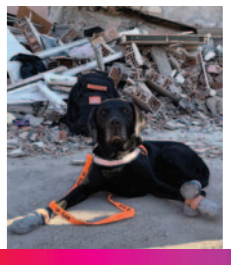
UK FIRE & RESCUE
ISAR
INTERNATIONAL SEARCH AND RESCUE
1993 30 YEARS 2023

CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE



In association with

EMERGENCY SERVICES TIMES

UK FIRE & RESCUE ISAR

NFCC National Fire Chiefs Council

UKaid from the British people

Advert

Foreword

This supplement is a tribute to the UK ISAR team's unwavering dedication and commitment to humanitarian service for over three decades. Since its inception, the team has been at the forefront of international disaster response, consistently demonstrating exceptional professionalism, bravery, and resilience.

Words: ***Nick Searle, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service***

DCFO Nick Searle.

I am the Strategic Lead of both National Resilience and UK ISAR. As Merseyside is the lead authority, it is with great pride and admiration that I reflect upon the remarkable achievements of UK ISAR past and present.

For me, the history of the UK ISAR and its former members and those that blazed a trail is essential to remember. I was previously a team member and I know what it entails to be a member of this highly effective team. The founders put down strong foundations for the team to move forward and build upon. This is certainly what I see daily within the capability team and when I meet up with colleagues from across UK ISAR.

The recent deployments to Turkey and Malawi demonstrated our highly skilled and agile team who showcased their expertise, playing a crucial role in saving lives, providing essential medical assistance, and offering much-needed support to affected communities. These deployments stand as shining examples of the effectiveness of their development, training and coordination.

The invaluable support and collaboration UK ISAR receives from the 14 participating services and volunteers at every level to provide the UK Government's response under the Emergency Deployable Team (EDT2) program working closely with and funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

This has developed over many years of being the official responders. Over the past decades, this partnership has enabled us to deliver life-saving assistance globally within short time periods of a disaster or crisis happening, leaving a profound impact on the lives of those affected by disasters. The trust placed in us all by the FCDO is a testament to the professionalism and effectiveness of our team, and I am honoured to have the opportunity to contribute to the global humanitarian efforts.

Together, UK ISAR strives to make a difference, building resilience, and offering a helping hand to those in need, providing the most for the most. I also want to recognise and thank the families of the UK ISAR team who are as equally as committed as the team members with understanding, personal impacts and enablement of their loved ones.

The current team is developing so quickly with a diverse group of experienced, developing and new members all hungry to make a difference with all they do. Thus, showing clear priorities, drive and commitment to be not only a premier team but recognised as the most innovative, self-sufficient, sustainable and environmentally supportive deployable team with a full menu of options to offer in disaster situations on behalf of the UK Government across the globe.

"Together, UK ISAR strives to make a difference, building resilience, and offering a helping hand to those in need, providing the most for the most."

The 30 years of response and humanitarian support is key to our vision for the future and how the UK ISAR team is utilised with both USAR and flexible responses and is recognised as one of the premier teams in the world.

Our colleagues in the United Nations and the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) understand and support this passion. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service receives international opportunities and requests to mentor teams bilaterally on a daily basis, showing how this team is held in regard and respect.

Currently, UK ISAR is working on and preparing a further aid convoy for our colleagues and fellow firefighters in the Ukraine demonstrating that its work is continuous. It is not just overseas but here in the UK as well. Our work holds no barriers, and long may this continue.

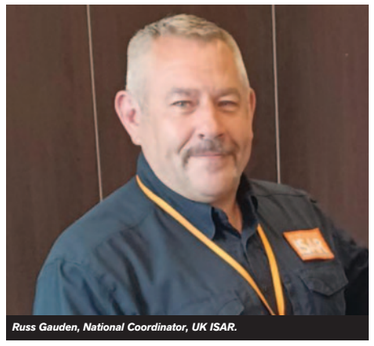
IN THIS **SUPPLEMENT**

Advert

Welcome

I am delighted to welcome you to this 30-year supplement and thank you for taking the time to read about the remarkable achievements of UK ISAR.

