The International Maritime Rescue Federation Mass Rescue Operations Project:

Maritime / shoreside coordination

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:

- planning effective maritime / shoreside coordination
- the SAR Coordinator’s and SAR Mission Coordinator’s roles and the Rescue Coordination Centre’s focal position
- shoreside authorities’ information needs
- the choice of landing sites: the interface between the at-sea and on-shore parts of the operation
- port authority concerns
- coordinated responses to public and news media interest

1 Planning maritime / shoreside coordination

1.1 It is the aim of every SAR mission to rescue people in distress; and ‘rescue’ usually ends at a ‘place of safety’ ashore. In an MRO we can usefully adapt the existing IAMSAR definition of ‘rescue’ to read ‘an operation to retrieve or support persons in distress, provide for their initial medical or other needs and deliver them to a place of safety’. Although survivors can be placed in temporary places of safety, or their own vessel can be made one (see chapters 10 & 15), the final place of safety will still be ashore – but this is not simply the nearest beach: resources must be prepared ashore to receive the survivors properly.

1.2 In an MRO this is a complex process, as discussed in chapter 11. It will often involve a large number of shoreside response organisations, each with their own parts to play and their own information needs, summarised below. The transfer of survivors (and the dead) to the land requires careful coordination as, in almost all cases, responsibility for the rescue and ongoing support of the survivors will also transfer, from the maritime responders led by the SMC in accordance with the provisions of the IAMSAR Manual.
to a shoreside response organisation whose component parts and coordination arrangements will vary from State to State.

1.3 Failure to coordinate this transfer will lead to confusion and further distress at least; at worst, in effect, a second major emergency, if large numbers of people come ashore without reception facilities having been arranged for them.

1.4 It is the SAR Coordinator’s and the SAR Mission Coordinator’s responsibility to make sure that this does not happen (see chapters 18 & 19). The SAR Coordinator should ensure that, at the planning stage, maritime and shoreside responders agree how the transfer from sea to land can be most efficiently managed.

1.5 As shown in the simplified diagram below, the Rescue Coordination Centre, the SMC’s base, should be the primary link between the sea and land parts of the operation. During an MRO it is the SMC’s responsibility to ensure that landing procedures are agreed in accordance with the plan and that the necessary information is passed on: see also chapters 17 & 25. The SMC should ideally have a single link to the shoreside responders’ senior officers; usually to a tactical coordination centre, supported by an exchange of communications and/or liaison officers.

2 Shoreside authorities’ information needs

2.1 As discussed in chapter 11, survivors may have a wide range of needs to be attended to at the place of safety; and shoreside authorities will also have their own concerns – border control, security and accident investigation issues, for example. To enable all these needs to be met, early and effective communications must be established with the RCC to ensure the best information flow possible in the circumstances (see chapter 25).

2.2 Shoreside authorities – including port authorities and shipping, offshore or aviation industry companies whose units are involved in the accident, as well as emergency response agencies – will, between them, need the following sorts of information:

- the overall dimensions (including draft) and condition of the casualty vessel if it is being brought into port
- if survivors are in rescue units, the identity, type and relevant details of each unit
- where it is proposed that survivors should be landed
- how many will be coming to each landing point
o when they will arrive
o what condition they are in, medically and generally
o what assistance they will need on arrival: can they walk ashore from the rescue units, for example?
o their names, nationalities and other personal details, if known
o what needs to be done for them once ashore, and who can help provide for those needs.

2.3 The shoreside authorities also need to prepare to receive the dead. Again, they will need to know which units they are in, where they are being taken, when they will arrive, and any personal details available.

2.4 Not all of this information will be available before people are landed, perhaps – personal details in particular – but as much of it as can be gained should be passed to the relevant responders ashore via the RCC.

3 Landing points

3.1 What constitutes a ‘place of safety’ is discussed in chapter 11. The final act of transfer to it – the actual landing of survivors – is something that needs to be discussed and, so far as possible, planned for. Arrival ashore represents the interface between the sea and land parts of the operation. As such, places of safety should be assessed and agreed jointly by the lead maritime and shoreside authorities during the MRO planning phase.

3.2 From a maritime SAR perspective, the nearest accessible landing site will usually be thought the best: using it will enable rescue units to minimise the time they have people aboard, and will allow them to go back for more, or to be released from the operation with minimal delay. But the nearest landing site is not necessarily the best from a shoreside point of view. A jetty remote from facilities such as hospitals or reception centres, with limited local shelter or difficult road access merely presents shoreside responders with additional, and avoidable, problems. It will also be the case that, if people can be kept aboard rescue units in sufficient comfort for longer while proceeding to a better-serviced landing site, the shoreside authorities will have more time to prepare to receive them.

