

FOREWORD HELD BY SIR CARL DECALUWE
FOLLOWING THE INTERNATIONAL FIELD EXERCISE
MIRG-EX THAT TOOK PLACE ON TUESDAY THE 11 AND
THE 12 OF OCTOBER 2016

Bruges, November 23th 2016

Dear everyone present here today

Ladies and gentlemen

On eleven and twelve October of this year we held a MIRG-EX field exercise at the North Sea and in the port of Zeebrugge.

The preparations for the field exercise MIRG-EX took almost two years and involved more than 500 people.

The centre of the exercise was the 161 meters long ferry Oscar Wilde from the company Irish Ferries. In reality 1500 people can take place on the ferry, but for this exercise, the number of passengers was restricted to 150 persons. Every participant had a role either as a victim or as a rescue worker.

The exercise scenario was divided into two major parts: during the first day the exercise took place for the most part at the North Sea with MIRG-teams from The

Netherlands, France, England and Belgium as main protagonists. The MIRG-teams of these four countries were trained in the same way and operate with the same operational procedures and materials, so in reality they should be able to cooperate perfectly. The purpose of their commitment is always avoiding large scale evacuations at sea ... a situation that is in reality and in all circumstances, even with good weather, much more dangerous and should be avoided at any cost!

On the second day the exercise took place in the port of Zeebrugge. Zeebrugge was the assigned emergency port for the (disastrous) ship in need and all the passengers could be disembarked here. In that way the exercise got immediately a different character: the command was transferred to the 'fire department on land' and the emergency services ashore practiced the evacuation, registration and the care of large groups of victims.

Fire on a ship ... as good a ship at sea as a ship in port ... it's a nightmare for everybody who's active in shipping!

First of all I want to congratulate everybody who was directly or indirectly involved in the preparation and performance of this large scale field exercise, for their

commitment, dedication and great job they did to make a success out of this exercise!

I would like to use the occasion to introduce you shortly to the “sea part” of my job as governor of the province of West-Flanders, bordering the North Sea.

As governor of West-Flanders I have amongst others the authority for the emergency planning in my province, this as well on land as at sea.

The Belgian part of our North Sea, an area of 3600 square kilometres, is comparable to the surface of a province! On this surface, there’s an enormous range of activities, both at sea and in the water.

I don’t have to tell you, because obviously you are familiar with this fact ... but the part of the North Sea in front of our Belgian coast happens to be one of the busiest shipping routes in the world!

Daily hundred of ships pass our coast, going from giant oil tankers, chemical tankers, cargo’s, container ships to huge cruise ships with sometimes thousands of passengers aboard. The distance from the ships to our beache is only a 1 to 3 (few) kilometres.

Besides, there are also the dredgers, fishing boats, motor yachts, sailing ships ... And also there are the wind farms, the military training areas, the areas for nature conservation and aquaculture, the areas where gravel and sand are extracted, ...

Moreover, our North Sea is also covered with sandbanks, wrecks and a giant network of pipelines and cables.

And then I didn't even mention our coast ... a tourist site where on beautiful and less beautiful days diverse water sportsmen like surfers, kayakers, divers, bathers, ... have their activities

It is therefore not surprisingly that our North Sea is called the 11 province of Belgium.

As governor of the province of West-Flanders, bordering the North Sea, I am responsible for the smooth and safe progress of all these activities, together with a lot of other public authorities, both on Flemish as well as on a federal level.

I consider it one of my core tasks to be well prepared in case a disaster should happen in our North Sea ... because let's be honest ... despite all the preventive efforts accident will happen.

Every year there are approximately 60 to 70 incidents/accidents in Belgian waters, fortunately most of them result in just limited damage. Unfortunately, others are much more tragic ...

On March 6th 2017 it will be exactly 30 years ago that no less than 193 people lost their lives in a disaster with the ferry boat 'Herald of Free Enterprise' in front of the coast of Zeebrugge. This dramatic event was then

the direct reason from my predecessor to develop an emergency plan for the North Sea.

