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Exclusive - Reaction To Government Decision To Allow Repairs

The following is an opinion written by Joe Bishop an Emergency Management Consultant who has been involved in Emergency Crisis teams across the world including the Mexico Earthquake.

HMS Tireless – “Responsible Care and Risk Communication”

An Independent View by Joe Bishop MBE Emergency Management Consultant

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Over the last few weeks we have seen the MOD using every possible avenue to allay fears surrounding the incident onboard HMS Tireless. These have ranged from statements explaining that public safety is the MOD's number one priority, that the population of Gibraltar has nothing to fear, that the MOD will keep us informed throughout these events and last but not least, the passionate and understandable remarks by the Commander British Forces in his role as father and head of family, not wishing to expose his family to any hazard.

Having been involved over the last thirty years in the field of emergency/disaster management, the last ten as independent consultant, and as a member of the community likely to be affected in the event of an accident, I sit and watch with disbelief, the direction the "Tireless fiasco" is taking.

No matter how much effort the MOD puts into steering the situation back on a straight course in the hope of building public confidence, they will have little or no success. The MOD, has been overtaken by events and are now facing a 'no-win' situation with the community in Gibraltar. This no-win situation has come about as the direct result of sub-standard risk communication before the incident, between the MOD and the population of Gibraltar (the population at risk). As any professional Emergency Manager will tell you, during an incident or in its immediate aftermath, is not the ideal time to build confidence, get people to listen to your advise or win friends and support.

When we talk about risk communication and preparedness for response, one cannot ignore the major role played by the general public as 'main stakeholders' and those whose personal safety is threatened. Risk communication can be described as "an interactive process of exchange of information and opinions among individuals, groups and institutions concerning risk, or potential risk to human health

or the environment". In other words, the general public has to be brought into the emergency planning loop from the very start of the process, and not once the submarine 'springs a leak' resulting in failure of containment of radioactivity. The MOD should be aware, that in any crisis (let alone one associated with a nuclear submarine and the public's perceived fear of radiation, "the dread factor") by definition, there is almost never any time, to bring together representatives of the general public to determine their needs and concern.

In addition, risk communication is firmly based on credibility, transparency and timely information provided by the MOD. Sadly, the MOD are also representatives of the British Government, who over the last ten years have had their credibility and transparency completely eroded in Gibraltar, as the direct result of their inaction on foreign policy vis-à-vis our neighbours. So when a spokesperson stands in front of the television cameras to reassure the public and says "Trust me, I represent the MOD and the British Government", people have difficulty in taking them seriously.

When the MOD first decided years ago to use Gibraltar as a berth for nuclear submarines, community awareness and risk communication programmes should have been established. These should have included full community participation (trade unions, parents associations, church representatives, pressure groups, associations for the disabled and others) in consultation, risk assessment and risk management of the installations. This is over and above any participation by representatives from the Government of Gibraltar. Awareness and preparedness for emergencies is a tripartite programme, involving the community, the Government and in this case the MOD.

The placing of a Nuclear Submarine Contingency Plan (the Plan) at the John Mackintosh does little to promote risk communication. The Plan contains information on technical issues, operational information, command and control procedures, alert and evacuation messages, risk communication etc all encompassed in the same document. It uses technical jargon, fails to separate crucial public information, lacks a pictorial approach, it is not written in simple layman's term, is not a user-friendly document and is confusing to say the least. So, as a public risk communication document, designed to create public awareness of the risk and advise in a clear, concise and a non-confusing manner on specific courses of actions for public preparedness and response in the event of an emergency, this document falls far short of its objectives.

In addition the MOD makes some unrealistic assumptions with this document, it assumes that:

1. Everybody living in or around Gibraltar and likely to be affected the emergency, is able bodied, can walk to the John Mackintosh Hall and climb two flights of stairs.
2. We can all read English, so those Spanish, Moroccans, Portuguese, etc who cannot read the 'mother tongue' or are illiterate, will be unable to react on the day.

3. Everyone in Gibraltar who is able bodied and reads English has the required level of education and technical knowledge to interpret the instructions, buried amongst paragraph after paragraph of operational and technical jargon, of no particular interest or use to the general public.

4. If more than one person at a time decides to study the plan, serious logistics problems are going to be encountered.

I get the distinct feeling that the MOD by displaying the Plan at a central point, honestly belief it's meeting its obligations under 'responsible care' to keep the public informed. Well, In the event of a major accident involving the nuclear berth and affecting a large number of the public, I am of the professional opinion that the MOD would have a difficult time convincing any judge presiding over a public inquiry, that their risk communication initiatives with the general public in Gibraltar before the accident, where carried out as far as practicable or where reasonable in the circumstances. If now the MOD turns round and explains, that this is what the normal practice is in the UK, then I will have to say that they've got it wrong there as well.

If, as stated on the media the MOD is genuinely concerned about public safety, would it not be proper for them to publish data on the frequency and results of their public evaluations/sampling? How often have they have walked our streets and spoken to a good cross-section of the community. Have they made any effort to find out the level of risk awareness amongst the public, what percentage of the public has read the Plan, knowledge of alerts and evacuation, are people satisfied with the information available, does the public understand and agree with the Plan etc etc. After all the MOD is expecting from the public a change in behaviour in the event of an emergency. Should they not be interested in how the public is likely to react? Is the MOD assuming that everyone at risk has studied the Plan, they understand it, they feel comfortable with it and they have nothing to say or contribute? Are members of the public being treated like military personnel and expected to follow orders and instructions without question?

Risk communication is about proactive dialogue, not a monologue on the part of the MOD. In the global village where those affected by a risk are demanding more and more involvement in planning, consultation and decision-making, this approach seems outdated in the extreme.

It is the duty of the MOD and indeed any industry posing a major accident hazard, to embark on meaningful, effective and efficient risk communication programmes with those communities living within the predicted risk zone. This initiatives should include presentations and lectures to the general public, school programmes, risk awareness programmes, community participation at every step of the risk assessment and risk management, distribution of newsletters, information pamphlets, booklets and fact sheets, WebPages, articles in newspapers highlighting the risks and response preparedness action required, open days to demonstrate (within security constraints) the equipment,

systems and procedures in place to safeguard public safety. These are jus but a few of 'Positive Safety Action Initiatives' that should have been established years ago, not now that the horse has bolted.

Risk communication must be a rolling programme and not just an initiative that "surfaces" when a crisis arises.

The MOD has demonstrated an unwillingness and inability to see the public as equal partners in risk decisions making and to understand how the public as stakeholders, value systems and risk differently. Their lack of investment in a meaningful public awareness and information programme, coupled with their belief that a Contingency Plan displayed at the John Mackintosh Hall, is the answer to risk communication and public response preparedness, brings into question their values and commitment to a community at risk.

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