

Implementing a regional exercise programme in the Caspian Sea region

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The littoral States of the Caspian Sea - Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russian Federation and Turkmenistan - cooperate in cases of major oil pollution under the Protocol Concerning Regional Preparedness, Response and Cooperation in Combating Oil Pollution Incidents (the 'Aktau Protocol' to Tehran Convention¹). This establishes the framework for mutual support and reciprocal assistance between national response systems. It is implemented through a regional plan of cooperation, drafted and formatted in alignment to International Maritime Organization (IMO) guidance.

The regional plan facilitates emergency communications and offers of oil pollution combating capability or expertise, through a pollution reporting (POLREP) system. The plan incorporates a programme of testing and exercising to ensure its purpose is understood by all parties and its operational procedures are familiar to them. These procedures include the delegation of 24/7 national operational contact points, and Competent National Authorities entitled to request assistance or to decide to render requested assistance in cases of oil pollution incidents.

A series of regional exercises has been undertaken, commencing in July 2020. The pandemic imposed a requirement that the exercises be held virtually. Whilst the lack of face-to-face meeting has downsides in terms of interactions and network building, the virtual environment has provided some constructive elements, including cost savings, greater participation and more frequent events.

Initial exercise activities have focussed on the POLREP system, emphasising the need for clearly identified national operational contact points with knowledge of the agreed communication procedures. This has paved the way to expanded exercise scenarios to include offers of assistance and their technical or financial aspects. The exercise programme is coordinated by the Tehran Convention Interim Secretariat (United Nations Environment Programme's Europe Office) and all the five Caspian Sea littoral States have participated in each event. The Oil Spill Preparedness Regional Initiative (OSPRI) – a voluntary industry effort - has also supported the events, including sharing international experience, including from the Black Sea region.

To assist with implementation, exercise guidelines have been drafted. They are based on those used in other regions (Baltic Sea and Black Sea). The 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 virtual activities undertaken in Caspian so far have been a hybrid of ALPHA and BRAVO exercises. The guidelines also provide information concerning reporting on activities, administration / organizational aspects of exercises, planning / evaluation of DELTA exercises and related financial considerations.

Lessons learned from activities to date include:

- The fundamentals of cooperation (knowing whom to call and having rapid procedures to make requests for assistance) are squarely addressed by the regional plan.
- Simultaneous translation (English/Russian) was effective, and Zoom is now settled as the preferred platform for the virtual events.
- There were issues with connectivity for some events, due to local internet issues. Overall the large majority of participants had adequate bandwidth and stable access to meetings.

¹ See <https://tehranconvention.org/en/home>.

- The pollution reporting system requires practice and has some elements which may be less familiar to non-maritime personnel. A YouTube tutorial was developed to explain the POLREP (<https://youtu.be/K8f5sRBTrnI>) and build knowledge of how to complete it.
- The financial procedures and potential claims or reimbursement during an oil pollution incident are key aspects. To further clarify questions arising about the international compensation regime for oil spills from shipping, key documents in the IOPC Funds' Claims Information Pack (<https://iopcfunds.org/publications/iopc-funds-publications/>) are being translated into Russian.

The series of exercises is fostering the development of a functional network for cooperation in the Caspian. It is anticipated that the exercise programme will incorporate physical events as pandemic restrictions ease. However, the virtual platform is likely to provide a continuing and beneficial forum for some table-top elements.