

Who Does What in Major Fire? Part 2

In our first part of this two part series I gave an overview of the firefighting structure under the National Operational Directive to Combat Rural Fires, the way the command was exercised as the number of operatives deployed increased, the work of the Bombeiros, GNR Emergency Protection and Relief Unit (UEPS), Special Civil Protection Force (FEPC) and the GNR and PSP regulars.

This feature covers the work of the command centre personnel, pilots, INEM and Red Cross, Army, Municipalities, Airforce and ICNF.

CDOS

The civil protection operational structure comprises District Command and Control Centres (CDOS), which operate 24/7. They coordinate all the relief, emergency and assistance operations at the district level, guaranteeing or technical support and logistics necessary in situations considered emergency to the member organizations of Integrated System of Protection and Relief Operations. They do not deal with crime incidents nor do they operate as public call centres.

They are under the command of civil protection and personnel undertake various roles together with liaison officers from, Bombeiros, INEM, GNR, PSP and other and other civil protection agents. When a fire/incident



develops to a stage where it becomes more complex, and or additional resources from further afield are required, an incident command post is established on the ground. Here the incident commander will work with Teams that support him/her in the decision making to combat the fire or indeed in any other major catastrophe.

Incident command post

Like the CDOS, which deals simultaneously with all incidents in the district, the incident command post comprises personnel from the same entities, who maintain regular contact with their respective operational units on the ground. The CDOS is there to support the incident command post, obtaining the resources it needs, as well as specific advice, specific risk analysis and technical information. They are in regular communication throughout the incident.

Others present at the incident command post include Civil Protection and other technicians. Their work ranges from analysis of technical data, keeping records, communication and preparing information for the incident commander and dealing with the media.

Role of local Municipality

They play a vital role, as after all it is their area!

The incident command post will also include representatives from the local municipality to advise on opportunities and threats in respect of firefighting operations, based on their local knowledge and logistically to support the mission. Such logistical support and input for example could include evacuations both people and animals and provision of alternative accommodation, as well as other logistical support services that may be needed. As such they play a vital role and the mayor would be present at major events to provide close coordination.

Air support

The use of fixed wing firefighting aircraft and helicopters play a major role in firefighting. The number aircraft available at present is 60, comprising: 19 fixed wing aircraft, 16 for firefighting and three for coordination/ reconnaissance) and 41 helicopters (26 light, 12 medium and three heavy).

The deployment of light and medium helicopters is by CDOS, but for heavy helicopters and all fixed wing aircraft deployment needs the authorisation and deployment by the ANEPC headquarters. Air deployment co-ordination at the scene of an incident is by the incident commander through an air attack liaison officer.

The pilots of nearly all aircraft are civilian, some having previous Portuguese Air Force experience. Most aircraft are privately owned and the pilots engaged through public contracts managed by the Air Force.

In fires the final decision to fly rests with the pilot as he/she has the responsibility for the safety of the aircraft, crew having assessed operating conditions. The exception is in the case of an Air Force Reconnaissance aircraft which has been deployed.

In the initial attack on a fire when one or two helicopters maybe deployed, the crew are from the GNR UEPS, who are flown to the scene and are often the first to arrive in areas of difficult access. After offloading the helicopter will collect water to return to fight the fire. For observation helicopters the crew are from the Special Civil Protection Force to provide information for data analysis.

In operations wind is a factor in deployment and for fixed wing aircraft that scoop water, the amount of water available in reservoirs is a factor plus at sea the height of waves

INEM and Red Cross

As fires develop beyond the initial attack phase an ambulance is deployed to the fire scene. Their role is to provide immediate treatment to fire fighters and the population who may become injured during the fire and when not treatable at the scene, conveying them to hospital. In the most complex of fires this maybe under GNR escort. The Red Cross acts in support of this work. In very large fires INEM can provide specialist physiological support services on the ground during the aftermath of fires.

ICNF

In forest fires ICNF forest engineers advise the incident commander on the type of vegetation, say for instance eucalyptus, that maybe encountered during firefighting operations. This is important as this could have a bearing on the intensity of the fire, and how it is fought. This is coordinated by ICNF reporting to the incident commander.

Forest Sappers

Apart from the maintenance and protection of forest, their role is surveillance, first intervention and support for fighting rural fires, support for aftermath operations and active post-aftermath surveillance;

The Army

For the much larger rural fires the Army can be deployed depending on the need. Their main role would be provision of specialist vehicles such as large bulldozers. Much of their work would be in the consolidation and aftermath of fires rather than actual firefighting.

Land clearing bulldozers

One of the firefighting tactics is the use of large land cleaning tractors to clear areas at fire perimeters to try and prevent the fire spreading and also to clear tracks to help fire vehicles gain access to the fire itself. This was used to effect in the Gambelas, Faro fire in early July. Their deployment is coordinated by the incident commander. The ownership of these are private companies and the drivers are civilian. They are engaged through public contracts.

Lastly

In this two part feature the work of 15 entities has been covered, to provide an overview of their work in in major fires. When dealing with other major catastrophes, there will be other various specialists as well. Their work is diverse ranging from logistical support in the incident, to evacuations, to those who fight the fires either on the land or air. They all play a vital role acting as one coordinated team.

Author

David Thomas

President

Safe Communities Portugal

8th August 2022