THE 10th ANNIVERSARY INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC
PROFESSIONAL CONFERENCE
SECURITY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT – THEORY AND PRACTICE (SeCMan)
- THE 10th ANNIVERSARY INTERNATIONAL FORUM
„SAFETY FOR THE FUTURE 2024" -
27th and 28th September 2024, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia

ACTIVITIES OF THE SLOVENIAN POLICE DURING THE 2023 FLOODS IN SLOVENIA

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Received: 6th September 2024
Accepted: 12th September 2024

Review paper

Abstract: *In Slovenia, floods cause the most damage among natural disasters due to their intensity and frequency. Sometimes they even claim human lives. Floods can occur throughout the year but are most frequent during the period of heavy and prolonged rainfall in the autumn. In the summer, floods are caused by storms and are mainly local and torrential. In 2023, Slovenia was affected by widespread flooding that destroyed or damaged a significant part of its infrastructure. The Slovenian Police have been actively engaged in activities associated with the floods in accordance with the national plan and the action plan. This paper describes the activities of the Slovenian Police in response to the 2023 floods in Slovenia.*

Key words: *National security, Natural disasters, The Police, Floods, Slovenia*

1. INTRODUCTION

Flooding is one of the dominant geographical factors reshaping landscapes, both in mountainous and hilly areas and in low-lying flat regions. It is a natural factor which, alongside varying degrees of technological development, directly influences land use and the intended use of space. Normally, floods are not sudden events, unless they are the result of a dam failure, which is not dealt with in this national plan, and are therefore not a complete surprise and can be considered gradual natural phenomena. Torrential or flash flooding is a partial exception in this respect as such can occur in a limited area over a very short period of time.

Flooding is a multi-layered event with many interrelated factors, but it is the increased discharge of watercourses that stands out. The volume of water in watercourses increases mainly due to a precipitation event in a particular river basin. The amount of water reaching a watercourse depends on several factors, such as vegetation, evaporation, infiltration capacity and soil saturation, the height or presence of the water table, water retention areas (e.g. depressions), the catchment size, sloping terrain and land cover.

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On the night of 3 to 4 August 2023, heavy rainfall swept across the north of Slovenia, causing severe and devastating floods. The national plan was operational from 4 to 31 August 2023 due to the natural disaster caused by several days of heavy rainfall over a wide area of Slovenia and heavy downpours during the night of 3 to 4 August 2023, resulting in catastrophic flooding, landslides and other consequences of the torrential action of the high waters (the destruction of or damage to numerous homes, commercial buildings, road infrastructure, etc.). During that period, the action plan, which includes the engagement of the Slovenian Police, was also operational.

2. GENERAL INFORMATION ON FLOOD RISK IN SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, floods are frequent and often cause significant damage. Of all the natural disasters resulting in damage, floods are probably the most common. Floods can occur throughout the year but are most frequent during the period of heavy and prolonged rainfall in the autumn. In the summer, floods are caused by storms and are mainly local and torrential. Floods cannot be prevented, but their consequences can be mitigated to a certain extent and people can be more or less effectively prepared for such events. While there is usually time to save lives in the event of floods, which are usually highly predictable, the more immediate threat is from torrential streams, which can also occur in the form of mud and debris flows. Torrential flooding is more difficult to forecast. Snowmelt and ground saturation are also very important factors in the occurrence of flooding, as are the characteristic spatial and temporal patterns of rainfall and wind in combination with vegetation, especially in the autumn, but also in the spring.

Since, despite certain measures, flooding can still affect densely populated areas, it is important to prepare in time. Flood risk management includes a range of structural and non-structural flood protection measures to prevent flooding, and measures to mitigate the consequences of floods, the most important of which are monitoring and studying the flood risk and flood hazards.

Floods are caused by: prolonged and heavy rainfall or extremely heavy rainfall of several hours or snowmelt, the distribution of rainfall in an area draining directly into populated areas, heavily waterlogged soil in a catchment area before rainfall or poorly permeable ground due to its geological characteristics or frozen soil, the development and urbanisation of floodplains, poorly managed surface water drainage, undersized bridges and culverts, the closure of watercourse profiles due to, for example, landslides or avalanches.

