



Picture: REUTERS

A member loyal to the Islamic State waves a flag as the organisation stands poised 130km outside Baghdad

The trio had travelled to Syria separately, he said.

Al-Alawi said he had shared the information with the Department of International Relations

and Co-operation. But Department of State Security spokesman Brian Dube said he was not aware of any people who had left South Africa to join Islamic State. He added intelligence officials would look into it.

International Relations spokesman Nelson Kgwete said yesterday they were unaware of any South Africans recruited by Isis, but that if the ambassador had passed on such information, it would have been relayed to security authorities.

Kgwete could not confirm the arrival of the three bodies of the dead recruits.

The Syrian Embassy said it was not aware of the matter.

Islamic State is known for its highly-publicised beheadings of foreigners and carrying out other public executions. Most recently the group released a video showing the aftermath of the killing of American aid worker Peter Kassig. He was a former army ranger who was kidnapped last year as he delivered medical supplies to victims of Syria's civil war.

Kassig, 26, is the fifth Western hostage to be executed, and the third American to be killed.

According to a UN report, more than 15 000 people from various countries have travelled to Syria and Iraq to fight alongside Islamic State. It is believed this includes South Africans, although there are no confirmed numbers.

According to one source, 140 men are believed to have joined from South Africa although it is not certain if all of them are citizens.

The Foreign Military Assistance Act (1998) prohibits South Africans from participating in the armed forces of foreign states, rendering foreign military assistance and taking part in armed groups.

Although Al-Alawi said he was not aware that as many as 140 men from the country had allegedly joined Islamic State, he said there were groups operating in the country that were recruiting and fundraising, under the guise of humanitarian aid.

He said one of the South African men who died fighting had been recruited by two men in the south of Joburg. "When they are raising funds, they tell the community that the money is going to help orphans."

The 24-year-old man had travelled with a group of young men from Azaadville and Lenasia. He was killed in combat in October last year.

The ambassador said before the man left, he sold all his belongings, including his car.

Al-Alawi said the man came from a wealthy background.

"He was recruited by two men in Gauteng. "

The third to die in combat this year was a 26-year-old man from Vereeniging, who had gone to Saudi Arabia for a pilgrimage.

"When he got to Saudi Arabia he came in contact with a man who convinced him to travel to Syria and join up."

The man died fighting, but his family was told he had died in a car accident. "They use car

accidents as an excuse. They never say he died fighting for Islamic State.”

A 54-year-old man from Cape Town had left with a group that was meant to provide humanitarian aid. He then joined and died while he was travelling in a convoy with the rebels. “His body has been returned to South Africa,” said Al-Alawi.

He added that the terrorist group used its strong media resources to attract young men from various countries to join them.

Al-Alawi gave the example of a man who once went with a friend to attend Friday prayers at a mosque in the Eastern Cape and noticed the speakers were using inflammatory language. “He said they were saying all non-Muslims should be sent to hell. He was shocked by the actions of the men – a father and his son.”

A spokesman for the Muslim judicial body, the Jamiatul Ulama South Africa, said: “If this is a matter of fact that so many South Africans are joining the Islamic State, there will always be concerns.

“In the first place, there are legal implications for anyone involved in armed conflicts around the world. This kind of development can also jeopardise the support of legitimate relief initiatives generous South Africans are contributing towards in the region.”

This week the African Christian Democratic Party released a statement calling on the government to investigate concerns and allegations that elements in South Africa “are key players in facilitating funding and sending of recruits fighting alongside Islamic State”.

Al-Alawi said it was the obligation of all the countries to vigilantly raise awareness in order to prevent young men from joining extremist and terrorist groups. “This is not a simple issue to deal with, but we have to bring on board government and non-government organisations to fight terrorism. I think if we do that, we are likely to succeed.”

Last year South Africans were shocked when it emerged that “White Widow” Samantha Lewthwaite – believed to be the mastermind behind the terrorist attack in Kenya – reportedly lived in South Africa in a flat in Mayfair with her three children.

Meanwhile, Iraq’s army has launched an operation to retake parts of the eastern suburbs of Ramadi, 130km west of the capital, Baghdad.

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