Words: ***Russ Gauden, National Coordinator, UK ISAR***



Russ Gauden, National Coordinator, UK ISAR.

Over the past three decades, UK ISAR has established itself as the premier international search and rescue team, and official UK Government response through the EDT2 on behalf of and funded by the FCDO.

UK ISAR is renowned for its expertise, dedication, and unwavering commitment to saving lives in the most challenging situations and speed to deploy across the globe ready to mobilise within a 6–10-hour time window from a designated national point of departure. The ability to do this has been honed over the last 30 years.

I am immensely proud to be the UK ISAR National Coordinator to lead on behalf of the lead authority, representing UK Government Internationally within INSARAG, working closely with the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service principal officer team, national resilience and with the dedicated service leads through their appointed coordinators.

This team is like no other and it's a real honour to have spent over twenty years involved at every level within the UK ISAR family.

Reflecting on the journey

It is so important to understand the UK ISAR journey which started with the United Kingdom Fire Service Search and Rescue Team (UKFSSART) was officially formalised in 1992 following an initiative designed to improve the effectiveness of British relief efforts to international disasters.

Today, known as the United Kingdom International Search and Rescue Team or UK ISAR, it comprises volunteer members selected currently from across 14 different fire and rescue services, including Scotland and Wales.

It is further bolstered by dedicated voluntary medical team, structural engineers and veterinary personnel, all of whom volunteer from organisations outside of the UK fire and rescue service. All members undergo a stringent selection process which takes place in arduous conditions.

"UK ISAR is one of the leading current 63 United Nations INSARAG classified search and rescue teams from across the globe."

UK ISAR vision

To remain and strengthen its capability as one of the world's leading international disaster response teams for USAR and develop exceptional flexible responses.

Aims

Excellent disaster preparedness

UK ISAR will provide excellent disaster preparedness for USAR and flexible responses with training, information, and procedures aligned to UK standards where applicable and equipment to ensure that team members can provide a safe and effective response (inter)nationally to disasters, embedding the UN resolution 57/150 in all preparedness and response activities.

Excellent disaster response

UK ISAR will provide, maintain and develop excellent (inter)national disaster responses to meet the requirements and needs of any approved official request from an affected country to deploy or an official offer of assistance is accepted as per the menu of options, working closely with FCDO and other UK Government departments.

Excellent capacity and development programs

UK ISAR will develop, deliver and promote excellent and effective capacity building and development programs for developing countries to support their own self suffiency and response contingencies within their own disaster preparedness programs agreed officially by FCDO.

Excellent people

UK ISAR will support development, value and guide individual FRS UK ISAR team members and volunteers respecting diversity, promoting opportunity and equality for all and championed through the capability team.

International recognition

The UK ISAR team provides a specialised, technical search and rescue response to incidents in disaster affected nations, on behalf of the UK Government. The team was one of the first to undertake the United Nations INSARAG classification in 2005 and then went on to be reclassified in 2009 and 2016; the next IER is scheduled for November 2023. UK ISAR is one of the leading current 63 United Nations INSARAG classified search and rescue teams from across the globe that responds to sudden onset disasters, such as earthquakes, tsunami, hurricanes, tornadoes and flooding events, as well as providing humanitarian and mentoring/capacity building programmes at strategic and tactical levels.

UK ISAR responds overseas at the request of the affected nation's government on behalf of the FCDO as the official UK Government response funded through EDT2 and supports a mechanism through which the UK can comply with the principles of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 57/150, 'Strengthening the effectiveness and coordination of international urban search and rescue assistance.'

Volunteers at the heart of the team

Except for the UK ISAR Capability Team, all personnel are volunteers and include fire and rescue service personnel supported by their respective fire and rescue services under the overarching guidance of the National Fire Chiefs Council. The team is totally self-sufficient other than fuel and transport which are normally sourced in country.

As UK ISAR reflects on its remarkable journey, I invite you to read on and discover the significant milestones and the ongoing commitment to excellence in emergency response.

