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 need to have an agreed public relations strategy in a mass rescue operation
- news media relations
- direct communications with the public, including those in distress
- arrangements for friends & families
- arrangements for VIP visits

1 The need for a public relations strategy

1.1 Various aspects of ‘public relations’ are discussed in this chapter: relations with the news media; with the friends and families of those believed to be involved in the incident; with the general public; and in some instances with those who are the subjects of the mass rescue operation itself. There is also the special case of VIPs (Very Important People). A strategy should be planned to deal with each category.

1.2 The news media are an obvious source of pressure. Their response to an MRO will be rapid, intense and unremitting. The leading news media organisations are well-organised, competitive and, due to the international basis of their work and the availability of instantaneous communication systems, will be pressing for information 24 hours a day.

1.3 Friends and families of people involved in the incident – or who might be involved – will also soon be seeking information, either because they have been alerted by the news media or social networks or because they have heard direct from their loved ones, using portable communications devices. In the early stages of a major incident many more people will be worried, and therefore seeking information, than actually need to be. An incident reported as involving “an offshore oil platform” or a “passenger aircraft” or a “cruise ship” or a “ferry” will give rise to concerns among people who have friends or
relations on any such unit in the general area. Even if the unit is named early on – which is recommended – this may not help: people will probably not know the name of the ferry their loved ones are using, for example. Internet-based information systems enable worried people to find contact information for organisations likely to be involved in the response, and they will attempt to contact these organisations – quite possibly reaching offices not involved in the response at all.

1.4 Senior managers, government personnel etc will also be pressing for information. This is, in part, because they are required to know the details as soon as possible for good strategic support reasons. But it is also because they are publicly accountable, and need to make public statements which are as accurate as possible. They have a part to play in the public relations network.

1.5 Similarly, although at a slightly later stage in the event, there will be pressure to host VIP visits, at the scene of the incident or at responding organisations’ facilities. People in public positions, including senior officers of organisations involved, feel the need to be publicly seen to be doing something.

1.6 Finally – and most importantly – information should be passed to the people in distress, if possible. The Rescue Coordination Centre should keep commanders of distressed ships, aircraft or installations fully informed, and they should inform their own personnel. On passenger ships, the passengers should be kept informed by ship’s staff. In some mass rescue scenarios, however, the people involved will not have such an intermediary. If possible, ways should be found of establishing communications with them.

1.7 The pressure caused by these public relations issues can be huge. Getting information to those in distress is a priority. The news media have a job to do, and will do it whether assisted or not. Senior and public figures also have jobs to do, and are hard to put off. Worried friends and relatives present different emotional challenges, but will also be determined to acquire information. The pressure all this causes can badly effect the emergency response if not carefully planned for.

1.8 This risk of disruption, in addition to responding organisations’ own public accountability responsibilities, makes it imperative to have a public relations strategy which can be quickly implemented at the outset of an MRO. For best results, this strategy should encompass all the responding organisations. If one organisation says one thing to the news media, for example, and another says something else, both will suffer extra pressure as reporters try to get at ‘the truth’.

2 The news media

2.1 Response to news media interest must be positive, professional, and coordinated with that of other responders.

2.2 In this context it is sometimes said that one should “feed the beast – or it will eat you”. It is not a good idea to regard the news media as a ‘beast’ – they are almost always professional people simply trying to do their job – but the point of the saying is that it is no good refusing to provide information. The reporter must have information, and will find it somewhere – possibly from a less reliable source.

2.3 This does not mean that everyone a reporter contacts must give a statement! It means that there should be an agreed and reliable source of information, known to everyone in the organisation, to whom the news media should be directed. Those directly involved in the response to the incident must not be distracted from their work – but this alone does not prevent the news media and others from contacting them in search of information. They need to know who to refer the reporter to. So do other people in the organisation, even if they themselves have no response role. Just because you are in Accounts does not
mean that a reporter will not ask you for a quote. Beware of ‘ambush’ interviewing! Anyone not involved in the public relations response should quickly and politely refer the reporter to the correct contact point.

2.4 Every organisation should have a public relations office of some sort (even if only a single officer) to whom news media enquiries should be referred. If such an office is established as the sole point in the organisation at which information will be provided – and, crucially, if it gives information quickly and accurately – the great majority of the news media will use it and not trouble the people responding to the emergency itself. The ‘beast’ will go where it knows it will be fed!

2.5 All responding organisations should coordinate their statements to the news media. This does not mean that all will say the same thing, for different organisations will lead on different aspects of the response. But the basic confirmed facts of the case must be shared among the responders expeditiously – the name of the casualty vessel, for example, the number of people at risk, the units responding, where people will be taken to, and so on. Agreed news releases can be quickly circulated, or centrally coordinated, prior to publication. Later, coordinated news conferences will also be required.