Last year we had the collision between the Dutch cargo ship *Flinterstar* and the gas carrier '*Al Oraiq*' which led to the release of a significant amount of heavy fuel

Since the development of the first 'emergency plan for the North Sea', the insights in emergency planning have evolved thoroughly and after the royal decree on emergency and intervention planning was published in 2006, this plan was reformed in what's actually on the table: the general emergency and intervention plan North Sea, called with an acronym the GEIP North Sea.

This GEIP organises, the emergency planning regarding the North Sea and can be considered as a model of answer to all possible emergency situations and incidents in the North Sea requiring some kind of coordination and/or management. It's meant as a guidance for the procedures that must be followed and the measures of protection to be taken. It describes the tasks to be executed by the different services involved, each within the borders of their own legal and regulatory powers.

As provincial governor, I am responsible for the

coordination of incidents in the North Sea, according article 26 of the collaboration agreement between the federal state and the Flemish region.

As I said before incidents take place in the North Sea with relatively great regularity. Fortunately, not all of them require coordination. The GEIP North Sea determines very clearly when an incident is really to be considered as an emergency situation, that in addition also requires coordination. As an example, I think of the obvious situation of a collision between one or more vessels, but it can also be about a fire or an explosion aboard of a vessel, a serious case of pollution, a terrorist attack, ...

And then there are the so-called specific risks, as the cruise ships that are a challenge on their own with their many thousands of passengers ... 130 cruise ships arrive every year in the port of Zeebrugge alone. This was the specific reason that we decided to develop a separate special emergency and intervention plan, so to speak an addition to the GEIP North Sea.

It's clear that with major incidents at sea the resources of the country involved will soon be insufficient and help and assistance will be asked from neighbouring countries.

The MIRG project is the perfect example of a cooperation between four European countries to deal

together with one of the maritime risks at sea. Each country can never have on individual basis enough teams educated and trained to manage these sometimes very long-lasting incidents.

And there are still a few challenges ahead of us to which we still have no answer today.

Think of the necessity of a medical team aboard a ship. Today, only the French marine has one trained medical team that can be deployed. Unfortunately, this is based in Marseille, this means we have to search for a different solution for an immediate deployment. Another, at least as big and also highly topical is the approach of terrorism ... also at sea, we can be confronted with it ... the inevitable international aspect makes cooperation beyond the country's borders absolutely necessary.

Emergency planning never ends with the development of a "paper plan" ... on the contrary!

The practicing of the procedures to follow and the agreements that have been made is a crucial part because it's the only way to verify if the developed documents also work in practice. It allows absorbing and agreement of the working methods.

I don't have to tell you here today that well educated

and trained aid workers play a very important role. When an emergency situation occurs at sea, they are the first ones to go on the spot and to be confronted with the disaster and the victims.

Hence the importance of the MIRG exercise we just had: it offers an opportunity to implement and test the acquired knowledge, skills and insights, as if it were reality.

Thanks to this exercise the different emergency services and disciplines – beyond the country's borders – had the opportunity to get to know each other better, to practice and work together, appreciate each other ... and all of this in a “safe” environment! I think this is the ideal preparation for a possible real emergency situation!

Practice makes perfect ... we all know it and for those who are well prepared, the practice/reality can only be easy!

This gathering today, this final conference, is organised to inform you what this exercise has taught us and which consequences will arise from it.

Emergency and intervention planning is clearly an evolutionary data: we must stay vigilant all the time

and we need to adjust, reform and refine our plans on a permanent basis. Your presence here today shows me that I'm not alone in this thought and that you are also willing to engage further in the professionalization of the emergency planning, that you will continue to think, learn, and not unimportant, to engage in networking!

I hope you'll go home tonight with the same good feeling as I got at the end of this two-day exercise. That you'll have later on a first step of reply to the questions you perhaps still had, and most of all that you'll remain enthusiastic in the future to continue to practice with us.

I thank you very much again for your selfless commitment and your fantastic cooperation in the run-up to and during this exercise.

I wish you a lot of success with all your further activities.