Advert

About UK ISAR

The UK ISAR team is drawn from fire and rescue services across the country, some of whom have a more involved role. Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service is the lead authority, with logistics support provided by London Fire Brigade. Our base of operations and welfare support comes from Hampshire and Isle of Wight, with West Midlands Fire Service leading on command and support.

"The UK ISAR team is currently classified and will undergo reclassification in November 2023."

UK ISAR team members come from the following fire and rescue services: Cheshire, Lancashire, Lincolnshire, Greater Manchester , Leicestershire, Kent, Scotland, Essex, Mid and West Wales and South Wales.

In addition, we have 10 highly trained search and rescue dogs that belong to individual services and are deployed with their handlers. We also have two vets, one of whom is in development.

The USAR Medical team comprises 11 Doctors/ Trauma Nurses and includes a medical director. We also have four structural engineers.

Reclassification

The UK ISAR team is currently classified and will undergo reclassification in November 2023. Extensive preparations are already underway to achieve this new status. The team was initially classified in 2005 and reclassified in 2009 and again 2015 by the United Nations INSARAG as a Heavy Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team. Since its reclassification, UK ISAR has successfully carried out deployments in earthquake rescue operations in Turkey and provided crucial flood response assistance in Malawi. These deployments serve as testament to the team's expertise and effectiveness in international disaster response efforts.

Since 1992 UK ISAR has deployed to disasters across the world, including:

Turkey
India
Pakistan
Haiti
Indonesia
New Zealand
Japan
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Nepal
Greece
Turkey
Malawi

UK FIRE & RESCUE ISAR INTERNATIONAL SEARCH AND RESCUE
1993 30 YEARS 2023
CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Recent Deployment – Turkey, February 2023

When an earthquake struck Turkey on 6 February, UK ISAR was promptly mobilised to assist on behalf of the FCDO. A heavy USAR team of 77 specialists plus four search dogs, including search and rescue technicians, a vet, a structural engineer and a medical team with pre-hospital care doctors and trauma nurses were deployed flying to Gaziantep South Turkey and established its base of operations in Hatay.

The team deployed with 12 tonnes of equipment, including tents, sanitation, water, food rations, search and rescue equipment, technical search, medical equipment, veterinary equipment, command and support, all to ensure they were self-sufficient to ensure no additional burden was placed on Turkey.

During its operation, the team worked around the clock to ensure maximum search and rescue operations. The team successfully rescued eight people, with three intricate and complex search and rescue missions with one taking more than 20 hours to complete due to its complexity. The team returned home on 15 February, landing at Stansted airport to a salute from fire engines, and a flower reception which included representatives from UK Government, FCDO and the Turkish ambassador for the United Kingdom.

Read on to learn more from Jim Chaston who shares his week as Operations Commander in Turkey.

Diary of a UK ISAR Operations Commander in Turkey

Earlier this year, the southern part of Turkey suffered a devastating earthquake that destroyed thousands of homes and claimed nearly 60,000 lives. Here I share how I found out about the news and my experience of being deployed as part of the UK ISAR team over a week in February 2023.

Words: ***Jim Chaston, UK ISAR Operations Commander, Kent Fire and Rescue Service***

Monday 6 February 2023

I was woken by the alarm, as it was my first duty back to work after my rest days. I turned my alarm off and I could see from the news alerts that something big had occurred in Turkey. attempting to get ready to leave the house, phone call after phone call, message after message made it clear that the likelihood of a deployment to the scene of was high.

The Kent team was off rota because we'd just completed a period of four months on first call and had handed over to the other section. I thought there was a slim chance of myself being asked to go in a management team role (if availability was an issue) but not for any of my Kent team. What I wasn't aware of was that at that time, several courses were taking place where other service team members were out of the country. This meant that the chances of deployment were higher.

By the time I had reached work at midday, I had been asked to provide names of who was available. We went to standby mode - an enhanced state of readiness - packed our bags, said our goodbyes to our family members and waited to be told where to report. By 6pm, I was at a fire station in Birmingham with two of my ISAR team members, Brad and Martin.

When we arrived, we were greeted by old friends and new faces; we went through our pre-deployment screening, including passports, vaccinations and health checks.

