

MAJOR ACCIDENTS AND DISASTER RESPONSE: THE SWISS PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The coordination of the emergency preparedness towards disasters and major accidents takes place into the context of a global security policy. The purpose of this policy is to guarantee the survival of the population and to protect vital installations within a given area (state, region, canton, district, prefecture).

According to the Swiss law - except in the case of a nuclear accident - the authorities of the cantons and communes are in charge of disaster relief in their jurisdiction. In addition, various instruments subordinated to Federal Departments (i.e. ministries) can be required either to function as experts or - on request and while respecting the principle of subsidiarity - to contribute to disaster response. Also in peace-time, parts of the army (rescue troops, engineers, medical units, ...) or parts of the means of the civil defence may be involved.

The political authorities in charge entrust cantonal management staffs or parts of them (crisis management staffs) with the mission of managing with disasters or major accidents response.

Disaster response must be considered as a global concept which does not just include immediate relief (rescue). Prevention, precaution and preparedness must be coordinated within an « integrated approach ». The COMCAT - which is a Swiss official commission of experts dealing with disaster response - provides opportunities for mutual exchanges of experiences. These experts are people active in the field of prevention (research, high schools, insurances, humanitarian organisations, ...), in ministries, at the federal

Chancellery, in the cantons as well as in many associations dealing more or less extensively with disaster relief.

In accordance with Switzerland's federal state organisation, each canton has worked out its own structure for disaster response (examples are provided in the paper). Although each of them has its own peculiarities and the available means can vary, several local events in the past few years have allowed them to give proof of their efficiency (Randa/VS, 1991; Brig/VS and Ticino, 1993; Lausanne/VD, 29.6.1994).

INTRODUCTION

« It is in borderline situations only that man become conscious of himself » (Karl Jaspers)

The rapid growth of civilisation in many parts of the world, the technological development and their combined effects on the environment add new types of threats to the dangers that have existed at all times, thus making societies more vulnerable.

In her archives, Switzerland keeps the records that remind her of nature suddenly becoming hostile, such as landslides, rock falls, floods, avalanches, etc., from among I may mention the flooding of Brig, in the Valais, and that of the canton Ticino, in 1993.

Other major occurrences have left their mark on our memories, making us more aware of the new types of dangers:

- Major chemical accidents (fire resulting from the burning of a chemical product warehouse at

Schweizerhalle, near Basle, in 1986);

- Passenger aircraft crashes such as the one occurring at Stadelberg, in the Kloten area, in 1990;
- Train accidents involving inflammables or chemicals, such as in the Zurich suburb of Affoltern or in Lausanne, both in 1993.

We are limiting ourselves to a few major occurrences that have hit Switzerland but could obviously add those that have made themselves felt across the planet, such as Seveso, Tchernobyl, Bophal, etc.

The high population density of Switzerland, particularly in certain sections of its territory, to which must be added all the risks inherent in nature or resulting from the use of technology, cause the topic « disaster » to enter our minds with ever greater alarm.

Disaster of various dimensions and different probability do in fact combine to form a permanent set of risks.

Considering the purposes which the Swiss Confederation has given itself, as stated in article 2 of its Constitution, and taking into account the possibilities and dangers inherent in the global interdependence as well as conditions in Switzerland itself, the *1990 Report on Swiss Security Policy* enumerates the five aims of that security policy. These read as follows:

- to guarantee peace under conditions of freedom and political independence;
- to guarantee our freedom to act;
- to protect the country's population and the foundations of its existence;
- to defend the nation's territory;
- to contribute to international stability, primarily in Europe.

To protect the country's population and the foundations of its existence: « *It is our intention to protect within the range of our possibilities our population and the foundations of its existence from all dangers, be they political, military, of natural or man-made origin.* » (1990 Report, page 30)

BEGINNINGS

As to the measures taken in view of possible disasters, a field in which - as in many other areas - the Swiss cantons have large powers, constant co-ordination on a federal level is indispensable.

