Comments on “The Zeebrugge ferry disaster”

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Re-constructive logic

For a re-constructive analysis of decision making and management dynamics in major emergency situations to be accurate and objective, one essential element it should include is a detailed description and precise assessment of the way each of the actors involved have perceived and experienced the chain of events. This implies an attempt to put oneself in the specific position of these various actors. Such an ‘emphatic’ approach may not always be easy – indeed, in this respect hindsight, instead of a benefit, could sometimes even prove to be more of a handicap – but it is in my view nevertheless indispensable. It seems a prerequisite for both writing fair history and developing crisis management theory with a valuable spin-off for practitioners.

The plausibility of crisis and the need for risk assessment

A particular point I would like to stress – and which appears directly relevant for the pre-HoFE-disaster risk assessments on the chances of a ferry capsizing in front of the port of Zeebrugge – is that crises are not events that present themselves like a bolt from the blue. Under normal circumstances most crises seem highly unlikely to happen. But the risk of a crisis can never be ruled out completely, either because the chance that a specific type of disaster will strike one day is far from negligible, or because the consequences of a crisis, even if it is unlikely that this will ever take place, are unacceptable. Therefore, public authorities should not only not pursue an ostrich policy. They must also make realistic risk analyses. Subsequently, they can, of course, always hope for the best but, at the same time, they ought to plan for the worst.

Phases of crisis management

A distinction can be made between different phases of crisis management:

- prevention and preparation;
- management of the actual emergency situation;
- mitigation of the consequences and recovery.

Take for instance the case of the Zeebrugge ferry disaster. As far as the Major Emergencies Plan ("Plan tot Organisatie van de Hulpverlening") of January 1987 is concerned, which was established in connection with the construction of a large LNG-terminal in the outer-harbour area, a number of questions remain to be answered. In what way have the Zeebrugge authorities made a thorough risk analysis? Did they anticipate other risks than those involved in LNG terminal before drawing up his plan? What does Belgian law say with regard to prevention of and protection against disasters? Did the plan distinguish between (1) risk analysis and prognoses and (2) crisis management planning? What conclusions have been drawn by the authorities themselves with regard to their Major Emergencies Plan after the Herald of Free Enterprise disaster? Such questions should be answered. At the same time it should always be kept in mind that, although distinct, the three phases mentioned above are also closely interrelated if we want to make an accurate and effective assessment of what happened during the Zeebrugge ferry tragedy.

**Prevention and preparation**

Once an analysis, prognosis and taxation of risks have been made, the authorities involved must decide what to do with it. This is a political process. Take, e.g., the Netherlands where people consider the inundation of parts of the country by a seaflood to be an unacceptable risk. In order to prevent such a disaster, enormous sums of money have been invested in the building of dikes, flood-gates etc. At the same time, the annual loss of lives and material hardship due to traffic accidents in the Netherlands is at least as large as the death toll and damage caused by the tragic flood disaster which struck the country in 1953. Nevertheless, even counted as a whole, traffic accidents are considered a more acceptable type of risk. A degree of acceptability of risks which differs: as such a political choice.

In the case of Zeebrugge's prevention of and preparedness for a disaster the same kind of choices must have been made. Therefore, the risk-assessment by various authorities, involved prior to the HoFE-tragedy, should be analysed and evaluated, before drawing further conclusions about their crisis management performance on the night of the disaster.

Preparations for crisis management can be evaluated by using a general checklist of criteria, based on lessons from the past. A few examples of these