HSE and services are available to anyone who needs them”, a spokesperson said.

But Mr Khambule refutes this information, saying that there’s no social worker, or mental health consultant visits to centres. He added that it doesn't seem to be a priority to the DOJ.

When there has been a death in the centre, no one gets help, he said, describing how his organization recently covered the costs of a couple in Athlone who had to undergo a private counselling session after the death of a resident in December.

“The centre told us that there was nothing they could do”, Mr Khambule said.

The DOJ said that the residents access health services and support on the same basis as everyone else in society, including mental health services. A spokesperson said that if someone in Direct Provision passes away, all other residents are offered all appropriate support including counselling if needed.

"Every effort is made to ensure that residents' specific needs are met. Where more intensive care needs are required, such cases are referred directly to the Health Service Executive”, DOJ added.

As the news of the Bolivian asylum seeker's story trickled through the social media networks of Ireland's migrant community, another asylum seeker's death came to light.

MUHAMMED

Muhammed was a 30-year-old asylum seeker from Afghanistan who lived in Treacy's Hotel, Monaghan. He died by suicide after spending time in self-isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Muhammed came to Ireland from Malaysia a year previously, as his MA student visa in Malaysia had expired and he couldn't go back to Afghanistan. During the pandemic, he was forced to self-isolate and when he had finished that period, he appeared completely changed, a fellow resident explained.

"Muhammed who we know is totally different from Muhammed who we saw after self-isolation," the friend said, adding that he had suddenly stopped speaking to everyone and was walking alone around the buildings after midnight.

"I can say that every resident in our centre is depressed because of living in the middle of nowhere", he added.



(Paintings by Mostafa Younis and Omar Emam as described by resident) Muhammed Arif takes his meal to go back to his room to avoid sitting with his friends at a table at Treacy's hotel, Co. Monaghan.

*Ahmed, Muhammed's brother, is currently seeking asylum in another country. (His name has been changed for the purposes of this article, due to his precarious situation). He said that his brother had gone to Ireland to seek a safe life but felt that he was in a prison and that he was being treated like an animal.

He was quarantined for 20 days in a room alone. He told family members he had been tested for Covid-19 but was never told the result. He changed afterwards, they said.

"I told them that my brother is sick after Covid lockdown but they didn't care. I called the residence office and I told them that my brother needs treatment but they said he is okay, don't worry", Ahmed said.

An employee from Treacy's administration said that when they were informed that Muhammed needed medical attention, he received it the next day.

"When I contacted my brother virtually, sometimes he didn't know me, he was telling me that 'these people are kidnappers and I am kidnapped'", Ahmed added.

"He was telling me to help him to get out of this prison. He requested a voluntary return but no one replied to his email," Ahmed added.



(Painted as described by Ahmed, Muhammed Arif's brother) Muhammed Arif, 29, self-isolating in his room asking his brother for help to get him out of the Direct Provision centre.

A spokesperson for the DOJ said that the department was unable to comment on the claims, but expressed "sincere condolences to the family and friends of the deceased person in this tragic incident." When an applicant wishes to

voluntarily withdraw their international protection application, such as in Muhammed's case, they must request this in writing to the International Protection Office (IPO).

That request is then processed by the IPO in accordance with the provisions of the International Protection Act 2015, and the applicant and their solicitor will then be notified accordingly, by way of letter. Assisted Voluntary Return may then be requested from the Department's Repatriation Unit, with support provided from the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The South Monaghan coroner's office stated that Muhammed had died by suicide on August 28, 2020.

A group representing the Afghan community in Ireland has collected donations to send his body to Afghanistan to be buried in his hometown.

THOMAS

In November 14, 2020, Thomas, an asylum seeker from the United States, died by suicide after he received a deportation letter. He was living in the Atlas Hotel in Tralee, Co Kerry, according to a resident at the same hotel.

The resident said Thomas was afraid he would be arrested and deported, so he left and he was living in a tent in Killarney.

The West Kerry coroner said the cause of death has not yet been released. At the time of going to print, a date for inquest had not been set.

There are currently 16 asylum applicants who have provided the United States of America as their country of origin, the DOJ spokesperson said.

The DOJ doesn't comment on individual cases due to confidentiality provisions in the International Protection Act 2015. The provision ensures the

protection of an applicant who may have fled from persecution and who may remain at risk if their identity or location is made known.

There is no exemption to that provision. Each application is examined individually and assessed on its own merits.

ELAKI

On December 29, 2020, Elaki, a 56-year-old lady from Nigeria living at Mosney Direct Provision centre in Co. Meath died, according to a resident at the same centre.