In our case, the following needs have been stated:

a) On a federal level

Creating conditions that will encourage a better co-operation at all levels, i.e., with the cantons, with adjoining regions of neighbouring countries, with the countries of the European Union, as well as with international organisations.

b) On the level of the cantons

- Unifying principles and documents.
- Exchanging minutes and conclusions drawn from certain occurrences.
- Making sure that instruction and training are based on uniform guidelines (« *unité de doctrine* »).

It is with reference to these elements that it was decided at the end of 1989 to put up a federal commission called « *Commission for the coordination of preparatory measures in view of disasters* », better known as « COMCAT ».

As the COMCAT was being constituted, care was taken to include into it as complete a range of organisations, institutions and government offices as possible that might profitably contribute to these efforts.

TASKS

Although the responsibility for the handling of disasters lies with the cantons and municipalities, many federally empowered institutions are also confronted with such tasks.

The means in the hands of the Swiss General Defense, especially those of the Federal Office for Civil Protection and the armed forces can be put to use in times of peace if and when the ordinary means prove insufficient, whereby the principle of subsidiarity must not be encroached upon.

The tasks to be undertaken will be, on the one hand, to study what possibilities there are to improve the ability of the Swiss Confederation to intervene in cases where a disaster reaches national proportions or where help

across national borders is required. On the other hand, the problems related to rescue work in the case of disaster (« Civil protection » in EU terminology) make it indispensable to put oneself in a perspective of « Euro-compatibility ».

To which must be added the Swiss willingness to participate actively and realistically in the International Decade for the Reduction of Natural Disasters (UNEP / IDNDR) launched by the UNO.

The tasks the COMCAT is entrusted with have been defined as follows:

a) In general terms:

To guarantee a co-ordinated approach to the preparation of the various measures aimed at handling disasters and situations of need resulting from natural causes or from technological activities, not including damage resulting from war.

To develop co-operation between federal offices and agencies, those of the cantons, the armed forces, the various rescue bodies and scientific institutions.

To create and maintain connections with those agencies of international organisations as deal with disasters, viz.

- UNEP (United Nations Environmental Program)
- UN DHA / RCB (United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs / Relief Coordination Branch)

- b) To decide on the competence each body has in various cases of intervention.
- c) To draft a Federal handbook on the ways in which to handle each type of disaster.
- d) To collect and analyse the minutes of major rescue operations that occur both in Switzerland and other countries. To make known the results of such analyses to the cantons and the General Defence partners.
- e) To decide, together with the relevant government offices, on what and how much each party involved will have to contribute at an international level, and to co-ordinate the preparations of cross-border mutual assistance.
- f) To co-ordinate research and development pertaining to the successful handling of disasters (e.g. « Polyprojekt » at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich: Risk and Safety in Technical Systems).

- g) To create a documentary service (with its own data base) whose task it will be to keep federal and cantonal authorities permanently informed.

In all its activities, the COMCAT will have to conform to the principles laid down in the Swiss Federal Constitution, viz.

- **legality,**
- **subsidiarity**
- **and proportionateness.**

COMCAT: MAKE-UP AND ORGANISATION

COMCAT includes representative from following bodies:

- all Federal Departments (= Ministries) and the Federal Chancellery;
- all cantons;
- the Association of Swiss municipalities;
- the Swiss Federation of Fire Brigades;
- the Swiss Red Cross;
- the Council of the Swiss Federal Institutes of Technology;
- the Swiss Accident Insurance Institution;
- the Conference of the heads of cantonal Police corps.

The Commission meets twice yearly. Its executive staff, comprising its president as well as the representatives of the Swiss Federal Administration, meets, on average, once every three months.

In order to carry out properly the tasks assigned to it, the COMCAT has been given its own permanent secretariat comprising the following working groups:

- **Research and documentation**
- **International co-operation**
- **Assistance given to the cantons**
- **Warning, alarming, rules of behaviour**
- **Standardisation**

ORGANISATION OF THE STAFFS OF THE CANTONS

Within their sovereign territory and the security-policy tasks entrusted to them by the federal authorities, the cantons have to plan, prepare and implement the

measures required to master exceptional situations. Particularly in the case of locally limited crises and disasters, cantons and communes are competent as long as there is no need for central action and no federal competences apply; the latter is the case for radioactive contamination and epidemics.

