

Overview

The INSARAG Africa, Europe, and Middle East Regional Meeting took place in Doha, Qatar, from 18 to 19 October 2023. The event was generously sponsored by the State of Qatar and Lekhwyhia, Qatar's Internal Security Forces, to which the Qatar International Search and Rescue Team belongs. The event was preceded by the INSARAG After Action Review of the USAR response to the Turkey and Syria earthquakes, held at the same venue from 17 to 18 October 2023.

A total of 117 participants from 43 countries and organizations attended the meeting. The list of participants is available in Annex A. The meeting agenda, provided in Annex B, focused on the presentation of the work plan for 2023 and 2024, updates on new strategic directions, the recently established Arabic Speaking Initiative, presentations on USAR capacities from Iran, Kenya, and Tanzania, breakout discussions on the outcomes of the INSARAG Steering Group for 2023, the USAR response to the earthquake in Morocco, updates on the IEC/R process, announcements from Member States, and the nomination of the Regional Troika for 2025 and 2026. All presentations are available in Annex C.

The meeting was moderated by Winston Chang, INSARAG Global Lead, Stefania Trassari, INSARAG Regional Focal Point for Europe and CIS, and Lucien Jaggi, INSARAG Regional Focal Point for MENA.

Day 1

Session 1 - Opening ceremony

Colonel Staff Mubarak Sherida Al Kaabi, INSARAG AEME Regional Chair for 2023 and Commander of the Qatar International Search and Rescue Group, expressed his gratitude to all the participants who had travelled to Doha for the Regional Meeting. He emphasized the significance of coming together to discuss the important topics on the agenda. Colonel Mubarak also recalled the privilege that Qatar had in holding this year's AEME Regional Chairmanship and serving as a leader for this global network, reaffirming Qatar's longstanding dedication to INSARAG and its commitment to advancing humanitarian efforts worldwide.

Ambassador Dominik Stillhart, INSARAG Incoming Global Chair and Deputy Director General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, commended the work of the AEME Region and its members in emergency response and USAR operations in 2023, specifically in Turkey, Syria, Morocco, and Libya. He stressed that the great diversity in cultures and risk profiles is a major strength of the region and encouraged all AEME members to leverage the different resources offered by each country.

Sebastian Rhodes Stampa, INSARAG Secretary and Chief of the Emergency Response Section at OCHA, reiterated his appreciation to Qatar for hosting the event on behalf of the INSARAG Secretariat.

Session 2 - Regional workplan and global updates 2023

Lucien Jaggi, INSARAG Regional Focal Point for MENA, presented the activities carried out by the network in 2023 and provided global updates.

Regional workplan and highlights of events:

- Three IER exercises have been completed so far: Czech Republic (Heavy), Russian Federation (Medium), and Hungary (Medium). Three more are scheduled before the end of the year: Spain UME (Medium), Spain ERICAM (Medium), and UK ISAR (Heavy).
- France successfully conducted two IRNAP exercises (FRA10 and FRA11). Mr. Jaggi emphasized the strong peer-to-peer support within the network, which enables IEC/Rs and IRNAPs, and highlighted the added complexity and realism of exercises performed abroad, such as those within the EU MODEX framework. In 2023, 60 classifiers from 27 countries supported IERs in the AEME region.
- One scoping mission occurred in 2023 in Kenya. Two more are anticipated to take place by the end of 2023 or early in 2024: an assessment mission in Iran to evaluate USAR capacity and INSARAG methodology, as well as a USAR assessment in Palestine as part of the Palestinian Civil Defence INSARAG Classification Projects.
- The complete list of trainings and other events is available in the presentation in Annex C.

Global updates:

- The composition of the INSARAG Secretariat team was presented to the plenary, including the breakdown of regional focal points and support staff.
- Dominik Stillhart was introduced as the Incoming Global Chair, succeeding Manuel Bessler, who has retired. The official handover will occur at the INSARAG Steering Group in 2024.
- The INSARAG Secretariat is actively seeking donors to sponsor an external Governance Review, aiming to evaluate the decision-making framework at the policy and regional levels and to propose changes to the network's institutional structure. New strategic directions were presented in detail during session 4.

Session 3 - Presentation of regional priorities and workplan 2024

Daniel Georghita, Head of Analysis and Strategic Development, Office for Civil Protection, Romania, representing the INSARAG AEME Incoming Regional Chair, outlined regional priorities for 2024. The next AEME Regional Meeting will be hosted in Bucharest in September/October 2024, possibly back-to-back with the AEME Earthquake Response Exercise 2024 in the region. Countries interested in hosting the ERE are encouraged to reach out to Romania and the INSARAG Secretariat.