It was now a question of waiting to find an aeroplane, a pilot, and get everyone on their way.

Jim Chaston, UK ISAR Operations Commander, Kent Fire and Rescue Service

Tuesday 7 February

We arrived at Gaziantep airport – that's 77 people and 12 tons of rescue equipment deployed to a disaster zone within 24 hours. That is incredibly quick.

Disaster response is like no other travel. Once landed, you unload your own plane, try to find transport for the people and equipment, and plan a route. A route that you have little idea is still passable. As an added issue, our proximity to Syria meant that strict guidelines had to be followed given how close our route was to the border.

Our Dutch colleagues were the first United Nations classified rescue team to land and were tasked to coordinate what came next. We had been tasked to head to Hatay province, the most southern point of Turkey. Hatay had a population of over 1.5m people living in an area of approximately 300km; it was a concrete metropolis, made up of high-rise buildings.

When the team travels it is self-sufficient. That said, UK ISAR does have some simple logistical needs. Fuel for our generators and a space large enough to build a base of operations. A place for command and control, accommodation, and welfare. A tented fire station in effect with everything to keep us fit and healthy to complete our mission.

We headed to Hatay football stadium. A premier football team with large car parking areas. Large enough for us and other teams that arrived, far enough away from ground zero for security but close enough to be effective. Two hours later after arrival, it was built, and we were ready to work.

By now, the UK ISAR coordination cell had been established. This is a focal point for the local authorities to pass information to and for that to then be shared with the rescue teams. We had been given a large sector of the city as our own and we immediately mobilised the team.

Search and rescue is not an exact science but what we can control is the process. It's split into five elements. The first is to gain a general overview of the area, splitting it into manageable chunks, and the second being is to work out what needs to be done within that chunk. The third, fourth and fifth is the rescue phase from light response through to de-layering buildings with cranes and excavators.

The second level was our brief - find the work, report its requirements back and move on. My team, Red 1 comprised firefighters from Kent, Manchester, Cheshire, South Wales, Hampshire, West Midlands, Lancashire and London. We also had a medic from a Warwickshire hospital and a structural engineer as part of the team.

Once we arrived, it was clear that we were faced with an almost never-ending scene of devastation. Closely packed high-rise concrete constructed buildings. Most unrecognisable in their collapsed state, little taller than a two-story house. We had to move fast to find the most probable areas of survival. We started without any intelligence and progressed through the sector. Making assessments of buildings with chances of survival using local knowledge of contact with survivors and dog searching.

I made the decision almost immediately to split the team. My deputy carried on with the assessments - allowing me more time to investigate the local intelligence. My advance team had been told by a local they had heard somebody crying for help. Now silent, but recent enough to explore further.

> **"Search and rescue is not an exact science but what we can control is the process."**

A 60-year-old woman was trapped between the second floor of a six-storey building. The second floor was now at knee height. The team had to tunnel into the building (approx. 15m) removing debris with their hands and small hand tools. At this point we did not have the luxury of all our equipment. We were light and fast with just what the team could carry and walk with over considerable distances.

Once we eventually reached her, we found she was trapped by masonry and only her head was visible. We could only use a hammer and bolster to help free her due to the small space. Once this was broken free, we managed to pull her out of the tunnel we had dug. There was an applause from the now hundred strong crowd, a BBC crew that had appeared from nowhere and an ambulance that had been flagged down.

The sirens were deafening. A constant reminder of where you were, and what was occurring around you if you did manage to drift away temporarily in your thoughts. There were large excavators everywhere, frantically crashing through buildings trying to open escape routes. Crying mothers, fathers, and children, screaming into collapsed buildings having guessed where their once 10th floor apartment was now on the floor.

One of the many things that will stay with me forever, was the discipline of the local people. The recognised signal for silence in a collapsed environment is a long blast on a whistle. Wherever you were, whatever you are doing, if you heard the whistle everything stops. The roads came to a standstill, sirens were turned off. Grief was halted and a silence would fall.

