

Maritime Incident Response

The Scheldt provides access to the ports of Zeeland as well as the ports of Antwerp and Ghent. Navigation here is often tricky as a result of tidal movements, bends in the river, and the sometimes narrow fairway. The Scheldt Radar Chain and well-trained pilots are making sure that ocean-going vessels are able to transport their cargoes safely. However, sometimes things go wrong and prompt action is crucial when that happens.

In 2009, a gas oil tanker bogged down in front of the Vlissingen boulevard and in the summer of 2008, seaside visitors had to leave the Dishoek beach when a gas tanker ran aground. Fortunately, the consequences remained limited to material damages. Such incidents are wake-up calls for emergency services. They have to be ready to act at all times in order to minimise any damage to the public, the environment and the economy.

'Just standing on the boulevard in Vlissingen, watching the ships go by on their way to their various destinations, loaded with containers and hazardous substances, makes you realise that a regional crisis organisation must be prepared.' These words come from Gerrie Ruis, director of Safety Region Zeeland since 1 August of last year. The safety region is a form of collaboration in which all Zeeland municipalities are represented. Among its responsibilities are crisis control and disaster management, fire services and medical assistance in case of calamities. Maritime and nautical safety are among the organisation's spearheads. 'We want to excel in this area, because it is necessary for Zeeland and all ships visiting our harbours. And also to put our region on the map, both nationally and internationally. During the past couple of years, we have achieved quite a lot already, together with regional partners such as Zeeland Seaports and the Department of Public Works. Today, two special command vessels are patrolling the Scheldt. In case of emergencies on board ships, these will coordinate assistance on location. In addition, we have made sure there is ample fire-fighting capacity present.'

Cross-border collaboration

'Currently, we are training special fire-fighting teams called Maritime Incident Response Groups (MIRGs), which are to quickly and efficiently control any fires and chemical incidents that may occur on board ships. It is a specialism that has been practised by fire brigades in the UK for a number of years already. In order to apply this knowledge in our region, we initiated the European Interreg Project.



Gerrie Ruis, director Safety Region Zeeland

Next to the Kent Fire and Rescue Service, we invited fire brigades from Belgium and France to this project. The Province of Zeeland is a partner as well. As a relatively small safety region, these types of projects simply cannot be realised alone; we have to look for forms of cross-border collaboration. In addition, if there are any problems on the Scheldt River, our neighbours also suffer the consequences. By cleverly collaborating, we learn from each other and achieve unity in execution. It's something I strongly believe in. This way, we can complement each other's activities, help each other and approach calamities in a more effective manner. Knowing that things are well organised provides peace of mind. Not only for ourselves, but also – and perhaps even more so – for the shipping companies that visit our region.'

(Continued on page 26)

Fast and efficient

The project MIRG-EU is to ensure that the Zeeland Safety Region obtains a MIRG team for the fast and efficient control of calamities around the Scheldt delta. The team can also be deployed in other locations in the Netherlands and abroad. In practice, this means that well-trained teams will quickly get fire incidents and other emergencies under control, so that the ship concerned may be taken to a safe haven, whether or not with the assistance of a salvage company. This way, many problems can be avoided. First of all, there is the evacuation. Getting people to disembark at sea is a dangerous procedure. There are so many things that can go wrong. We will minimise the consequences for these people and for the environment. In addition, we will minimise the obstruction to the fairway.'

Deployability throughout Europe

'During the first year, we have made all necessary preparations. We have performed a general risk analysis and an analysis of our own Zeeland waterways. What types of ships navigate these waters? What are the risks MIRGs may come up against? With these risks clearly mapped out, it became clear which types of people and means were needed for the teams. Based on the answers, we set up the teams. One team comprises twelve members. In total, we are training three teams; 36 people in all. With teams in four countries, we can combat prolonged incidents. The men are equipped with special tools. This equipment is identical for all teams, so that Dutch hoses fit English connectors, and vice versa. We have also drawn up a draft Operations Manual, which describes the operation of the teams. This year, we will be training and exercising together. The project will be concluded in 2014 with a major international exercise, in which all knowledge and skills of the partners are jointly put to practice. The end of the project will hopefully lead to something larger. We do not intend to keep our expertise to ourselves. Large shipping incidents are rare. It would be good if our MIRGs could be deployed in a greater area. This way, the teams and their members can keep their knowledge up to date, while ensuring adequate emergency assistance for other regions as well. European recognition, that's what I am aiming for!'