2.6 Which organisations will comment on which parts of the operation should be agreed at the planning stage. For example, the maritime rescue coordination service’s public relations office can lead on the at-sea SAR operations, while the agency coordinating the response on land can lead on that aspect. Individual organisations may comment on their own role in the operation, but should pass wider questions to the coordinating offices.

2.7 Details of the people in distress, rescued etc (other than the overall numbers) should only be released by one officially recognised coordinating body, working in close cooperation with the casualty unit’s parent organisation – the ferry company, for example, in a ferry accident – and hospitals etc. No other responding organisation should give personal information to the news media.

2.8 The need to coordinate means that responding organisations’ public relations offices must be notified of an MRO as soon as possible. In the earliest stages it may be necessary to issue a holding statement in answer to enquiries, to the effect that, yes, an incident has occurred, a response is under way, and the organisation will provide further information, through its public relations office, as soon as possible. The public relations office should then be kept fully up-to-date on developments.

2.9 It should be clear to all responders that speculation in public must be avoided. Information given, whether to the news media or the general public, must be purely factual, and as factually correct as possible at the time. If a question is asked to which the answer is not yet known, simply say so. If it transpires that information given in good faith earlier was incorrect, issue a correction. Never, ever lie or mislead. If some information is considered sensitive or uncertain, simply do not comment on it.

2.10 It is common for reporters to ask questions too soon. “What caused the collision?” is an appropriate question to ask – but not when the rescue operation is still under way. “I am not going to speculate” and “It is far too early to comment on that” are perfectly legitimate answers to such enquiries – and the reporter must be made to understand that no other answer will be given no matter how many times the question is put!

2.11 Information given should also be clear. Avoid jargon, abbreviations, acronyms etc. The reporter is unlikely to be a marine expert; less likely to be a SAR expert; and least likely of all to know all the details of mass rescue operations planning and procedures. ‘Simple, clear and factual’ are the watch words.

2.12 Public relations officers may not be experts themselves. It is good practice to have designated spokespeople (‘talking heads’) available to the public relations team: officers who have the necessary
knowledge but are not otherwise involved in the operation. A selection of suitable people can be on call for this work, and should be trained for it. They can then become the authoritative face and voice of the organisation, and have a key role to play in reassuring the public that the organisation is responding effectively.

2.13 Reporters will want their own ‘angle’ on the story; something that distinguishes their report from others. This can be catered for by providing the opportunity for individual interviews with the ‘talking heads’ – but it should be noted that this approach can be resource-intensive. ‘Talking heads’ are as prone to fatigue as everyone else!

2.14 All news media require pictures, video or still, and interviews. People actually involved in the incident will place pictures and video clips on social networks or send them direct to media organisations, and may choose to talk to the news media themselves. However, unrestricted access by news media representatives to the incident scene, reception centres etc, should not be permitted, as this would be intrusive and may be hazardous and/or impede rescue operations.

2.15 One solution to the demand for pictures from the scene is for the news media to agree to ‘pool’ them: one unit is allowed into the area, under the direction of the coordinating authorities, with a number of camera-people aboard, and they share the results with their colleagues on their return. Footage collected by the SAR units themselves may also be suitable; and opportunities should be given to the news media to acquire ‘library’ images beforehand.

2.16 Public relations offices should seek to establish local representation as soon as possible. The news media will head for the scene of the incident, or as close as they can get to it, or for other focal points such as landing sites and reception centres. A media centre should be established for their use, with power, cellphone coverage, refreshments, etc, and used for briefings and news conferences. (See also chapter 24.)

2.17 The overall aim is to work with the news media so far as possible. This has considerable benefits for the organisations responding to the incident. It reduces the volume of calls from the public as well as misplaced contacts by the media themselves. It helps the responders to broadcast information: contact telephone numbers for concerned friends and families, for example. And material gathered by the news media – pictures in particular – can be a valuable information source.

3 Mayhem, Mastermind, Manhunt

3.1 News media interest tends to follow a pattern as a crisis unfolds. First comes Mayhem – an uncoordinated scramble for information as reporters try to build a general picture of what is going on; where; and who is involved. Next comes the Mastermind phase. This is characterised by a search for background information and expertise. The news media wish to present an informed, objective appraisal of the situation – to sound as if they fully understand what is going on and are in a position to analyse it. Quite quickly after that comes the Manhunt – a search for errors and someone to blame.

3.2 All three phases are difficult to handle, partly because the news media set the pace – and usually that pace is too fast to be really useful. The ‘mayhem’ would be avoidable if there was not such a race to be first with the news. Being a ‘mastermind’ should ideally wait until all the facts are known. And the ‘manhunt’ should be a matter for slow, careful enquiry by experts, not a rush to judgement by reporters within days or even hours of the incident occurring. But such comment is irrelevant: ‘mayhem, mastermind and manhunt’ will happen, so should be planned for.
3.3 The most important phase to plan for is the first. There will be less ‘mayhem’ if clear, reliable and coordinated information channels are opened up rapidly; and responders can help with the ‘mastermind’ phase by providing their own expertise via the same channels. A good prior relationship with the news media will help here.

