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Cooperation of public services at the scene of Szczekociny railway catastrophe on 3rd March, 2012

Summary

The article presents the cooperation of the National Fire Brigades, Medical Services and the Police at the scene of the biggest railway catastrophe during a few dozen years. The accident occurred on 3rd March, 2012 in Szczekociny (Poland). Several public services of various ranges of competence performed their duties with an aim of achieving common aims such as: aiding surviving victims, securing the scene and physical evidence, as well as restoring the state from before the catastrophe. A short description of the situation during that evening and recollection of the course of action shows in this tragic context not only the effort and tremendous work of the services but also the areas that still require additional attention such as, for example, isolating the scene, setting up a media point or communication between services at the incident scene.

Keywords: Szczekociny, cooperation, collaboration of services, incident scene, catastrophe, railway catastrophe, crisis situation, rescue operation

The ability of interaction between services at the scene of crisis is one of the most important factors that many times determine the success of a rescue operation. In the vast majority of countries, including Poland, the leading roles are played by Fire Brigades, Medical Services and the Police. It was no different during one of the biggest railway catastrophes in the last several dozen years. The tragic event occurred on 3rd March, 2012 in a small town of Szczekociny on the border between Silesian and Świętokrzyskie voivodeships. Two passenger trains collided after they had been directed on the same track. The striking power was so high that the front parts of the trains were almost completely crushed.

It is difficult to describe with words the immensity of destruction faced by the persons who came to rescue of the victims trapped in the carriages of the feral trains. Not the very sight was the most frightening but the awareness that there may be dead passengers in the destroyed carriages. It was hard to reject this thought at the sight of the remains of the trains. Still, there was hope that some surviving persons remained in those parts.

From 21:00, the moment of receiving the notification by one of the passengers on the train (a police officer off duty) by the Area Police Command

in Zawiercie, rescue services began a race with time to save from the trains as many people, as possible.

A serious impediment of the operation were the environmental conditions, that is the coming dusk and the wooded area. However, already a few minutes after the notification, the first firefighters, ambulances and police patrols arrived. Three departments, with different competences, had to act in such a way as to minimize the effects of what happened on the Szczekociny track.

The competences and duty scope of services in such situations are determined by the specific legal acts, procedures and algorithms developed. The success of the operation depends on their mastering, ability to control one's emotions and great commitment. Three services must align almost perfectly to avoid duplicating the efforts, not to interfere with one another, but on the contrary - to support each other and achieve the highest possible level of performance. Only a demagogue would claim that at the scene of such an event everything goes like clockwork, because - I dare say - it is simply impossible. There is always chaos because it accompanies every such event. The primary goal is to take control over this chaos in the shortest possible time and to get things done according to

the procedures in place. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to continuously improve the competencies of the commanding officers and heads of each service.

Undoubtedly, this catastrophe demonstrated high professionalism of all the services present at the scene, although the operation was not free from faults. In case of such incidents, it is very important to identify the leading service, i.e. the one which will be in command of the activities, but is also important to understand the need to report to that service by the commanding officers of the remaining teams. A so-called security network precisely points to the service authorized to command in a crisis situation. Based on analysis of the situation in Szczekociny it is possible to conclude that the relevant services in Poland are well prepared to joint operation and mutual support in handling the effects of a crisis.

I will briefly present the course of events:

On 3rd March, 2012 at 21:00 the officer on duty at the Police Command in Zawiercie received a notice of railway catastrophe from one of the participating passengers who also indicating the approximate location.

The officer on duty immediately directed to the scene a patrol from Szczekociny police station, as well as traffic police and constable patrols from Zawiercie Police Command. He notified the officer on duty of the Fire Brigade in Zawiercie, medical emergency service, the officer on duty in Katowice Voivodeship Police Command, the District Prosecutor in Myszków and the Commanders of Zawiercie Police Command.

A point of controlling the traffic of services participating in the rescue operation was set up on the road leading to the scene of catastrophe.

Forces from the district prevention units in Kielce and Katowice were relocated to the scene.

The procedure of isolating the scene was implemented in order to prevent unauthorized access by third persons to the scene. A "0" zone was established to grant safety of the rescue operation conducted by the Fire Brigades and the Emergency Medical Service.

Already at 21:50, to ensure appropriate coordination of the activities, a Police Operation "TORY" (railtrack) was launched and jr. insp. Zbigniew Klimus, 1st Deputy of Silesian Voivodeship Commander of the Police was appointed the Commanding Officer. In addition to that a suboperation "KATASTROFA" was ordered with suboperation Commanding Officer: jr. insp. Janusz Cizak, 1st Deputy of Zawiercie Police Commander.