Regional priorities were presented against the four pillars of the INSARAG Strategic Plan 2021-2026. These include training for RDC and UCC managers, advocacy for national capacity building, development of the concept of flexible response, and more joint training within the network and with external partners. Invitations to held meetings in Romania were extended to the National Capacity Building Working Group and Flood Response Working Group.

Stefania Trassari, INSARAG Focal Point for Europe and CIS, presented the draft calendar for 2024. Key dates are available in the presentation in Annex C. The INSARAG Steering Group 2024 will be held in Geneva, on 7 May 2024. The draft calendar 2024 can be found on the INSARAG Website.

In addition, Member States announced 2024 events: Italy will host a USAR MODEX in Venice, from 7 to 11 October 2024, Türkiye will host a UC training in April 2024, and a UC Training of Trainers later in the year.

With reference to training, Lucien Jaggi explained the different levels of training ownership, from local - delivered internally in a team, no INSARAG certificate issued, to global - open course for members of the network, INSARAG certificate required.

Extra session – From Good to Great

Jonah Boyce, UK ISAR Research Development & Innovations Officer, presented the “Good to Great” approach to training. This initiative designed to enhance team quality through leadership and innovative thinking.

Session 4 - Updates on new strategic directions

Sebastian Rhodes Stampa, INSARAG Secretary, illustrated new policy directions for the network. He recalled that humanitarian needs are steadily increasing, as well as the number and magnitude of disasters, and remarked the steady need for international emergency response. However, INSARAG must focus on local and national capacity building, to empower affected population to lead the response.

The Secretary sees the potential for a “franchised” INSARAG, based on the current regional division (AEME, Asia-Pacific, the Americas), with a timeline of 15-20 years. This would allow each region to tailor responses according to their regional risk profile, which is largely different among the three.

The role of INSARAG in complex emergencies (a humanitarian crisis where there is a total or considerable breakdown of authority which requires a multiagency response) must also be further discussed by the network. The pivotal question is how fulfil INSARAG’s mandate to save lives in earthquakes, in the absence of a clear sovereign body that can accept or refuse offers of international assistance.

The INSARAG Governance review will be an external, comprehensive, review of the INSARAG institutional structure, which is now timely due to the succession of the Global Chair. One expert consultant per region will be selected. Volume 1 will be the main scope of such review, and a system for a rotation between Global Chairs could be introduced. The terms of reference are included in the presentation in Annex C.

Finally, Mr. Rhodes Stampa addressed the relationship between INSARAG and UNDAC and the necessity to create a pool of UNDAC members with a strong USAR background. In USAR responses UCC and RDC remains INSARAG teams’ responsibility, while UNDAC can add value to the response by liaising between the UCC and LEMA. Nevertheless, it is important to have UNDAC members with USAR background to ensure the quality of the UNDAC liaison.

To conclude the session, Winston Chang, INSARAG Global Lead, outlined the five steps guiding the implementation of the results of the After-Action Review of the INSARAG USAR response to the Türkiye and Syria Earthquakes:

- the academic team will incorporate the results of the AAR breakout discussions in the report,
- the report will be circulated once more among the network for final comments,
- a summary of the report will be integrated in the AAR Book, drafted by the Secretariat,
- INSARAG Team Leaders and Working Group will meet at the Team Leaders meeting in Ecuador (18-22 March 2024) and will decide how to implement the recommendations in their respective workplans,
- the book and the WGs workplans will be presented for endorsement at the ISG 2024.

Day 2

Session 1 - Agenda of the day

Stefania Trassari, INSARAG Focal Point for Europe and CIS, presented the agenda of the day.

Session 3 - Strengthening USAR Capacities - Iran

Abdoljajal Saeed, Head of Operations and Response Office of Tehran Disaster Mitigation and Management Organization (TDMMO), presented Iran's disaster risk profile and the activities of TDMMO in 2023. He also illustrated the structure of the organisation and its functional departments. Mr Saeed also remarked the importance of participating in international training, for instance, TDMMO took part in the ERE 2022 in Ankara, Türkiye and is holding English courses for the Heavy USAR Teams that will undergo the INSARAG IEC process in the future.