3.4 It is also worth remembering that serious news media organisations want to get their facts right. Their timescale is too short, but within that timescale they will want to work with the experts if they are allowed to. One famous international news organisation used to have the unofficial motto that “we are not wrong for long”. Helping the news media get things right is to everyone’s benefit. This means that, if resources allow, response organisations should monitor at least the main news media output, and act quickly to correct any mistakes or misunderstandings.

4 Direct communications with the public

4.1 Websites and other social media enable response organisations to communicate with the general public, worried families and friends, and possibly even with people directly involved in the operation. The latter may also be reached by radio, satellite communications, telephone or loudhailer.

4.2 The most important group to communicate with are those directly involved in the incident. Survivors frequently say that such communications were lacking: they were not kept informed about what was going on even though it was possible for them to be so. MROs often require people to wait for long periods. Like delayed passengers at an airport, they will be much easier to manage if they are kept properly informed of the reasons for the delay and what is being done about it. They may also have important information, of use to the responders. Ideally, communication should be two-way. Personnel should be assigned to communicate with those being rescued, if possible, to ensure that they are kept up-to-date, and also to collect any useful information they may have.

4.3 The next most important group are the families and friends. They urgently need clear, accurate and up-to-date information, and the internet will often be the first place they go to look for it. Response organisations can plan to make use of this important facility, either posting information or directing readers to where it may be found. Some organisations maintain ‘dark’ web pages which can go live in an emergency, getting the tone right as well as giving clear and useful information about the incident. In some situations arrangements can be made for people involved in the operation to communicate with their friends and families direct: a source of relief to both sides.

4.4 Reception centres, both for survivors and for families and friends, should also be planned with communications and clear and frequently updated information arrangements in mind. Direct communications facilities and suitable spokespeople and liaison officers are again the best options here, but information boards and screens are also very useful. (See also chapter 25.)

5 Families and friends

5.1 Worried people are likely to head for landing sites, if within range, or, as noted, will be searching for news of their loved ones by any means available to them. While some will be worrying unnecessarily (because their loved one is not involved in the incident at all), all need careful management. Apart from the obvious humanitarian need to treat such people decently, they may also have information of value to the response organisations.
5.2 A lead organisation should be established at the planning stage to gather information from people contacting the responders and to link them, if possible, with the people they are seeking. Friends and families travelling to landing sites should be accommodated in reception centres. They should not be allowed to mingle with survivors in an uncontrolled way, as this will inevitably lead to confusion. They should be kept fully informed, and reunited in a controlled manner once the necessary checks have been made. The need to respect privacy is one reason for this but, from a SAR perspective, the most important reason is the need to account for everyone who may have been involved in the incident.

6 VIP visits

6.1 Very Important People may well become involved, particularly at reception or response facilities. Their involvement should be pre-planned in general, so as to ensure that their visit does not adversely affect the response operation. Personnel actively engaged in the response should not be distracted. Expert escorts not otherwise engaged in the response should be used.

6.2 VIPs may not understand that their involvement might have adverse effects. Most will want to avoid this – and no-one is so important that difficulties of this sort cannot be pointed out, and avoided!

7 Summary

7.1 The aim of this chapter has been to highlight some of the public relations issues likely to arise in a mass rescue operation, not to give detailed guidance on how to handle them in particular cases. That will be a matter for local planning. A mass rescue operation is, of course, primarily about rescuing large numbers of people – but it is not only about that. Relations with those involved, with the news media, concerned families and friends and the general public, together with public relations-related issues such as VIP visits, must be carefully planned for too. To do otherwise is to ask for trouble – and in some circumstances that trouble will affect the success of the MRO itself.

7.2 As with all aspects of MRO planning, the public relations elements are resource-intensive, particularly as regards people. Public relations officers preparing and coordinating the release of information, spokespeople, escorts and support staff will all be required. The demands placed on responders by the public relations element need to be balanced with the other demands made of them in an MRO.

7.3 The following are important points to consider.

- Plan to communicate: consider
  - those involved in the incident
  - the news media
  - friends and families of those involved
  - the general public
  - VIPs

- Ensure that everyone in your own organisation knows who the public relations point of contact is, and that all public relations matters are passed to that point of contact

- Coordinate with the other responders’ public relations points of contact: agree which organisation will lead on which subjects

- Make sure that your public messages are simple, clear, factual – and agreed

- Be positive and professional: do not speculate or mislead
- Have a pool of knowledgeable spokespeople who are not otherwise involved in the operation
- Establish a public relations presence, including a news media centre, near the incident scene
- Agree arrangements to acquire and share images.

8 Further reading

8.1 See IAMSAR Manual, Volume II, Chapter 1.10.5-6, Chapter 2.37 and Chapter 6.15.42-49; and Volume III, Section 22, ‘Public Relations’.

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