Elaki was single with no children but is understood to have had family in Ireland. She had lived in the centre for eight years.

“She was a friend of everyone, but she loved to be alone most of the time,” the resident said. “She wasn’t like that when she first arrived at the centre though,” she added. The coroner said it could be six months before a post-mortem result is made official.

‘Triple trauma’

John Lannon, head of Doras, an NGO based in Limerick which works to help refugees integrate into Ireland said the causes of deaths in asylum centres are not properly investigated because the government treats asylum seekers as numbers rather than people. He added that the government doesn’t appear to be concerned about why people die in the centres.

The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS, formerly Reception and Integration Agency) sees its role as providing accommodation and meals and basic access to additional essential services, Lannon said. But it does not adequately meet the needs of asylum seekers that may have

survived torture, are separated from family, or coping with post-traumatic stress.

"Unreasonably long delays in processing applications for international protection, the poor living conditions in many direct provision centres, their remote location, the strain of looking after children, the lack of access to work or education, the threat of deportation, and other stresses of living in direct provision and it's not surprising that the mental health of asylum seekers suffers greatly".

"This is likely to lead to suicide, and sadly it has in some cases", Mr Lannon added.

A December 2019 report by the Faculty of Paediatrics, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (RCPI), confirmed that 94% of international protection applicants have experienced traumatic events prior to arriving in Ireland, with 32-53% reporting torture (18, 20). This is on par with international studies which estimate a torture prevalence of 30-84% among asylum seekers.

The RCPI report says that 6% of all asylum seekers are referred for treatment. Spirasi (Spiritan Asylum Services Initiative), is Ireland's national treatment centre for survivors of torture.

Aisling Hearn, a psychotherapist working with Spirasi, said that among the clients she has worked with who experience suicidal ideation, the reasons appear to vary.

"Sometimes it is strongly connected to the asylum process waiting times and accommodation issues compounding mental health issues; and sometimes it is as a result of the intensity of the psychological impact of the torture experienced."

The direct provision system is highly triggering for a lot of people seeking protection because it strips the applicant of stability, safety, choice, privacy, autonomy, and is deeply dis-empowering, Hearn added.

“Feeling frightened, trapped and dis-empowered is traumatic. All of this contributes to the triple trauma paradigm we see in asylum seekers. Because there is a lack of vulnerability screening for trauma, and mental health services are extremely under-resourced and lack cross-cultural specialisation, the presence of trauma continues to grow and worsens,” she said.

Information on deaths

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has urged Ireland to ensure transparency regarding deaths in direct provision centres and collect and publish data on such deaths.

According to Lucky Khambule of MASI, it has been three years since the authorities released the number of deaths.

“We are wondering why there’s no new statements by the government about suicide or deaths and why the Irish media doesn’t cover anymore the suicide cases in the direct provision centres,” he added.

Media outlets in Ireland follow Samaritans and the Irish Association of Suicidology guidelines on reporting of suicide, which advise against reporting details of suicide methods, suicide notes and other communications, or attributing suicides to particular ‘trigger’ causes.



Muhammed Arif, who died by suicide on August 28, 2020, after spending time in self-isolation due to the coronavirus pandemic. Photo: Arif family

An FOI request to the DOJ on the number of deaths in all DP centres since the system was established in 1999 was refused.

Following an appeal, the department revealed that establishment of a Critical Incident Policy means the figures have been recorded since November 2019.

Since its introduction, any death that occurs within accommodation centres provided by the Department (including those run by private companies) is referred to the Garda Síochána as a matter of course. The Garda Síochána in turn refers all deaths to the local Coroner's office.

The four deaths described above were notified to IPAS between the introduction of the policy in November 2019 and July 14, 2020, the department said. IPAS does not record the causes of death of individuals.

Further FOI requests to the DOJ found that figures are not available for the period between 1999 and 2002. The Irish Examiner was unable to verify how many deaths occurred inside direct provision centres between 1999-2000, and media reports are patchy.

In March 2001, an inquest found that six-month-old Soluman Dembele died after a kettle of water spilled on him in the bedroom he shared with his family in the Ashbourne House asylum centre.

From 2002 till the end of 2020, there were 84 deaths in asylum centres. Figures are unavailable for the 10 months between January and October of 2019, before the Critical Incident Policy was established.

In March of that year, the Irish Times reported that an asylum seeker from Eritrea had been found dead near the Hazel Hotel DP centre in Co. Kildare.

This adds two to the official figure of 84 deaths. The real figure may never be known.

Helplines:

If you are affected by the issues raised in this article, contact Samaritans for free on 116 123, email them at jo@samaritans.ie, or visit www.samaritans.ie to find your nearest branch.