Operation and Suboperation Staffs were established and Katowice Voivodeship Police Command Operation Centre was made operational. At that time the Author was Head of Staff Department

in Katowice Voivodeship Police Headquarters. The Author attended the scene to organise and control the activities of "TORY" Operation Commanding Officer's Staff. At the same time, during the 4th hour since the catastrophe the officers of Crisis Management Team in the Staff of Katowice Voivodeship Command reported on duty and made active the Operating Centre where all the proceedings connected with the catastrophe were coordinated from.

The procedure of handling corpses or human remains was launched. Corpse/Human Debris Identification Cards, as well as Dead Bodies/Human Debris Register Book were issued.

Psychologists from Voivodeship Police Command were directed to the scene.

For the needs of Operation Commanding Officer Mobile Command Post and two Communication Support vehicles were directed to the scene.

In agreement with the Rescue Activities Leader (KDR) a corpse storage point was established based on resources of the National Fore Brigades. All the proceedings related to handling recovered dead bodies or human remains were conducted under supervision of the Prosecutor present at the scene.

The area within a radius of several dozen hundred meters from the train was searched for any injured persons.

A helpline for relatives of victims was set up at the Operating Centre in Katowice Voivodeship Police Command. Information of the place of hospitalizing victims was given by means of that line.

At the scene of the catastrophe the first briefing of the Voivodeship Crisis Management Team was held. The participants included heads of the services attending the scene, representatives of the Railways and local authorities.

At 4.45 a.m. the rescue operation was finished and appropriate services commenced collection and recovery of traces and physical evidence:

- witnesses were identified and interviewed,
- identification of fatal victims was commenced,
- the recorder of speed and breaking distance of one of the trains was secured,
- train dispatchers from Straszycy and Sprowy control rooms,
- documents recovered according to pretrial regulations in Straszycy and Sprowy control rooms, Włoszczowa and Sędziszów Exploitation Section were examined,
- no. 3 and no. 4 railroad crossings were inspected.
- identification and handing over of objects belonging to the passengers was coordinated.

In the railway catastrophe 16 persons died and 58 sustained injuries. The total number of police officers participating in the rescue operation as 488, and addition to that 8 civilian Police employees and

65 vehicles were used. The total cost of the police activities amounted to **108 691,11 PLN**.

In addition to that, the following policemen from Świętokrzyskie voivodeship took part in the operation:

- Jędrzejów Police Command: 2 policemen,
- Włoszczowa Police Command: 6 policemen,
- Kielce District Police Command: 44 policemen.

During the activities supporting “TORY” operation police officers made **1367 telephone calls** amounting to **50 hours** (data from communication record in the Operation Centre, post of officer on duty in Katowice Voivodeship Command).

As it turned out during this operation it was more difficult to prevent representatives of local and national administration entering the isolated zone. This resulted from the fact that not all persons authorized to access the incident scene were appropriately identified. Lack of clear marking, such as, e.g. vests caused difficulties in differentiating persons that were allowed to be in the zone from third persons and ordinary members of the public. This required performing many additional activities connected to justifying the presence of each person in the zone.

An additional problem was the decision made by Government Protection Bureau allowing journalists to enter the “O” zone, which significantly impaired assuring security of representatives of the highest state authorities and disorganised the work of rescue services.

The analysis of this particular situation lead to formulation of the following conclusions:

1. When being present in the isolated zone one has to strictly respect the orders of the Rescue Operation Managing Officer (usually the officer of the Fire Brigades) who is obliged to making such decisions and directs persons out of the marked zone with the help of police officers making the cordon.
2. The media point at the crime scene is set up - according to adopted procedures – outside of the zone and that is where the media coverage and press conferences should take place.

It should be mentioned that the Silesian Voivodeship has in recent years a few times been touched by tragic incident of crisis character (1997 flood, 2010 collapse of the Exhibition Hall, 2006 methane explosion in Halemba Coalmine). Because of that, police officers of Silesian Garrison who were involved in rescue operations had gained experience and skills and able to act quickly, effectively and professionally. to neutralize the threat.

Those unfortunate incidents led to elaboration of the ways of proceeding by the police officers directed to the operation and thus “Portable procedure for coordinator of crisis activities performed by...” was created.

The document was prepared by the Crisis Management Team of Katowice Voivodeship Police Command Staff in consultation with police psychologists. The cost of its publication and print was covered from the funds of Silesian Voivode.

The tasks of the police in case of natural disasters and technical disorders are strictly defined by relevant regulations. The appropriate knowledge of activities performed jointly with non-police institutions results in efficiency of support services at the scene and its direct vicinity. These procedures are used by the leaders of units and sections of both services and local institutions until the present day.

The issue of using uniform radio communication at the scene deserves particular attention. The common radio channel, B-112 is actually meant for the needs of various services in crisis situations but according to my observations the habit of using it has not established itself yet. It is necessary to emphasise that quick and reliable communication is among the most important elements of professional operation of the services at the scene.

This situation and many others have demonstrated the importance of cooperation of the services. In Author’s opinion it is one of the conditions of successful operation at the scene of incident.

Translation Ewa Nogacka