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The first ever EU exercise to look at establishing emergency refugee camps for people displaced by disasters or other events was recently held in the Republic of Macedonia, writes **Vlatko Jovanovski**

European candidate countries and potential candidate countries including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, are exposed to a variety of natural hazards including floods, earthquakes, fires, storms, droughts, extreme weather events and landslides, which can overwhelm their individual and collective capacities and have cross-border effects.

The need to enhance co-operation in civil protection with candidate countries and potential candidates of the Western Balkans and Turkey (referred to as 'partner countries') was recognised as far back as 2008. Since then, steps have been taken in order to reduce the vulnerability of the partner countries to natural and man-made disasters at local, regional and national levels, as well as within the region.

To this end, IPA Campex 2015 was held this June in the Republic of Macedonia. This was the first ever exercise organised in Europe to focus on planning and assessing refugee camps, establishing settlements and running operations.

The Republic of Macedonia has experience in camp management from the 1999 Kosovo crisis, when it had to accommodate more than 340,000 refugees in its territory. Approximately 100,000 of the refugees were accommodated in refugee camps, including camp Stenkovec 1 (30,000 refugees), camp Stenkovec 2 (32,000 refugees) and camp Cegrane (42,000 refugees).

The first step was to locate those involved in refugee camp management back in 1999. Next, we had to identify the existing legislation and national standards dealing with camp management and then prepare the national participating team. All three steps presented difficulties, which was the first lesson identified from this phase of exercise preparations. We discovered that institutional memory is very weak among the key organisations involved in the Kosovo crisis and it was hard to track down the right people.

Another learning point was that although there are many organisations responsible for camp management in Macedonia, not much quality was brought to the process. We also discovered limited legislation or national standards dealing with camp management.

This lacuna followed us throughout the exercise, leading us to use internationally accepted standards like the Sphere Project – *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*, Camp Management Toolkit developed by the Norwegian Refugee Council, the *UNHCR Handbook for emergencies* and, of course, the web page of the Global Cluster on Camp Co-ordination and Camp Management. We also benefited from input from the country office of the International Organisation for Migration.

The scenario was as follows. On June 13 at 08:30hrs local time, an

Emergency camp management



One of the lessons identified early on when organising this exercise is that institutional memory is very weak among the key organisations that were involved in camp management during the Kosovo crisis, despite the Republic of Macedonia accommodating more than 340,000 refugees in its territory

Protection and Rescue Directorate, Macedonia

earthquake struck the northern parts of the Republic of Macedonia. The epicentre of the quake was in Skopje. The most damaging tremors occurred 10km north-east of the capital. Less severe, but still damaging tremors occurred in all areas around the capital.

Skopje registered three consecutive earthquakes, with the strongest registering M6.4. The earthquake was felt across the entire state, with ground movement from the main shock lasting for approximately 45 seconds in some areas. Aftershocks of varying intensity were felt across the region for several days, causing further damage to already weakened structures. Tremors were felt as far away as the eastern part of the state. Preliminary information estimated 1,310 casualties, 2,890 injuries requiring hospitalisation and 20,000 internally displaced people (IDPs).

On June 13, the Government, via the Protection and Rescue Directorate, activated the EU Civil Protection Mechanism, requesting USAR teams and medical assistance. On June 14, eight international teams with a total number of 413 rescuers and 34 rescue dogs arrived in Skopje. In the meantime Skopje was divided into 12 sectors operated jointly by the local rescue units and the international teams.

On June 15, the Protection and Rescue Directorate (PRD) sent an additional request for assistance to the EU, asking for help with camp management. The Government identified six locations around Skopje for IDP camps, one of them being Vizbegovo, which needed to accommodate 2,500 people for

six months. Again eight countries (Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Germany, Turkey and Italy) responded to the request and sent their support to Skopje.

The exercise scenario was introduced to the Protection and Rescue HQ on June 15, when it had to send a second request for assistance to analyse the offers of assistance and co-ordinate the arrival of the international teams. Protection and Rescue HQ was composed of 26 people representing 14 different institutions. The HQ continued its operations until the end of the exercise on June 19, dealing not only with camp management, but also with other events from the global scenario, which provided added value to the exercise itself.

A camp management office (CMO) was established by the Protection and Rescue HQ in the Vizbegovo camp. The CMO's role was to liaise with the EU Civil Protection Team and the international teams in setting up the camp and managing the activities.

The realism of the exercise was provided by 250 IDPs – volunteers provided from eight national NGOs – who were accommodated in the camp on the third day of the exercise. To recreate certain dynamics, some of the volunteers were tasked with challenging the teams. They were told what they needed to do, with precise timings.

Setting up a camp for IDPs after a large earthquake requires constant assessment, co-ordination and planning. The location of the camp itself is a prerequisite for all further actions. So the location must have sufficient space, appropriate topography

and infrastructure in place. Consideration must be paid to the needs of the IDPs and to managing processes in the camp.

One of the most important considerations is that of the location's ownership. For this exercise, Vizbegovo, a village eight kilometres north-west of Skopje, was selected. The location itself was 35,000 square metres of public land, had an appropriate elevation of terrain and excellent connections to the capital. Under a governmental decision adopted in March 2015, ownership of the location was transferred to the PRD, which made preparations easier. The PRD now plans to build a training centre for Macedonia's rescue services on the site and is currently working on this project.

The location in Vizbegovo hosted both the IDP camp and the Base of Operations (BoO), where the international teams from Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Germany, Turkey, Italy and the EU CPT were accommodated. A clear and visible distinction between the two areas was established.

The location had no water or electricity supplies, so water tanks, mobile toilets, showers and portable generators were brought in before the start of the exercise. All teams taking part were self-sufficient in terms of accommodation.

The National Red Cross and the team from Turkey handled all catering; the former cooked for the IDPs and the latter provided catering for the international teams. Provisions had been acquired previously and were prepared according to menus set before the exercise took place.

Medical care was set up with dual purpose, covering the scenario and the health and safety of participants. The team from Italy arrived with an Advanced Medical Post capacity, supported by medical teams from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. The National Red Cross provided the overall medical security for the exercise within and outside the camp.

For the purposes of this exercise, a special protocol for registering IDPs was created by the PRD in co-operation with the University American College in Skopje. The registration protocol contained detailed procedures for registration of the IDPs, receiving non-food items (NFI), accommodating them in tents and special tools for data collection and data management. The protocol itself was tested during the exercise and was very successful. It took around 90-120 seconds per person to complete registration before moving onto the next step of receiving NFI and being escorted to the camp.

In summary, IPA Campex 2015 was the biggest regional field exercise financed by the EU ever to be organised in this region of Europe. The exercise itself involved 700 participants from 23 different countries.

For the Republic of Macedonia it was an excellent learning event that tested managerial skills and knowledge, as well as testing its capabilities to respond to such a scenario. After the exercise many issues have been examined in the PRD, ranging from organisational management and leadership, to composition and the personal profile of team members dealing with camp support and camp units.

At a national level there are still challenges in information sharing that we need to tackle, especially on a horizontal level among key institutions dealing with host nation support. More work definitely needs to be carried out on creating national standards for camp management, and this process has already started with the IDP registration protocol.

It is my personal opinion that the Republic of Macedonia did a good job with IPA Campex 2015 and proved to be a reliable partner within the Union Civil Protection Mechanism.

Author

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