"eğer beni duyabiliyorsan ses çıkar" (if you can hear me make a noise) would be hailed into a void. Repeated, maybe once, twice, but never for too long. Everybody fully aware that only next door that work had paused for that moment in time. A further blast of the whistle followed by a short pip and the frantic chaos would continue. By now we could hear over our radios that the rest of the team, elsewhere in the city was also making rescues. We had arrived, got to work, and were making a difference. By the end of the work period, we hadn't completed our brief. We would continue after a short period of rest.

Wednesday 8 February

The next day had a similar start, but I met a local rescue worker who was getting good intelligence of live potential rescues and we went on one of her leads. Our advanced party arrived – I was accompanied by command support from West Midlands, a K9 handler from Lancashire, with Dave the dog and our medical team.

When shown where the voices were coming from, we explored into the collapse in the direction of the cries for help. Going a bit further, we found a small opening and saw the hand of one of the trapped people. We managed to get them to pass the two-year-old child out to us. We then had to work on how to make the hole large enough for the mother and father. At this point, we only had a hacksaw and what we needed to cut was made of wood. Nevertheless, with some hard work, cutting through what once was a window and some furniture, we managed to make the hole large enough to extricate the people.

By now the rest of my team had caught us up and now we had a full team to complete the extrication. The only problem was that they were Syrian so couldn't understand our Turkish translator. They had to corkscrew their body to come out through the voids, and to explain that was difficult. The elation of the triple rescue was tainted by their deceased son, who we also recovered so the family could all be back together and start their grieving process.

The locals were so welcoming and grateful for our help. They were offering us food and water - anything to keep us working and hydrated.

We went onto many more areas, including some where the high chance of survival was likely but had no tangible evidence that anybody was still alive. This information was fed into to the coordination network and excavators got to work delayering the buildings.

Thursday 9 February

The following day, we were back at our sector and by now we were known – 50+ rescue workers with dogs walking the streets. The locals knew how we worked, and everyone wanted us to check for their loved ones.

The atmosphere had changed – people were more desperate. They were trying to pull us to their buildings, telling us that they could hear cries for help but in truth they couldn't. Our process and questioning were now common knowledge. No different to what anybody reading this would do. You just have to manage it. Manage without causing offence or escalating the already fragile security risk to the team.

> **"The hardest thing is telling somebody that we cannot find any signs of life."**

There were far more deceased people by this point. Most survivors would by now be the heavily entombed. No possibility of their scent escaping to find a search dogs nose; nobody to hear knocking deep within their collapse. Careful excavation with diggers was now fast becoming the best hope for the most.

The hardest thing is telling somebody that we cannot find any signs of life. This was a speech that became fluent in making but care needed to be taken so that the 10th family you had told that day received the same compassion as the first. Hugs were given, handshakes, whatever was required. There are no rules. There is no course that you can learn from to tell you how to deliver this heart wrenching news.

Importantly, we wanted to convey that hope was not lost. "Please continue what you are doing. Come and find us if anything changes" were our parting words.

By now, mid-afternoon and we had assessed dozens of buildings. We could hear over the radio that the other squad had made verbal contact with two people. It was also reported that it wasn't going to be quick. Level 4 rescue, over 12 hours to achieve. Still, at this point in the disaster there were limited teams that could achieve this rescue. The decision was made for my team to return to base. Rest, eat and be ready to take over at midnight.

It is an extremely difficult to withdraw from a scene, but clearly you cannot work indefinitely. You become less effective, tunnel vision sets in and that's when things can go wrong.

Friday 10 February

After a period of rest, or rather staring at the roof of a tent in the freezing cold, processing what had gone on before and anticipating what was next, we were back in the transport, heading to relieve our colleagues. We had made it to the river crossing, The other side was the work site when a panicked message came over the radio, "The dam has burst."

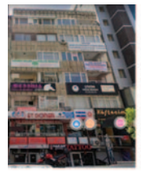
Unbeknown to us that the worksite was evacuating, the street was a mass stampede of people running for their lives. A dust cloud rising in its wake. The team at work were processing as they ran and had picked a building that looked safe enough to enter and made the 7th floor. A best guess as to how high would be needed to be safe the expected torrent of water.

