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SAR-WG: Joint Search and Rescue Exercise in Antarctica

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1.0 Introduction

On February 8, 2013 a joint Search and Rescue (SAR) Live Exercise between IAATO Operator, Holland America Line NV and Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC) Chile, took place in the Antarctic Peninsula. The exercise was developed and run by Holland America Line, NV (HAL) and is believed to be the first live SAR exercise involving a tour operator and the MRCC authorities in Antarctica.

The SAR exercise was subsequently replayed as a desktop Facilitated Training Session as part of a SAR Workshop held immediately after IAATO's 24th Meeting.

2.0 Incident Scenario

The exercise scenario involved MV *Veendam* cruising near the northern entrance of the Antarctic Sound, 12NM west of D'Urville Island. In the scenario, the vessel was carrying 1250 passengers and 582 crew. The hypothetical situation involved a fire on two deck levels within passenger accommodations that eventually effected two fire zones on the ship. Also the damages, theoretically rendering the main and crew galley unserviceable and 252 guests without cabins. As the scenario developed there were nine persons in need of a medical evacuation, and seven simulated fatalities. After a couple of hours, the simulated fire was brought under control, plans were in place to evacuate the hypothetical passengers in need of medical attention via the Teniente R. Marsh airstrip on King George Island and the decision had been made for the ship to make a direct course for Ushuaia, Argentina.

The players in the exercise included the MV *Veendam* 'live' in Antarctica, HAL's Emergency Response Centre (HAL-ERC), MRCC Chile, MRCC Punta Arenas, MRSC Fildes (as under the PANC agreement it was Chile's time to coordinate the rescue) and IAATO. In addition, communications were established with MRCC Ushuaia, MV *Delphin*, MV *Ocean Nova*, MV *Hanseatic*, RV *Polar Stern*, HMS *Protector*, ATF *Lautaro*, and Brazilian vessel *Ary Rongel*.

3.0 Workshop

On 25th April 2013 IAATO hosted a full day SAR workshop immediately following the closure of the 24th IAATO Meeting in Punta Arenas, Chile. David Edwards from the US Coast Guard chaired the workshop. The 75 workshop attendees included passenger ship captains, ship management companies, government rescue officials from Chile, Argentina and the United States, COMNAP, tour operators, logistics managers, expedition leaders, IAATO staff and others.

The morning session involved presentations on SAR in Antarctica from a variety of perspectives including the operator, IAATO, COMNAP and MRCC Chile. The opportunity to share the different perspectives was extremely beneficial in improving mutual understanding and presented an important opportunity to exchange ideas on how to improve communications between the players.

The afternoon session of the workshop involved a replay of elements of the 8th February exercise, with participants acting as 'incident commanders' to work through the decision making processes.

4.0 Outcomes

As expected, the exercise and workshop allowed for lessons to be learned at many levels. For example:

Training – both the live exercise and the workshop desktop replay provide an important opportunity for both operators and responders, as they not only allow for familiarisation and a better mutual understanding but are also invaluable in testing the systems that are in place, identifying issues and challenges and coming up with potential solutions.

Operator perspective – the exercise highlighted a number of issues related to internal communication challenges, the functionality of the IAATO network and the need for regular communication exchange with all the players. e.g. A suggestion to instigate a schedule of communication updates resulted from this exercise.

Resource availability – a better understanding of the information and resources available in an emergency situation was also highlighted. This was evident on multiple levels, from the knowledge that a number of IAATO operators have Emergency Response Centres, which are activated as soon as an incident occurs and can be used to support the work of the MRCC, to the understanding of the information held in IAATO databases, for example the additional assets within the IAATO fleet.

Media handling – while the media element was not replayed in the workshop scenario, during the live exercise this element was played out. The value in coordinating the press releases, or at minimum aligning media approaches, between the MRCC and the operator and/or IAATO was apparent and considered an important element.

Building Trust - The exercise and the workshop also helped to build trust between the different players. One inevitable question in an emergency is at what point should the MRCCs be alerted. The consequences of such an action can give pause to those making decisions, particularly in the very initial stages of an emergency when they are trying to establish the extent of the problem. However, there are clear advantages to the MRCC's being notified as soon as possible regarding a potential problem so that they can start to organise their response.

5.0 Next Steps

The experience of both the exercise and the workshop has resulted in a number of proposed next steps to continue to build trust, understanding and relationships. These include:

1. MRCC Chile are interested in developing a protocol between MRCC's and IAATO operators that outlines how operators on shore, including those with ERCs, can support the MRCC in their work (noting that there are international legal requirements under which the MRCC must coordinate and facilitate the response to an emergency).
2. Develop a mechanism to enable coordination of media interactions between MRCC Chile, operators and IAATO.
3. Review the information held in IAATO databases on vessels and how IAATO can better support the MRCC in their work.
4. Conduct regular exercises with other MRCCs and other players to continue to build relationships IAATO would very much welcome these opportunities.

While items 1 and 2 are noted as primarily being between IAATO and MRCC Chile, both parties would be pleased to extend these to other MRCCs if desirable.