The International Maritime Rescue Federation Mass Rescue Operations Project:

The SAR Coordinator

Overview

The IMRF’s mass rescue operations (MRO) guidance is provided in 30 separate chapters at www.international-maritime-rescue.org. For downloadable documents referenced in this chapter please use the drop-down menus or return to the MRO project main page under ‘Resources’. For a general introduction please see chapter 1, ‘Complex incident planning – the challenge: acknowledging the problem, and mass rescue incident types’.

This chapter discusses:

- the general role of the SAR Coordinator as described in the IAMSAR Manual
- the SAR Coordinator’s role and responsibilities as regards mass rescue operations
- the need for an identified ‘MRO lead’, whether or not this is the SAR Coordinator
- specific tasks that fall to the SAR Coordinator as regards MRO preparation

1 The SAR Coordinator and the SAR Mission Coordinator

1.1 It is perhaps unfortunate that the IMO should choose two such similar titles – SAR Coordinator and SAR Mission Coordinator – for two very different roles. The SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC) is defined in the IAMSAR Manual as “the official temporarily assigned to coordinate response to an actual or apparent distress situation”, usually based at a Rescue Coordination Centre (RCC) and nominated from among its staff. This is an operational role familiar to all in SAR. The role of the SMC in a mass rescue operation is discussed in chapter 19.

1.2 The SAR Coordinator, on the other hand, is defined in IAMSAR as:

“One or more persons or agencies within an Administration with overall responsibility for establishing and providing SAR services and ensuring that planning for those services is properly coordinated.”

‘An Administration’ here means an IMO Member State’s governmental organisation, and ‘SAR services’ means:

“The performance of distress monitoring, communication, coordination and search and rescue functions, including provision of medical advice, initial medical assistance, or medical evacuation,
through the use of public and private resources, including cooperating aircraft, vessels and other

craft and installations.”

1.3 The SAR Coordinator, therefore, does not (or, at least, need not) have an operational response role at all,

and need not be an individual. An official or a government agency is identified as responsible for arranging

the SAR services listed above and making sure that the use of those services is properly planned. Volume

I of the IAMSAR Manual, *Organization and Management*, describes the SAR Coordinator’s role in full, and

provides the necessary guidance on how, in general, it should be carried out. IAMSAR Volume II

summarises the role:

“SAR Coordinators have the overall responsibility for establishing, staffing, equipping, and

managing the SAR system, including providing appropriate legal and funding support, establishing

RCCs and rescue sub-centres (RSCs), providing or arranging for SAR facilities, coordinating SAR

training, and developing SAR policies. SAR Coordinators are the top-level SAR managers; each State

normally will have one or more persons or agencies for whom this designation may be appropriate.

[...] SAR Coordinators are not normally involved in the conduct of SAR operations.”

1.4 As noted in chapter 2, it is good practice to form a SAR committee to agree and to oversee SAR planning

and preparation in a State or region. All agencies with SAR response roles and responsibilities should be

represented. The SAR Coordinator as described in IAMSAR may lead or be a member of such a committee.

1.5 While the IAMSAR Manual is the lead international guidance on maritime and aeronautical SAR, it should

be remembered that not all response agencies – particularly those with roles on land – may be aware of

it. The principles and terminology underpinning IAMSAR may need to be explained to the SAR committee.

2 The SAR Coordinator and mass rescue operations

2.1 It follows from the IMO’s definitions and guidance noted above that the SAR Coordinator is, *inter alia*,

responsible for ensuring that coordinated planning is carried out for mass rescue operations. It also

follows that the SAR Coordinator has a position in the Administration which allows and enables this

activity to be carried out effectively – ideally s/he will have a legal responsibility to do so. MRO planning

will inevitably involve many different organisations; governmental and non-governmental, civilian and

military. It is essential that the SAR Coordinator is recognised as having overall coordinating responsibility

for this planning work.

2.2 Although it need not be the case that the SAR Coordinator actually leads the planning – the responsibility

is only to ensure that planning is done – it is recommended that the SAR Coordinator at least maintains

oversight of this difficult and important work. It is also recommended that responsibility for keeping MRO

planning current should be vested in a nominated *individual*, whether part of the SAR Coordinator’s own

organisation or not. If it is no-one’s specific job to make sure that a plan is up to date and understood and

agreed by all parties to it, there is a real risk that the plan will gather dust – and a dusty plan is usually

ineffective! See chapters 2 & 5.

3 Specific tasks

3.1 It is useful at this point to remind ourselves of the definition of a mass rescue operation. Such an

operation is “characterised by the need for immediate response to large numbers of persons in distress,

1 IAMSAR Manual Volume II Chapter 1.2.2.
such that the capabilities normally available to the search and rescue authorities are inadequate”. The recognition of the implications of this definition, and the fact that such operations, although rare, will occasionally be needed, is perhaps the SAR Coordinator’s most important responsibility in this regard.

3.2 In ‘establishing and providing SAR services’ it is the SAR Coordinator’s task to determine at what point ‘the capabilities normally available’ become ‘inadequate’. This point will vary from State to State and region to region according to the availability of SAR facilities, and it will also tend to vary with weather conditions. It may vary with season, time of day etc too. The SAR Coordinator is responsible for making a thorough and honest appraisal, based on risk and gap analysis (see chapter 3), of actual capability, and will need to liaise with likely response organisations in order to inform this appraisal. This work will identify the ‘capability gaps’: see chapter 4.

3.3 It is then the SAR Coordinator’s responsibility to engage with the response organisations and to coordinate the necessary MRO planning, or to ensure that it is coordinated. It is with the SAR Coordinator that MRO preparation begins. See chapter 5.

3.4 With reference to the guidance in IAMSAR Volume II, quoted above, we may then summarise the SAR Coordinator’s responsibilities in terms of MRO planning as follows:

- Recognise the need for MRO preparation
- Liaise with all relevant organisations to agree capabilities and capability gaps
- Establish and support a coordinated planning process
- Ensure that the planning includes identifying the necessary additional SAR resource, including staffing, equipment, management, coordination and communications resources
- Ensure that the planning includes the necessary training and testing regimes
- Ensure that any necessary legal provisions are in place
- Ensure that sufficient funding is in place for the planning, preparation, training and testing phases, and that policies are agreed that will ensure that any cost questions arising at the time of an MRO will not delay response (see chapter 16)
- Ensure that the resulting plans are ‘owned’ (see chapter 2) and that they are kept current.

4 Summary

- The SAR Coordinator has a distinct and leading role in preparing for mass rescue operations.
- It is essential that the SAR Coordinator is recognised by all parties within the relevant State or region as having overall coordinating responsibility for MRO planning.
- A nominated ‘MRO lead’ should be established, to coordinate MRO planning and to ensure that the plans remain up to date and understood by all relevant parties. The SAR Coordinator can provide this lead or can delegate it – but retains responsibility for planning overall.
- The SAR Coordinator should ensure that the ‘capability gaps’ are identified and planned to be filled.
- The SAR Coordinator is responsible for ensuring that the necessary legal and funding frameworks are in place, to facilitate MRO preparation and the operations themselves.
Further reading

5.1 Volume I of the IAMSAR Manual provides the main guidance on the SAR Coordinator role in general, and this is summarised in Volume II Chapter 1.2.2.

5.2 The IMO also publish a Model Course on maritime SAR Administration.

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