Our team were on a coach, next to the river. A few of us glanced at each other. A smile and a nod was an agreement that our only option would be to swim if required. Relatively quickly, news came that it was a false alarm. What it did achieve was a natural point to handover over from the day to night shift.

On arrival, I was briefed on actions so far. A six-storey building, pancaked in between a high-rise hotel and a tall building to the right. Access could be gained into the collapse to a stair well but had been deemed too dangerous to attempt. What the first UK team had arrived achieved was nothing short of remarkable. Using survivor knowledge of the likely area where the man and woman would be, they had entered the neighbouring high-rise hotel and worked out where to break through. With every brick removed, concrete breached their voices became louder and rescue was possible.

In the same way that my team had been disappointed in being sent to bed earlier the previous day, the eyes of the team that was leaving told the same story. They had all worked so hard to reach the casualties, 18 hours since getting out of their beds the morning before, and they did not want to stand down. This is where discipline

Advert



and acceptance of 'team' is at its most important. They didn't want to stop but also accepted that tiredness was taking over.

From a management perspective, I didn't need to change anything. We followed their brief and continued to tunnel deep within the collapse. Our enemy was the cold. Only four people at a time could physically fit along the tunnel whilst the others waited for their turn.

A fire had been lit and the crews huddled around it, boiling water to heat rations and maintain morale. It didn't seem like a long time, but it was a further three hours before we made physical contact with the woman. Her hand reached through a hole and was greeted with that of a rescuer; a bit more work and a medic was able to assess her condition.

Miraculously, with little assistance she crawled out of the void. Our translator told us that she was worried how she looked and that she had survived by drinking her own urine. It had taken approximately 16 hours to get this far, the man wouldn't be far away. He was in a worse condition and in a very restricted space. He was trapped by a wall that was pinning him across his thighs. We broke this up as carefully as possible with our pre-hospital team doctor continually assessing his condition. After approximately 18 hours he was free, assessed and taken away in an ambulance.

He was the brother of a policeman who had been present all through the rescue. His elation and gratitude will live with us all forever. Over 18 hours, only possible with the skill of that first UK team who worked out where to start work.

The next task was to venture further out into the city. By now there were huge excavators everywhere, piles of broken concrete that made streets unrecognisable. Our area was densely populated with high-rise buildings. Mostly collapsed but many still standing, many leaning precariously.

From a rescue perspective, a total collapse is the safest. It has fallen. It has survived a second large earthquake and many aftershocks since our arrival. There is always a risk of sudden further collapse either naturally or through our actions but in general, a sense of confidence assists our decision making. When you have 10+ floors still standing above you, listing in one direction or twisting in two, this is out of our control.

I was joined by a team member from Greater Manchester, a further West Midlands command support officer and a medic from a Warwickshire hospital. Along with our K9 handler and Colin the search dog, we were pulled by a local firefighter to a building.

This was within my risk scale, but we were surrounded by damaged high-rise buildings. We gathered the story from the firefighter and a distraught mother who through our interpreter explained that she had escaped, and her husband was getting their two children but had not made it.

We ask ourselves before committing: is it credible, is it possible, and does the reward outweigh the risk? The intelligence was credible as it had come in part from a local firefighter. The possibility of rescue was high and, in my opinion, not too long to achieve. We used our safest fastest asset, Colin the search dog who entered and immediately barked. We ran him another three times and he barked again each time.

"We ask ourselves before committing: is it credible, is it possible, and does the reward outweigh the risk?"

We couldn't mitigate the surrounding high-rise buildings, but the reward was certainly there. I started to draw up an action plan along with my colleague from Greater Manchester and mobilised the rest of our team with the equipment. This would take time to arrive, but we decided to get started. From nowhere, my contact that I had previously made days earlier appeared and asked, "Jim, what do you need?"

We decided that rather than wait, we would get to work. Entering the void was the hard part, just enough space to squeeze through without a helmet and crawl to where Colin had barked some 4m under the collapsed building.

