

# Sustaining Black Sea Regional Preparedness through an Exercise Programme

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## Introduction

The Black Sea Littoral States cooperate in cases of major oil pollution under the framework of the Bucharest Convention and its Emergency Protocol. To implement practical and operational cooperation measures, a regional exercise programme was initially developed in the mid-2000s. This programme incorporates a variety of exercise types including notification/alert, table-top and major full-scale exercises.

The exercises facilitate familiarization with national and regional oil spill preparedness systems and procedures. This paper summarises the activities, achievements and lessons learned from the programme in the decade to 2017.

## Main Results

### *Regional co-operation framework*

In recognition of the need to manage pollution threats to the Black Sea in a coordinated manner, the six countries bordering the Sea signed the *Convention on the Protection of the Black Sea Against Pollution* in 1992 (the 'Bucharest Convention'). In addition, the countries also developed the *Protocol on Co-operation in Combating Pollution of the Black Sea Marine Environment by Oil and Other Harmful Substances in Emergency Situations, 1992* (the 'Emergency Protocol') under the Bucharest Convention. This Emergency Protocol is the basis for the Black Sea Contingency Plan, which is an operational document describing the framework of regional cooperation mechanisms and mutual support during major oil spills. It is important to note that this regional plan coordinates the littoral States' national oil spill contingency plans – it does not supersede or replace them.

The regional plan was developed by a dedicated working group with participants from all the littoral States and with support and assistance from the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The Black Sea Commission's Advisory Group on Environmental Safety Aspects of Shipping (AG ESAS) approved the plan before it was submitted to the Commission for final adoption. The content and format of the plan were based on the precedents and experiences from other regions, such as the North Sea, Baltic Sea, Mediterranean Sea and the Caribbean Sea, where similar arrangements are in place. The plan is also fully consistent with the OPRC Convention. A series of national and regional oil spill training courses were organised in the Black Sea between 2003 and 2006 to help build knowledge and capacity, with IMO funding and support from the oil and shipping industries. Also, under biannual MoUs between Black Sea Commission and IMO, implemented in 2012/13 and 2014/15, the Black Sea Commission promoted the regional implementation of IMO's Integrated Technical Co-operation Programme (ITCP) regarding marine pollution prevention and response for the Black Sea Region. In this period a number of capacity building activities were successfully carried out in the region.

### *Regional exercise guidelines*

Regional exercise guidelines were developed in 2005 to facilitate the operational implementation and use of the Black Sea Contingency Plan. They were based on those used in the Baltic Sea and published guidance from the IMO/IPIECA at the time (now replaced by IPIECA-IOGP, 2014). A series of communication and table-top exercises were held over a two-year period to enable the

operational authorities of the littoral States to become familiar with the regional plan's detail and procedures. The culmination of this preparatory work was the first major oil spill exercise to involve all the littoral States as participants or observers, hosted by Turkey in 2007.

The exercise guidelines define five types of exercises:

ALPHA: Synthetic or Table-top Exercise  
BRAVO: Alarm or Communication Exercise  
CHARLIE: Equipment Deployment Exercise  
DELTA: Operational Exercise (full-scale, often incorporating CHARLIE exercising)  
ECHO: State-of-the-art Exercise

In practice, the primary focus of the activities has been on ALPHA, BRAVO and DELTA exercises. In 2015 an ECHO Exercise was also carried out back-to-back with 24<sup>th</sup> AG ESAS meeting. The guidelines also provide information concerning reporting on activities, administration / organizational aspects of exercises, planning / evaluation of DELTA exercises and related financial considerations.

#### *Sustainability of the programme*

It is recognized that co-ordination of exercises activities is necessary; this is achieved through activities of the AG ESAS group and relevant decisions of the Black Sea Commission (main implementation body under Bucharest Convention). An outline schedule of events and which littoral State will lead them is agreed, with a long-term horizon (up to 10 years for DELTA exercises). In principle, it is aimed to undertake an ALPHA exercise annually, three to four BRAVO exercises each year and DELTA exercises biennially. Practicalities can lead to delays in the implementation of activities, but the schedule can be revisited and revised at the annual AG ESAS meetings. These meetings also provide the forum for feedback and sharing of lessons learned from exercises.

#### *BRAVO exercises*

Maintaining familiarity with the communications procedures and the regional pollution reporting (POLREP) system in the Black Sea Contingency Plan is fundamental to sustaining the regional co-operation mechanism. BRAVO exercises are relatively low cost, as they do not involve travel and can be completed in a few hours at most. Since 2007, the region has undertaken around three BRAVO exercises per year.

#### *DELTA exercises*

Full-scale exercises such as BRAVO require significant planning and commitment of time and resources. They enable a testing of a national system within the regional co-operation framework. Whilst the aspiration is to hold biennial DELTA events, challenges with resources has led to following exercises, locations and host countries since their inception in 2007:

2007: Exercise SULH - Eregli, Turkey (Taylor *et al*, 2011)

2009: Exercise RODELTA - Constanta, Romania (Black Sea Commission, 2009)

2011: Exercise GEODELTA - Batumi, Georgia (Gegenava and Sharabidze, 2013)

2016: Exercise RUDELTA - Novorossiysk, Russian Federation

Each of these exercises has incorporated the deployment of search and rescue activities and oil pollution response on water and shorelines, alongside the establishment of command and control facilities. The DELTA exercises have integrated personnel from multiple national organizations, whilst interfacing with the regional system and international support. Numbers involved in DELTA exercises have exceeded over 250 persons. Videos have been produced of some exercises, to help communicate their value to a wider audience. For example, a professional video of the Exercise SULH is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhuwDnaGgCo>.

### *International dimension*

The participation of the private sector and international (out of region) organizations has added realism to the DELTA exercises. The oil and shipping industries have contributed assets and personnel to pollution scenarios, alongside support from commercial and not-for-profit oil spill response providers. The international organizations have assisted in elements such as the inclusion of compensation and claims procedures and provided evaluation support. In 2016 the Black Sea Commission also took a decision to finance representatives of the Black Sea countries from its regular budget to attend future DELTA Exercises.

### *Lessons learned*

The evaluation of exercises generates a variety of lessons; these are used to improve contingency plans and future exercise activities. Key recurring points from the last decade of events have been that exercises:

- ✓ Demonstrate commitment of the nations and regions to be prepared.
- ✓ Facilitate network building extended across boundaries.
- ✓ Provide communication tests for the regional mechanisms.
- ✓ Need clear objectives to measuring success and progress.
- ✓ Encourage preparatory activities that are inherently valuable.
- ✓ Require political and financial support to enable them to take place.

### **Conclusion**

The Black Sea exercise programme is an integral part of the regional preparedness framework and enables countries around the Black Sea to co-operate and coordinate in case of major oil pollution incidents. The region is undoubtedly better prepared to work together to address the challenges of a major oil pollution incident because of this programme. The programme is evergreen and needs to be sustained into the foreseeable future to maintain preparedness levels.

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