

Focus on Communications

The smooth communications plan for press and public was one of the key factors for the successful operation. For people to calmly leave the area in stages, with a minimum of rumours and conflicting press reports, city authorities need clear communications strategies developed in advance.

"If you have never experienced it, you will have no idea what large scale international press interest is all about – an enormous herd of reporters, cameramen, technicians, each with their own language, their own wishes and their own need for an exclusive story," points out John De Munnik, the public relations manager for the city. For press officers the emergency starts earlier than for other officials involved and ends later, with the corresponding consequences for staffing and workload. Press interest rises noticeably with the water levels of a treatment when there is not yet any operational reason whatsoever to take measures. And at the moment when all operational services take a rest after having accomplished their mission, press and public go on asking questions for weeks.

Successful citizens in dealing with the press and public included:

- **Communications was part of the overall emergency plan.** "Someone who has no plan is totally dependent on improvisation and thus runs the risk of chaos," DeMunnik noted. "Essential for emergency action is a good balance between preparation and improvisation. Crisis management is about setting up a good structure, seeing to it that people can do their work undisturbed and providing proper communication channels. Everyone involved must know who

decides about what." For example, communication officers for operational government services and local towns in the region were asked to provide all communications by fax, and only comment on their own field of activity.

- **Access to radio.** Officials contacted the regional broadcasting corporation to ensure that a radio station could be reached around the clock and transmit official announcements within two minutes. The public was informed of this plan. As a result, local citizens found the regional radio station to be the most trustworthy of various information sources, and by some municipalities radio was the primary source of information.

- **High Water Information Line.** 103,000 calls were handled in one week, from as far away as Australia. 15 phone lines (and eventually 13 more) were set up apart from the operational phone lines, so that operational activities could continue without interruption. In a special room filled with notice boards, maps, extra phone lines and by teletext sets, information officers trained municipal employees to answer questions. During the peak period, 100 different people per day were recruited by the City Personnel Department from various municipal services and trained by information officers for the city. Due to the heavy workload, four hours per day was the maximum amount of time people could reasonably answer questions.

- **Regular briefings for changing shifts of press officers, including confidential background information.** To prevent panic and rumours, a unified message is essential. Background of the situation were shared into schedules for press officers. They learned the background of decisions, implementation concerns and likely developments on a regular basis. "This approach to a press officer's duties is still far from usual. Quite often spokesmen hear no more than is allowed to come out. Due to a lack of background knowledge, they may be taken by surprise by journalists – with their fast connections and good contacts," said De Munnik. For a spokesman to do his job properly, he needs to have sufficient background knowledge in order to be part of the management team.

- **Regular briefings for media.** Journalists were briefed regularly. Information officers used several languages in dealing with foreign reporters. No preferential treatment was given for television or big newspapers. For emergency action, local and regional media played an essential role in providing information to the public.

- **A fast response to rumours and errors.** Rumours and errors cannot be completely prevented. Their effect can be weakened by providing information as openly, quickly, correctly and as promptly as possible before people start to guess. The most striking rumour at the time was that an embankment would be blown up on purpose, cleared from a local medieval custom that by cutting the embankment across the river, it would reduce the strain on one's own side. Some De Munnik, "If rumours start, as in this case, the best solution is a firm and fast correction."



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