In terms of their main characteristics and scope, floods are classified as:

- torrential: these are short-lived and extremely violent, caused by relatively short and intense rainfall, either after summer storms or during autumn rains;
- lowland: occurring in the lower reaches of a watercourse where the river bed reaches flat land. Flooding is caused by the difference in the velocity of high water inflows and the drainage capacity of river beds;
- the flooding of karst poljes: the water inflow exceeds the capacity of the swallow holes or the underground drainage system. They are characterised by relatively regular, slow onset, standing water for several days or weeks and slow drainage through the karst underground system;
- coastal: a combination of high tide, low air pressure and wind causes the sea level to rise above the height of the normal high tide for a few hours, flooding low-lying coastal areas;

– urban: flooding in cities or urban areas caused by the inability to drain sufficient quantities of rainwater via surface water drainage systems;

– technical: such occur due to the inadequate functioning or collapse of water infrastructure.

3. THE TASKS OF THE POLICE IN THE EVENT OF A FLOOD

The Protection against Natural and Other Disasters Act regulates the management of protection, rescue and relief forces. According to this Act, protection against natural and other disasters is organised and implemented as a unified system at the local, regional and national levels. The tasks of state authorities in the event of a flood are defined by action plans. Action plans are an addition to the national plan.

The Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia performs urgent tasks relating to the organisation and implementation of measures in the affected area, informs the public of the tasks carried out in its field of work and performs other tasks within its competence.

The Police, a body within the Ministry, protect life, personal safety and property; maintain public order in the disaster area; secure the disaster area; prevent, detect and investigate criminal and minor offences, identify and apprehend perpetrators and other wanted persons and hand them over to the competent authorities; control and manage traffic in accordance with the state of the transport infrastructure; facilitate the operations of the protection, rescue and relief forces; participate with its Air Support Unit in the elimination of the consequences of disasters and in the performance of police, rescue, humanitarian, supply, reconnaissance and other tasks important for protection, rescue and relief operations; perform their statutory tasks and provide assistance in the implementation of certain measures imposed by the competent institutions (the prohibition or restriction of the movement of people in areas under immediate threat); participate in the identification of persons; cooperate with the police forces of other countries; adapt their organisation, forms and methods of work and methods of operation and cooperation to the actual situation or circumstances; protect designated persons, authorities, facilities and areas; inform the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of deceased foreigners; and perform other tasks within their remit.

4. THE 2023 FLOODS IN SLOVENIA

On the night of 3 to 4 August 2023, heavy rainfall swept across the north of Slovenia, causing severe and devastating floods. The national plan was operational from 4 to 31 August 2023 due to the natural disaster caused by several days of heavy rainfall over a wide area of Slovenia and heavy downpours during the night of 3 to 4 August 2023, resulting in catastrophic flooding, landslides and other consequences of the torrential action of high waters (the destruction of or damage to numerous homes, commercial buildings, road infrastructure, etc.). During that period, the action plan was also operational.

The territories of the following police directorates were most severely affected by the devastating floods:

– the Celje Police Directorate (the territories of the police stations: Mozirje, Ravne na Koroskem, Dravograd, Slovenj Gradec, Radlje ob Dravi, Zalec, Velenje, Celje, Lasko and Slovenske Konjice);

– the Ljubljana Police Directorate (the territories of the police stations: Medvode, Kamnik, Domzale, Ljubljana Siska and Ljubljana Moste);

– the Kranj Police Directorate (the territories of the police stations: Skofja Loka, Jesenice, Trzic, Bled, Kranj and Radovljica);

– the Nova Gorica Police Directorate (the territories of the police stations: Idrija and Tolmin);

– the Maribor Police Directorate (the territories of the police stations: Sentilj, Gorisnica, Ruse, Maribor I, Maribor II, Race and Ptuj); and

– the Murska Sobota Police Directorate: (the territories of the police stations: Gornji Petrovci, Lendava, Murska Sobota, Ljutomer and Gornja Radgona).

The Koper and Novo mesto Police Directorates were not affected by floods.

5. ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT BY THE SLOVENIAN POLICE DURING THE 2023 FLOODS IN SLOVENIA

The Police performed tasks in accordance with the national plan and the action plan. It should be noted that the Police have continued to perform these tasks to a lesser extent even after the national plan was deactivated.

During the operation of the national plan and the action plan, the Police performed the following tasks:

– the evacuation and rescue of people from dangerous areas, and securing such areas,

– road closures (until the arrival of maintenance personnel) and traffic management,

– the protection of property in the evacuated areas and logistics centres, and assistance in flood recovery,

– the prevention, detection and investigation of criminal and minor offences, and the identification and apprehension of perpetrators,

– maintaining a presence at the municipal and regional Civil Protection (hereinafter: CP) headquarters, and escorting humanitarian convoys,

– providing assistance to protection and rescue units,

– participation in coordination meetings at the municipal, regional and national levels,

– daily coordination of work between the national and regional levels and between the regional and local levels.

