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All victims of May 18 air disaster identified

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Professionals at the Forensic Medicine Institute (IML) have been working tirelessly since a Boeing 737-200 crashed near Havana's José Martí International Airport last May 18.

Intense work, skill, and strong ethics have characterized efforts to identify all the victims of the disaster, a process that was completed in just eight days, as the Cuban people's grief turned toward eternal gratitude.

The announcement was made during a May 27 press conference held by Sergio Rabell Piera, the institute's director, who noted that all bodies have now been delivered to their families and for burial, and in so doing provide some closure.

Forensic experts from the IML, Ministry of Public Health, Criminalistics office as well as contingents from the Ministry of the Interior, were faced with a difficult task "due to the severe traumas caused by the plane crash, in addition to the effects of heat and fire."

The identification process featured experts in the field of anthropology, dentistry, fingerprint analysis, bio-forensics, and included DNA analyses, added Rabell.

According to the IML director, the participation of family members was also vital to such efforts, as they provided fundamental information about the victims, as well as photos and documents which, in addition to the identification of jewelry and clothing, among other elements, allowed for bodies to be positively identified, he noted.

Rabell also praised speedy analysis of video footage of passengers boarding the plane, images recovered from victims' cell phones, and descriptions by people who were in contact with them before the flight, as well as the support of all institutions, organizations and bodies that participated in the identification process, in addition to those from the provinces where the victims lived and diplomatic delegations from the countries involved.

The expert also gave a special mention to the island's 11 million inhabitants, who have continued to offer their solidarity. "Anyone with anything to do with forensic science has called," and "there are those that have come just once and been of great help," he explained.

Nonetheless, "The investigation continues, this is just a stop on the road. We are continuing to work with all forces, providing and receiving information."

Although it was said that work to identify all victims could take up to one month according to preliminary estimates for events of this kind, the IML and its staff worked with intensity, rigor, and dedication to identify all victims in just eight days. "All the bodies were physically there, we had as many bodies as victims. Sometimes this is not the case with disasters of this kind," stated Rabell.

To this must be added Cuba's experience and preparation in managing disaster situations. "Cuba wrote the chapter on managing fatalities of disasters in the Pan American Health Organization's manual. This is the process to be followed. We put that which is established into practice (...) working in shifts over 24 hours, during which our doctors, technicians, professionals, and security officials, have worked like a clock."

The bodies identified include 67 victims from Holguín; 21 from Havana; three from Granma and three from Santiago de Cuba; two from Matanzas and the same number from the Isle of Youth Special Municipality, one from Las Tunas, seven Mexicans, two Argentines, and two individuals from Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.