Session 4 - ISG outcomes – Breakout discussions on regional inputs:

Participants discussed four topics directly related to the ISG 2023 Outcomes:

- Decision Making Process
- Flood Response
- Localisation
- IEC/R Review

The summary of the discussion can be found in Annex D.

Session 5 - Rapporteurs brief on the breakout discussions

The summary of the discussion can be found in Annex D.

Session 2 - Regional Chair briefing*

*Session rescheduled

Major Khaled Abdulla Al Hemaidi, Deputy Commander, Qatar International Search and Rescue Team, presented Qatar's INSARAG Arabic-Speaker Initiative. This Initiative brings together nine MENA countries and is aimed at enhancing communication and cooperation in the USAR field among Arabic-speaking nations. This initiative offers an opportunity to share ideas and experiences, working together to enhance national and international USAR operations. The Initiative will organise a variety of workshops, collaborations, and training opportunities to build-up the capability in the network. The group has already met virtually and the first face to face meeting was held in Doha in the margins of the INSARAG AAR.

Session 6 - Strengthening USAR Capacities - East Africa

Tanzania

Charles Elikunda Msangi, Deputy Director for Disaster Management Department, Prime Minister Office, delivered a presentation on existing USAR capacities in Tanzania and plans to join the INSARAG network. Current USAR Challenges were presented, including challenges on personnel, equipment and communication, and training and exercise. At present, Tanzania has capabilities at the levels of community responders and first responders, with aspirations to obtain national accreditation for a light team in four cities and a medium team in two cities by 2026.

Kenya

Lt. Col. Richard Migai, Commanding Officer Disaster Response Battalion, Kenya, illustrated to the plenary the USAR capacities of the Disaster Response Battalion of the Kenya Defence Forces. Since October 2009, the Battalion deployed 70+ times, and has established several partnerships with foreign countries to improve specific USAR skills. Future plans include the creation of a Medium IEC Team. Due to Kenya's interest in IEC, the team is keen to observe the upcoming reclassification exercise of UK ISAR in November 2023 and South Africa in 2024.

Session 7 - Morocco's earthquake response by USAR Teams

Annika Coll Eriksonn, ERICAM Team Leader, and Russell Gauden, UK ISAR Team Leader, delivered a presentation on the teams' response to the earthquake that hit Morocco on 8 September 2023. All international teams, Qatar, Spain ERICAM, Spain UME, UAE, and UK ISAR, deployed bilaterally, as the government did not request international assistance but only accepted a few selected teams. Even if the teams were deployed to different areas and therefore faced different challenges, they both received excellent support from the host nation.

The creation of a Virtual UCC was also appreciated and identified as a new best practice by the teams, who felt the support of the INSARAG Secretariat even if the host nation did not request international assistance.

Session 8 - Open Forum - Focus on IEC/Rs processes

Winston Chang, INSARAG Global Lead, briefly presented the status of the IEC/R system. Currently, 57 teams are INSARAG Classified, 4 Light, 19 Medium, and 34 Heavy. The Global Lead recalled that the IEC/R system is becoming difficult to manage, given the increase in the number of exercises.

Session 9 - Announcements by Member States and call for nominations

The IMWG is looking for two/three technical members to work on the next version of the INSARAG Coordination Management System (ICMS). The requirements are: (1) app developing experience, (2) Python programming, (3) system admin / operator. All based on the ESRI platform.

The IMWG is looking for two countries to host an ICMS training in 2024.

The Secretariat will send a call for the IEC/R Roster and the AEME TSG/TRG Roster for 2024. The call will be sent in November or earlier.

The Secretariat solicits the network to extend invitations for trainings (UC, RDC, ICMS, etc.) to UNDAC members.

Succession of the regional Troika:

During the session, the Russian Federation announced their candidature for the position of Regional Chair in 2025 or 2026. Czech Republic also announced their candidature for the same position in 2025. The INSARAG Secretariat proposed that Czech Republic assumes the duty of Regional Chair in 2025, while the Russian Federation will be the Regional Chair in 2026. No objections were raised by the participants and the proposal was endorsed. Romania – Incoming Chair, stated that the Troika agreed to let the INSARAG Secretariat take the lead and propose a solution on the succession of the Regional Troika.

Session 10 - Closing statements

Major Khaled Abdulla Al Hemaidi, Deputy Commander, Qatar International Search and Rescue Team, and Winston Chang, INSARAG Global Lead, officially closed the meeting, thanking all participants for their attendance and for the fruitful discussion.