Pursuant to the Order on the designation of flood risk areas and operations issued by the CP Commander, five checkpoints were set up in the Koroska Region(in Crna na Koroskem and Mezica) and in the Zahodna Stajerska region (in Solcava, Luce, Mozirje and the settlements in the direction of Ljubno ob Savinji). At the checkpoints, police officers and the CP personnel controlled access to these areas. Work at checkpoints was performed between 12 and 22 August 2023 from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.

At the request and in accordance with the orders of the CP of the Municipalities of Ljubljana and Medvode, the Police Academy provided accommodation and meals to 42 evacuees. On 12 September 2023, nine evacuees were accommodated at the Police Academy pursuant to the order of the CP of the Municipality of Medvode. The order was in force until 18 September 2023.

From 4 to 22 August 2023, a Police representative was present daily at the CP headquarters to coordinate work between the CP and the Police. During the night time, work was coordinated by the Operations and Communications Centre of the General Police Directorate (hereinafter:

OCC GPD). From 23 to 31 August 2023, a Police representative participated in the daily morning briefing in support of the CP headquarters. Work was coordinated by the OCC GPD.

The Police representative in the CP headquarters attended three meetings convened by the CP Commander(regarding checkpoints, psychosocial support and clearing watercourses).

Police helicopters were used for rescue and transport operations and police tasks and, in two cases, to provide images of the areas in order to assist the relevant services in their response to the situation. Operations were carried out to rescue people and animals at risk or injured, and to evacuate those exposed to an imminent indirect threat in the aftermath of the storm (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Rescue and transport with police helicopter
Source: Police, n.

Transport tasks included the transport of different experts to the flooded areas. The helicopter camera recorded images of all flooded areas in all regions and, among other things, provided data to the Slovenian Infrastructure Agency for the drafting of the application for flood assistance from EU funds, and to other authorities for planning field operations. From 4 to 10 August 2023, crews rescued and evacuated 286 inhabitants from critical areas and transported 42 persons engaged in rescue and flood management operations, including mountain rescuers, technical staff, municipal workers for watercourse monitoring, geologists, civil protection personnel, firefighters and others. Ten animals were rescued. In addition to rescue and evacuation operations, some 13,300 kg of food, water, fuel, generators, medicines and other emergency supplies were transported to the flooded areas. The Air Support Unit also observed the flooded areas and secured data needed by the competent services for emergency analysis of the situation on the ground.

The International Police Operations Division of the Service of the Director General of the Police provided information to the Dutch Police Attaché regarding the Dutch nationals

evacuated from the Menina Camp. The Slovenian Police Attaché in Austria participated in the activities, checking and coordinating work based on information on the closure of the old border crossing points at which humanitarian convoys could not enter the affected areas. In order to publish all flood-related notifications, a dedicated sub-page entitled "Floods" was set up on the Police intranet. Hence, the Police personnel were well briefed about matters required for their work. Media support for police activities consisted of over 25 press releases and more than 50 social media posts. Police representatives accepted invitations from media houses to appear on news programmes. All internal organisational units of the General Police Directorate and all police directorates were engaged in the performance of tasks.

During this period, the Police dealt with three incidents in which three people lost their lives as a result of flooding. It also dealt with two incidents in which two people lost their lives as a result of flood recovery operations. The Police are also investigating two criminal offences directly related to the floods (one against property and one against an employment relationship and social security). In Crna na Koroskem, the Police are investigating a mass poisoning with carbon monoxide, in which ten persons were injured.

The Police adapted their organisation, forms and methods of work and their methods of operation and cooperation to the actual situation or circumstances, which meant that activities were carried out as a matter of priority in relation to other tasks.

6. CONCLUSION

In most cases, floods can be predicted. By monitoring and modelling hydrometeorological conditions, the timing and areas where watercourses may burst their banks can be predicted with some certainty. For flood risk monitoring, data on water levels and discharges of watercourses are most important, as are data on predicted and actual quantities of precipitation. If necessary, field monitoring of watercourses can be organised at the municipal level. However, unpredictable events can occur, as was the case in the 2023 floods in Slovenia.

In the context of the activities carried out during the widespread flooding in 2023 affecting a significant part of Slovenia's territory, it is necessary to highlight the high level of commitment of the Police to perform tasks in the most dangerous areas, both in terms of ensuring safety and security in general, facilitating the rapid intervention of other protection, rescue and relief services and units, evacuating people, providing helicopter assistance, escorting international aid convoys, and other tasks. The work of the Police has proved to be of great importance, not only their regular tasks but also emergency tasks. The activities of the Police significantly contributed to the overall national security system of the country.

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