

# South Africa's cross border disaster response



Ian Scher, the CEO of Rescue South Africa, tells **Hilary Phillips** about the challenges met by this heavy rescue unit and how its is called upon for cross-border operations and training

*A punch-through shear building collapse at Little Falls, Roodepoort, South Africa. The red cone indicates a casualty located in a highly unstable zone*

Hugh Price-Hughes

void within the services, so our next move was to approach National Disaster Management and, through that organisation, an approach was made to INSARAG (United Nations International Urban Search and Rescue Advisory Group). This organisation, in turn, approached USAID for assistance, which appointed Fairfax and LA Counties, the official American international response teams, to come to South Africa and set up a 'Train the trainer' course.

"This very successful course was run in May 2000, and 26 USAR instructors were trained. The same year, under the mentorship of some of the American instructors, these trainers went on to train a further 60 USAR technicians. All in all, it was a very successful year for urban search and rescue in South Africa.

"During further discussions Rescue South

on our return to South Africa the serious work of research and development started. Out of this, in 2001, a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) company was formed.

Colin Deiner (CRJ 5:1), then a Divisional Chief at Boksburg Fire Department, developed a training course for USAR technicians from research he had carried out. He has since trained some 180 USAR technicians.

## FILLING A VOID

"Over the following years many of the senior officers involved with Rescue South Africa and the training either moved out of the emergency services or were promoted within their departments," explains Scher. "This created a

## IAN SCHER



Ian Scher is CEO of Rescue South Africa  
Megan Elliott

Africa and USAID explored the possibility of training further afield, not only in Gauteng Province but nationally and in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region (see footnote). A major stumbling block was identified in the lack of our own equipment; until then we had always used the local emergency services' equipment. A proposal was put forward and USAID undertook to fund a training cache. This was purchased over the next 12 months."

Having come through the initial steps of training and development, and the purchase of a training cache, Rescue South Africa is, with USAID, exploring an ambitious two to three

## Rescue South Africa is exploring an ambitious training plan

year training plan to cover from grass-roots level to complex USAR technician courses.

"The decision to form Rescue South Africa was taken because we felt it would be the easiest way for this group of specialists to operate under one umbrella body. The rationale behind this was that while some of the officers had left the service or moved on from their positions, they were still available to offer their expertise in times of need. It was envisaged that they would facilitate the training and development of USAR in South Africa, advising current departments on the formation and equipping of task forces to participate in complex rescues.

"It was also decided to keep Rescue South Africa a volunteer unit. We've managed to create a situation where the honour of responding with the task team puts us in the unique position of being able to select the very best available rescuers. When a rescue requires team selection this has, at times, created a problem: no-one wants to be left behind."

As a group, Rescue South Africa also assists in the selection of specialists who fall outside the emergency service fraternity, such as engineers and riggers; they too respond under the banner of the NGO.

Other projects Rescue South Africa is involved in:

- Formation of an Advanced Life Support volunteer corps for the City of Johannesburg;
- Formation of an USAR task force for the Province of Gauteng;
- Formation of an USAR task force for the Free State Province;
- Training programmes for basic firefighting at community level;
- Awareness programmes for swiftwater rescue for communities exposed to this risk;
- Assisting national government



with USAR equipment selection for a national task force; and  
● Participation in a first responder USAR trainers' course

"Over the past ten years we have liaised with INSARAG to familiarise ourselves with international SAR protocols and worked in the international arena," says Scher. "And through participating in numerous world team leaders' meetings we have instituted the INSARAG guidelines.

"An invitation to participate at Fort Widley during 2008 (CRJ 2:3) afforded us a great opportunity to once again meet and work with our peers from other parts of the world. This added another dimension to what we, and they, try constantly to refine and perfect."

A resource about to be launched is a three-day First Responder to Structural Incident course. Instructors will undergo this four-day course to familiarise them

with the responder course content.

Developed by INSARAG, USAID and the Singapore Fire Service, this is a three-day workshop demonstrated in Singapore in December 2008. It utilises only widely available tools while applying in an orderly manner the basic search principles of breaking, cutting and breaching; victim and casualty management; shoring and site management.

## VITAL HOURS

"In terms of the location and extrication of surface and lightly trapped victims, good results can be achieved within the vital hours after a quake or building collapse, with surprisingly unsophisticated equipment, and yet have a significant effect on the number of people saved. This allows time for the heavy rescue teams to muster and bring in their equipment.

"We would like to see first responders in all our provinces undergo this course as a preparation for the 2010 Soccer World Cup, and are seeking permission from INSARAG to present it for this purpose. Funding would need to be provided by the provincial administrations, with Rescue South Africa acting as course co-ordinator and facilitator of links with USAID.

"A business plan is also under way to introduce this course to the Southern African Development Community and beyond, by inviting potential instructors to South Africa for training or sending our instructors to various countries, or a combination of the two," says Scher.

"It can play a major role in the training of first responders in developing countries as it can be presented relatively economically with benefits far exceeding the cost. For the first time a viable foundation using readily available equipment exists that can lead incrementally to the modules required towards training and equipping USAR task force technicians in strategic locations throughout the SADC region.

"The time is fast approaching when Rescue South Africa will be expected to undergo an evaluation by INSARAG in terms of how it would handle a major disaster and all the above will assist with preparation for this event," Scher concludes.

■ Southern African Development Community (SADC): Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Zambia.

## AUTHOR

Hilary Phillips is a regular contributor to CRJ



*Trench collapse at Water World, Randburg, Johannesburg. During the extrications rain further destabilised the site, causing a second collapse (centre), which narrowly missed the rescuers*



*A round-the-clock operation followed the Water World trench collapse; two workers died and four were injured*

Hugh Price-Hughes