

Interim Joint Committee – Rescue cooperation in the Barents region
Chair: Norway 2008 (Ms. Bente Michaelsen)
Finland 2009 (Mr. Timo Viitanen)

Annual report 2008

The most important task within the rescue cooperation in the Barents region has been to finalize the Agreement between the Governments in the Barents Euro-Arctic Region on cooperation within the field of emergency prevention, preparedness and response.

The last negotiations were held in Kirkenes in April 2008. The Russian Federation hosted a signing ceremony in Moscow on 11 December 2008 with participants from all the Parties to the Agreement.

In the north, we are dependent on our neighbours. The Barents Region is a huge region with long distances and scarcely located rescue resources. It has also a cold climate and rough weather. In many search and rescue operations, the time factor is critical. Rescue resources may be located closer in a neighbouring country. A well-established search and rescue cooperation across borders can therefore be of vital importance to ensure a successful rescue operation.

The signing of this Agreement represents a new era within the rescue cooperation in the Barents Region. The purpose of the Agreement is to further develop and increase the rescue cooperation between the four countries in the region. The Agreement will act as a basis for mutual assistance, including the use of cross border rescue resources and rescue personnel. The Agreement will play an important role in preventing large consequences of incidents and accidents.

The new Agreement also allows for regional or local agreements and arrangements. To ensure a successful rescue operation, it is of vital importance that local actors across borders know each other and have established contact points and routines for cooperation before the accidents or incidents occur. We are therefore welcoming local agreements and cooperation at several levels and fields, such as for example health, fire and local rescue actors.

The Agreement has not yet entered into force, but will do so on the thirtieth day following the receipt of the last written notification to the Depositary, which is the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, of the implementation by the Contracting Parties of the internal state procedures necessary for the entry into force of this Agreement.

We encourage all the Parties to the Agreement to submit, as soon as possible, the necessary notes to the Depositary, allowing for the entry into force of the Agreement.

The Committee had two meetings in 2008, one in Kirkenes on 21-23 April and one on the vessel MS Trollfjord (from Bodø to Kirkenes) on 17-21 November, with the participation of the European Commission at the last meeting.

The Committee is engaged, through its national delegations, in the planning of the exercise Barents Rescue 2009. The Agreement will form an important basis for the exercise Barents Rescue 2009 to be arranged in the Murmansk Region and hopefully some of its provisions

will be exercised. Further details and development of exercise will be discussed at the Main Planning Conference to be held by the EMERCOM in Murmansk in March 2009. The Committee, as such, will in the future endeavour to be an active participant in relation to the exercises Barents Rescue.

Finland has taken the lead in a planned project called "Enhancing the Emergency Preparedness in the Barents Region". Finland has invited Sweden, the Russian Federation and Norway to participate in the programme. It is expected that the project will start soon in 2009 and that the project will apply for finances through the KOLARCTIC programme.

The Committee is continuing its work to develop electronic maps of the Barents Region, which identify the location of rescue resources. To be able to refine the maps, financial support would be necessary. Hopefully, the development of the maps can be a part of the new project "Enhancing the emergency preparedness in the Barents Region".

The Committee has also developed a Barents Joint Manual (for operational use). The Manual contains inter alia the contact points to which address requests of assistance. The Manual will soon be distributed after its final review.

The Committee has for several meetings been working on a fax sheet regarding early warning and request of assistance. The Committee agreed to the layout and the content of the fax sheet as it now stands. The aim is to use the fax sheet during the next exercise, e.g. Exercise Barents Rescue 2009.

The Committee is in the process of developing aims and objectives of the Joint Committee with the aim to finalize it in the near future.

The Committee notes that the European Commissions Arctic Strategy focuses on the challenges in the northern regions, contains EU policy in the area and represents the basis for further discussions. The Strategy supports the conclusion of the above-mentioned Agreement.

Plans for 2009:

The next meeting of the Committee will be held in Finland late spring 2009 under the chairmanship of Finland. Venue and time to be confirmed. The meeting will focus on following and, if necessary, promoting the implementation of the agreement on rescue cooperation in the Barents Region. The Committee aims at concluding its Terms of Reference in 2009 irrespective of the implementation process. The Committee is going to discuss the relationship with CSO and put forward proposals accordingly.

"Enhancing the Emergency Preparedness in the Barents Region" -project will be a key topic with Committee members assisting the actors in finding each other for a successful final result. Additional partners may be found in Arctic Council's EPPR working group in its annual meeting in March.

Committee representatives follow the planning of Barents 2009 exercise in their respective countries and, if proves necessary, support coordination between the countries.