

Exercise Northstar VI

Singapore

– Background

Following the success of Exercise Northstar V held on 8th January 2006 that was modeled after the multiple terror attacks on the public transport networks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), Singapore authorities conducted another large-scale civil emergency exercise this year. Codenamed Exercise Northstar VI, the exercise on 23rd May 2008 took on a whole new and different dimension in the form of a maritime civil emergency involving a fire and rescue scenario onboard a large cruise ship.

The conduct of the Exercise Northstar VI was timely in allowing authorities to stress test the collective capabilities of a multi-agency response in handling a large scale maritime incident within Singapore waters. This is against the backdrop of ferry incidents in recent years such as the bomb attack on a Superferry in central Philippines in October 2004 that resulted in the loss of 116 victims (presumed to have died in the fire that broke out) and the Kinmen-Xiamen ferry fire incident in February 2008. The Maritime and Port Authority (MPA) of Singapore is the Incident Manager for all maritime civil emergencies while the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF) spearheaded the planning and conduct of the exercise.



MPA Fire Fighting

Witnessed by Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Wong Kan Seng, Exercise Northstar VI involved about 1600 personnel from 12 agencies including the SCDF, Star Cruises and Singapore Cruise Centre, Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), Maritime and Port Authority (MPA), Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), Ministry of Health (MOH), Ministry of Transport (MOT), People's Association (PA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Singapore Police Force (SPF).

– Exercise objectives

Exercise Northstar VI was specifically designed to validate the response plans of MPA as the Incident Manager and other supporting agencies under the Passenger Vessel Mishap Contingency Plan (PVMCP). In particular, 8 key segments of the PVMCP were tested: shipboard fire fighting and rescue; seaward fire fighting and rescue; evacuation of passengers; management of landing points by the Landward Operations Committees (LOCs); incident management by the Emergency Operations Committee (EOC); casualty management; handling of

Next-of-Kins (NOKs) at the Family Assistance Centre (FAC); and media management.

– **Conduct of exercise**

The maritime exercise was conducted during the actual operating hours of the ferry terminal. This allowed the key stakeholders and responders to have a more realistic appreciation in responding to a maritime incident. To further inject a sense of realism, the cruise ship SuperStar Aquarius with its 13 decks of accommodation and recreational facilities for 2800 passengers and crew members, was used for the exercise.

The full troop exercise unfolded with a simulated fire at the galley of the ship. While cruise ships are generally very safe with the necessary compliance with international requirements, the huge fire was simulated for the purpose of testing the evacuation procedure. This was followed by the immediate response from key agencies such as MPA, the Police Coast Guard (PCG) and the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN). As a result of the fire that spread, a mass casualty situation developed. To simulate casualties, about 1000 personnel, with various types of simulated injuries depicting burns and puncture wounds, participated as role-players on the ship. Another 300 participants role-played as family members or next-of-kins.

The ship’s crew was also exercised in the scenario and conducted swift and effective on board firefighting. In addition, they had to manage the safe evacuation of passengers from the ship to two designated “landing points,” namely Marina South Pier (MSP) and Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal (TMFT). The MPA provided seaward boundary-cooling operations support to ensure that the fire did not spread and also assisted in the evacuation of passengers to the landing points. The PCG assisted in enforcing a sea cordon and regulating the flow of seaward traffic around the SuperStar Aquarius. There was also a heli-evacuation of two simulated casualties conducted by the Republic of Singapore Air Force. Triaging of casualties and the administration of first aid and pre-hospital care were carried out on-shore by MOH medical teams, supported by SCDF, the SAF and the Singapore Red Cross.



The “off-site” exercise points also included Changi General Hospital which received casualties from both landing points. As with Exercise Northstar V, the concept of the Family Assistance Centre (FAC) was exercised once again. For this exercise, the Changi-Simei Community Club, which is located near TMFT, was designated as the FAC. The FAC, managed by the SPF with the support of MCYS Care Teams, People’s Association, and Grassroots Leaders and Volunteers, served as the focal point for families and next-of-kin to get up-to-date information. Care counsellors at the centre also helped to calm anxious relatives and loved ones.

Noting the busy nature of the Singapore port and territorial waters, the MPA with SCDF and other related agencies, worked together with the shipping community, cruise ship operators, and ferry terminal operators to minimise the inconvenience to ferry-commuters and operators. Unlike the previous exercise, Exercise Northstar VI was not held as a surprise exercise; the date, time and other general information about the exercise were made known to the public ahead of time. This outreach effort was done through a proactive publicity campaign

comprising media announcements, feature stories and interviews. In addition, pamphlets detailing necessary information on the exercise were placed at strategic locations such as the ferry terminals; travel agents were also given copies of the pamphlets so that they could advise their customers who were intending to travel during the exercise period.

– **Conclusion**

The conduct of Exercise Northstar VI is a critical component of Singapore’s on-going efforts to enhance maritime safety within Singapore waters. The exercise clearly brought out the reality and challenges of mounting a large scale, multi-agency maritime rescue and evacuation operation. The exercise has been a good platform for the various Homefront agencies to also come together to look at a new front of possible terror attacks on Singapore. Consequence management for maritime terror attacks would present unique challenges, entailing large amounts of manpower, resources, coordination, and also cross border issues; Exercise Northstar VI has allowed for critical operational gaps to be surfaced and addressed. Overall, Northstar VI has been a timely exercise as Singapore continues to push in the development to be a major shipping/cruise hub.

– **Contact details**

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