3.3 Conversely, landing sites that suit shoreside responders, because of their proximity to reception facilities, for example, may not be best for the rescue units. For ships and rescue boats there obviously has to be sufficient water, and shelter from rough seas. Thought should be given too to ease of disembarkation, of stretcher cases as well as walking survivors, in all weather conditions and at all states of the tide. The different sizes of likely rescue units is a factor here: a deep-water berth alongside a wall may be fine for ships but will not be suitable for small craft from which people can only disembark by climbing ladders.

3.4 Landing sites for helicopters also need to be chosen with the helicopter operators’ involvement, to ensure that approaches etc are safe.

3.5 As discussed in chapter 11, potential places of safety should be identified at the planning stage, bearing the considerations mentioned above in mind and allowing the necessary flexibility to choose the most appropriate site or sites at the time of the incident. It may be that several landing sites will have to be used, including, perhaps, sites in neighbouring countries as discussed in chapter 14.

3.6 In general it is better to limit the number of landing sites, to minimise potential confusion and to make best use of the shoreside resources available. But the aim overall should be that the transfer of people from sea to land should be controlled and efficient; as smooth a flow as possible. Having additional
landing sites – provided that they are properly resourced – is preferable to having rescue units queueing for berths or survivors waiting on quaysides for transport to reception centres or medical facilities.

4  Port authority concerns

4.1 Port authorities will be key players during landing operations from surface craft, and should be involved at the planning stage. Their concerns will include ensuring that, so far as possible, the normal work of the port is not disrupted.

4.2 As regards the arrival of rescue units, early notification from the RCC will enable the port authority to prepare to receive them. This may require moving vessels already in the port, which is clearly an interference with normal working; but one which port authorities should be ready to accommodate, in the interest of life-saving.

4.3 The ‘safe return to port’ concept, designed to enable a damaged ship to proceed, or to be towed, to port without the need for at-sea evacuation, is likely to raise further concerns. Space may have to be cleared for the vessel, which may not then be able to be moved on quickly once the alongside evacuation has been completed. And what if a damaged vessel sinks in the port approaches?

4.4 It is clear that life-saving must take precedence over commercial concerns, but the decision may not always be clear-cut. It may be better for the port authority, for example, to place the casualty on a berth which is less suitable from the point of view of the shoreside emergency responders. These issues should be resolved as quickly as possible, ideally by mutual agreement. But it may be that commercial concerns have to be formally over-ridden. Some States have clearly defined means of doing this, should it be required. SAR Coordinators should consider arranging for such powers to be vested in an appropriate authority if they do not already exist.

5  Coordinated responses to public and news media interest

5.1 There are other aspects of an MRO where close coordination between the maritime and shoreside parts of the response will be beneficial. One of these is as regards providing information to the public (including but not limited to friends and family of people involved in the MRO) and the news media.

5.2 This is discussed in detail in chapter 7. A secondary, but still important, reason for seeking efficient information flow between the sea and land responders — who will usually have separate public relations teams — is to ensure that information released is factual and up-to-date. To release uncoordinated information causes confusion, distress — and even more work for responders' public relations staff.

5.3 It is recommended that a single media centre be established, into which both maritime and shoreside parts of the operation can feed confirmed and coordinated information. The same coordinated approach should be adopted for information dissemination in survivor and family and friends reception centres.

6  Summary

- Good communication and coordination are required between the maritime and shoreside parts of a mass rescue operation to enable shoreside responders to prepare to receive those involved.
o The SAR Coordinator should ensure that maritime and shoreside responders plan together to this end. The Rescue Coordination Centre should be the focal point as regards communications between the at-sea and the on-shore parts of the operation.

o Shoreside responders will have a wide range of information needs in an MRO. These should be identified at the planning stage and priorities and dissemination methods agreed.

o Landing points and procedures should be agreed, and the SAR Mission Coordinator should ensure that the agreed procedures are followed and the best landing sites selected in accordance with the plan.

o The transfer of people from sea to land should be controlled and efficient: there should be neither too many landing sites nor too few.

o Port authorities will have particular concerns as regards interference in port operations. These too should be addressed as far as possible at the planning stage.

o Close coordination between the maritime and shoreside parts of the response as regards providing information to the public and the news media is highly recommended.

7  Further reading

7.1  The reader is referred to the other chapters mentioned above (chapter 17 in particular) and, in turn, to the further reading that they recommend.

7.2  Maritime and shoreside major incident planners should familiarise themselves with each other’s plans and procedures, to ensure understanding of each other’s capabilities and limitations.

7.3  The IAMSAR Manual Volume II Chapter 6.15 focuses on mass rescue operations and, at 6.15.34-36 in particular, on MRO coordination. Volume II Appendix C contains useful information on the Incident Command System.

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