

## Who Does What in Major Fires?

The purpose of this two part feature is to outline the work undertaken by various entities (known as civil protection agents), during rural fires. It is quite a complex structure, within the overall framework of the annual DCEIR (National Operational Directive to Combat Rural Fires) and although each entity has clearly defined roles, when there are emergencies those deployed work as a team, hand in hand, taking every action required, with the overall aim of preserving life and property.

There are many entities that can be deployed in large fires, including the Bombeiros, GNR, PSP, UEPS, Special Civil Protection Force, INEM and Red Cross, Forest Sappers, Civil Protection command units, ICNF and others. Depending on the nature of the fire and its complexity, determines the level of resources actually deployed.

Fire-fighting has evolved a great deal since the fires of 2017, and the success in fighting fires relies on: extensive and thorough preparation and planning, the increasing use of technology, the rapid deployment of resources, strengthened air attack, sound and experienced leadership, considerable team work not to mention the bravery of all the firefighters and support staff involved.



### Operational Command

The operational command of rural fires is performed in different stages depending on the fire's complexity. When a fire is detected and the alarm is given, the District Operational Coordination Centre (CDOS) launches the initial attack by at least one helicopter and its heliport team/brigade (subject to availability). At the same time three firefighting teams for the nearby towns are launched. This initial attack must reach the fire within twenty minutes after alarm is given. In some parishes considered priority two aerial means are launched in the initial attack. Initial deployments of aircraft may not always be possible, when there are multiple fires in the same area.

The first team that arrives at the fire assumes the function of Commander of Rescue Operations (COS). As soon as a team of Firefighters arrives at the fire location, the function of the Commander of Rescue Operations is assumed by the most senior firefighter on the team.

When a fire develops to a stage where it becomes more complex and or additional resources from further afield are required, the command can be elevated at either District, Regional or National levels – there are six levels.

After the second level (when deployment reaches some 300), there is usually a Command post on the ground and the overall commander will work with Teams that support him/her in the decision making process and in the coordination of various Civil Protection Agents, (those

mentioned earlier), to manage directly and monitor the implementation of the operation, seeking their advice and support in specific functions.

### **Bombeiros (Firefighters)**

There are 465 fire brigades/departments in Portugal comprising 29,457 Bombeiros of whom 18,285 (62%) are volunteers and 11,172 (38%) are professionals) (Source ANEPC). Their responsibilities include: fire prevention and fighting; assistance to populations in the event of fires, floods, landslides and, in general, in all accidents; underwater searches and Rescue and transport of injured and sick people, including pre-hospital emergencies and many others. A firefighter is an individual who, professionally or voluntarily, is part of a fire department, whose activity is to fulfil these missions.

Volunteers and professionals work seamlessly, have a high “Esprit de corps” and are the cornerstone of firefighting in Portugal. The number of volunteers has been declining and full time professional firefighters are increasing.

There are four types of brigades/departments, namely: Professional Fire Brigade under the direct responsibility of a municipal council comprising only professionals; Mixed fire departments which are dependent on a municipal council or a humanitarian association of firefighters, made up of professional and volunteer firefighters; Volunteer fire departments, who belong to a humanitarian association of firefighters with only volunteers and lastly; private fire departments which belong to a private entity that for reasons of its activity maintain a professional fire department.

The recent increase in professional firefighters is mainly, but not exclusively, in the form of Permanent Intervention Teams (EIPs). These were created in 2017, to consolidate the commitment to strengthen the permanent professional response to civil protection risks. With recent increases, 734 EIPs have been authorized with more than 3,600 operational personnel.

Within municipalities, initial deployments to fires are usually in the form of EIPs, but as a fire develops additional Bombeiros are deployed as required and other entities deployed depending on the complexity of the fire.

### **GNR – UEPS**

Comprising over 1000 soldiers, the Emergency Protection and Relief Unit (UEPS) (previously GIPS) carry out helicopter operations in fighting rural fires. A team consists of 5, 8 or 12 personnel, equipped with forest sapper resources for direct intervention in the theatre of operations. It is through this team that ground-to-air connections are established i.e. between the Fire Rescue Operations Commander (COS) and the pilot in command of the aerial support.

UEPS also fight fires on land, through Protection and Rescue Intervention Teams of 4 personnel, using light forest fire-fighting vehicles (VLCI). In addition to the vehicle, which holds about 500 litres of water, this team is also equipped with firefighting equipment for direct and indirect firefighting. These land intervention teams are generally engaged in first actions in emerging fires, in support of the helicopter team.

### **GNR and PSP Regulars**

Their responsibilities are diverse including evacuations of people and animals from their homes either as a preventative step, or sometimes in an emergency when a fire is close to the property. Other duties include placing road cordons around fires to ensure the public do not encroach onto fire scenes. As police they assist the public as required at fire scenes and in practice will help the population and firefighters extinguish fires. GNR soldiers are deployed to man watch towers

### **Special Civil Protection Force (FEPC)**

This highly trained Special Civil Protection Force, provides prevention and response to emergency situations in communities affected by serious accidents or catastrophes. It is fully qualified when necessary, to be deployed in international emergencies.

It has around 500 and intervenes in fighting rural fires, water and mountain rescues, analysis, logistical support, reconnaissance and situation assessment. The NADAIR team produces a daily "Strategic Operational Analysis" which, is disseminated by various entities. This assessment covers all areas of the country, analysing weather and fire behaviour.

The FEPC operates operational reconnaissance drones, enabling commanders to pre-position resources in areas of foreseeable greater risks of rural fires and operate them in operational decision support for developing fires". It was extensively deployed in the Odemira and Castro Marim fires in 2021 as well as most recent fires.

Part 2: Pilots, INEM and Red Cross, Army, Airforce, ICNF, command centre personnel and others.

Author

David Thomas

President

Safe Communities Portugal

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