We frantically dug by hand and worked with a hammer to make enough space to get under the next pinch point. After about 30 minutes, I reached a black section on the floor. Textile. I instantly knew it was a body. I removed my glove and felt it's temperature, it was cold, and clearly by the size, was the man.

We carried on and realised that he had been pinned by a door and we set about breaking it with our hammer. We would have to remove the door and the deceased as he was in our way of progressing. We then found the first child, also cold. At this point, we withdrew to allow the local military to extract their bodies. It is something they want to do and who are we to stop them.

My contact from the local authorities was still there and now had information regarding our neighbouring high-rise buildings. One was being monitored by the Government and was falling millimetres every hour. By now the whole team had arrived including our structural engineer from DE Group Ltd. He too confirmed that it was moving and that there was nothing we could do to mitigate the risk.

We managed to convince the military to withdraw and cease recovering the bodies while we carried out another search with our dogs. By now we had two. Our second handler from Lancashire with search dog Dave, and the Lincolnshire handler with Colin the dog. We needed to ascertain if there was still live human scent in that building or had our casualties passed during our endeavours. After all, we still had one child left. This is our ultimate way of deciding if the reward was worth the risk.

The dogs were run with the whole team outside, in as safe an area as we could find, waiting for a bark. Not that we would have heard it over the noise of the city. A city desperately destroying buildings to reach any more survivors.

The dog team appeared after a time, and we could instantly recognise that we had lost the race.

The difficult decision to withdraw

The reality of what is needed at a point in time is what drives the decision making. Rescues by search teams were few and far between and more success was being achieved by heavy plant. On top of that, our base of operations requires a large area. An area that by now is surrounded by thousands of tents housing displaced people. This slowly was becoming the priority.

We could not stay forever. We would become a burden as we will run out of food, fuel and water.

"We could not stay forever."

The decision must be made to withdraw, as hard as that decision is and as heavy as it weighs. I expected and accepted that the local community were going to be desperate. Desperation and frustrations that could hinder our effectiveness. What I experienced was something very different.

A population of welcoming and accepting human beings. United in hope, grief, and gratitude to whoever was prepared to help.

Deployment – Malawi March 2023

Tropical Cyclone Freddy hit the coast of Southern Africa, causing devastation among the communities. On 17 March, UK ISAR sent a rapid response assessment team of seven, including UK ISAR National Coordinator Russ Gauden as the Team leader in to Lilongwee and Blantyre in Malawi.

Words: ***Russ Gauden, National Coordinator, UK ISAR***

On arrival the team carried out a Rapid Needs Assessment and started planning the logistical support for the incoming flood response team following the severe flooding and landslides caused by Cyclone Freddy.

"The rescues then came thick and fast; each day, rescues were in the 100s."

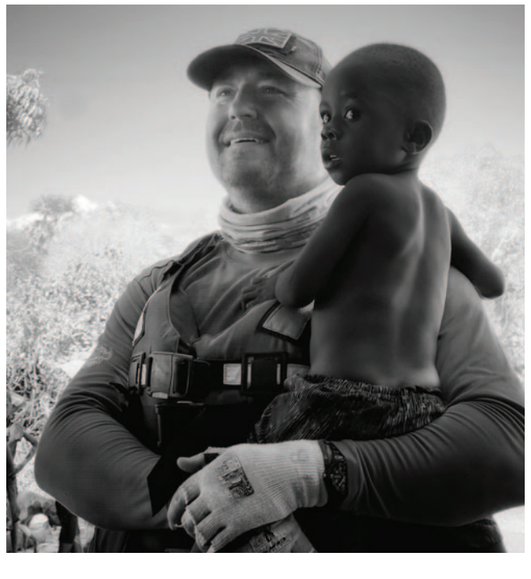
To assist local communities, on behalf of the FCDO, a further 20 members of UK ISAR arrived to assist along with specialised search and rescue equipment, medical equipment and emergency response boats. The team deployed was fully self-sufficient upon arrival and utilised ration packs for food and water to ensure no additional burden on the country. Transport and movement of the team was sourced locally by using fixers and in collaboration with the national emergency agency.