The federal authorities support the cantons in their preparatory efforts to deal with disasters, particularly in those cases where sufficient means are lacking or where it is desirable to act in unison.

The prerequisite to successfully master exceptional situations together is a good flow of information. It takes place at three levels:

- 1) between federal and cantonal administrations,
- 2) between the emergency staff groups at the federal and cantonal level,
- 3) and between the Federal Council and the cantonal governments.

If the need to act is very urgent, the canton's participation in the decision-making process may be limited.

In order to act in the interest of the entire country at all levels, close contacts between federal and cantonal authorities are necessary. Mainly in exceptional situations, the latter depend on an early knowledge of the Federal Council's estimate of the situation, on the government's goals, and on the measures prescribed by the Federal Council, so they can solve the problem at their level adequately in time.

In order to master exceptional situations, each canton has formed its own civilian staff. It answers directly to the cantonal government and cooperates closely with the corresponding military staff of the territorial organisation. Larger cantons have similar directives agencies at the regional and district level, in addition to the cantonal directive staff.

Within federal and cantonal legislation, the communes are responsible for planning, preparing and implementing the required measures enabling them to solve the problems arising at their level in exceptional situations (mainly disasters). For this purpose the communal authorities form a directive agency (communal directive staff) which, according to its instructions, coordinates the preparation of decisions and the employment of means.

In extraordinary situations, there is the danger that instruments of strategic leadership fail or that their means of communication cease to function. In such cases Swiss federalism with its partly overlapping organizational structures proves to be a sort of safety net: if the top structure of one area breaks down, only a comparatively narrow sector is without leadership. Adjoining areas or subordinate levels which are still functioning can bridge the gap as deputies and assure the continuity of leadership. Here cantons and communes have an extremely important role to play.

The army also makes an important contribution to the protection and conservation of our basic needs. Dangers exceeding the possibilities of civilian means have to be mastered: major disasters caused by nature or man require the deployment of troops and suitable heavy equipment, efficient organisation and prepared management structures.

THE COMCAT IN 1995

As the members of the COMCAT involved in it are on friendly terms with each other, their work has produced results, viz.

a) Internally

- through the forming of working groups;
- through the drafting of a preliminary project concerning a handbook on federal activities;
- through assigning various tasks to the right people with the aim to optimise the co-ordination of the federal government offices involved.

b) Externally

- by establishing contacts with foreign offices and organisations dealing with disasters situations;
- by participating in a cross-border exercise in 1993 (« REGIOKAT », Basle);
- by their willingness to receive and give out information.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

A growing population, the concentration and growth of industry and the services, an ever-increasing number of buildings, all this adds to the vulnerability of our vital systems.

The consequences of disasters can and must be attenuated by preventive measures based on research, the importance of which is beyond any doubt.

Fortunately, researchers in the field show great interest in these activities and I would mention as an example the **National Research Programme n° 31** (PNR 31) financed by the Swiss National Research Foundation.

Related to these activities, data bases have been created in several countries and on different levels (in Belgium, on a European level, in Federal Republic of Germany, on a provincial, or Land, level). This is an important aspect of disaster prevention deserving co-operation.

Regarding preparatory work, standardising the equipment deserves our attention for it will make assistance much easier. We are convinced of the usefulness of the standardising efforts made on a European level by the rescue equipment manufacturers.

All these activities pertaining to the prevention of disasters and the preparation of assistance in case of disaster add up to a heavy economic burden which may be too great for some states to carry alone. This is why it seems realistic to us to do everything that encourages co-operation on an international level, both in Europe and beyond.

CONCLUSION

As the risks resulting from major disasters tend to reach global proportions, the efforts aimed at finding adequate solutions must be hampered by the erection of dividing walls nor by a spirit of isolationism; what is required is a willingness of societies and states to handle crises and disasters by overcoming political borders.

COMCAT will not only seek to accomplish solid short term goals but is willing to place its activities in a context of growing international co-operation.