In collaboration with the supporting Tanzanian military, we were able to source helicopters to transport the UK ISAR team to Bangula to assist with the immediate flood response. A Base of Operations (BoO) and Command and Control were established at the World Food Programme grounds in Bangula; these were cut off by water due to collapsed road bridges and extensive flooding around the border of Mozambique. The Malawi Defence Force ensured the safety of the UK ISAR team during the deployment.

The rescues then came thick and fast; each day, rescues were in the 100s. Communities were trapped on small islands, surrounded only by water, without food or fresh water for more than nine days. A total of 358 rescues were made from the land locked islands due to flooding by rescue boat, plus assistance for four complex needs cases. In collaboration with World Food Programme, the UK ISAR team delivered five tonnes of maize to Makanga Island.

UK ISAR National Coordinator, Russ Gauden, donated three rigid inflatable boats and engines for continued local emergency response plus the ancillary equipment, including generators and shelters to the President of Malawi, Dr Lazarus Chakwera.

These resources will be essential in the ongoing efforts to save lives, respond to emergencies and offer support to local communities. UK ISAR continued to work with the Malawi Defence Force in providing boat handling training and crew safety after the handover of the three boats, and this will leave a legacy for the communities in Malawi.



Advert

Learning in the heat: Exercise Merlion 2

Exercise Merlion took place in June 2023. Travelling to Singapore to join a local team, the UK ISAR medium team deployment set out to achieve the following objectives:

- To prepare team members in working in heat and humidity, experiencing the physiological effects of working in a tropical climate
- To familiarise the team with the functionality of the new hot weather PPE which also acts as wildfire PPE under the menu of options UK ISAR provide to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
- To allow team members to demonstrate competency against the assessable areas of the INSARAG External Reclassification (IER) classification checklist for USAR teams
- Work in collaboration with another INSARAG classified heavy team from Singapore's Operation Lionheart.

The exercise provided an excellent opportunity for interoperable working between other international USAR teams. The team from Singapore known as SGP-01, provided its search dogs for an Assessment Search and Rescue level 2 (ASR2) casualty search, which was followed up by the British team known as GBR-01, who carried out a technical search using search cameras into voids.

The team leader and the command support team coordinated the rescue activities through the INSARAG Coordination Management System. INSARAG is the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group, a network of countries and organisations dedicated to urban search and rescue. The team also used the Virtual

On-site Operations Coordination Centre known as VOSOCC. Additional personnel assisted with the urban search and rescue (USAR) coordination cell as well as the reception and departure centre.

"The exercise provided an excellent opportunity for interoperable working between other international USAR teams."

During the 72-hour period, there were numerous challenging rescue scenarios for the team to undertake. UK ISAR used a wide range of USAR rescue capabilities including breaking and breaching; lifting and moving; shoring and line access. Some scenarios combined the additional challenges of water and height. In many of the scenarios the team was assisted by the local Singaporean team.

Due to poor access to one of the floors, the team was required to build an access ramp which first needed a supporting shore. Working in partnership, the teams were able achieve this quickly to continue the search for more victims and subsequently use the ramp to make a

There were many opportunities for the USAR medical team to provide casualty care. This was on both live victims and simulated casualty dummies. There was a full range of injuries of varying severity for the team to triage and treat. The sector medics were also on hand to provide treatment for minor injuries.

The UK ISAR logistics team was required to familiarise itself with the Singaporean equipment, while the wider team conducted an ASR2. This knowledge was then cascaded to the wider team. The logistics team also played a vital part in producing shores remote from the scene, to be erected at the work sites. The team produced various shores during the exercise, including T-spots, sloping floor shores and door shores.

Throughout the exercise the team was subjected to many challenging injects to test its decision making under pressure including:

- Gas explosions
- Gas leaks
- Site evacuation
- Gun shots and explosions
- Temperature related withdrawal
- Local Emergency Management Agency requests for assistance.

This exercise was one of many that the UK ISAR teams carry out to ensure that they are prepared and ready for wherever the next call may take them.

Advert