

Speech Governor Breyne of the Province of West-Flanders (Belgium)

(spoken by mr. Debyser, Head of Cabinet of Governor Breyne)

SPOKEN TEXT IS LEADING

Ms Queens Commissioner, Ms Director-General, Mr. Sternheim,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Queens' Commissioner of Zeeland this morning concluded with a wish: She wants us to open our minds to look at things in a different way, in a broader perspective.

This must not be so difficult, was my first thought. People love to travel. We visit other places, enjoy other cultures in other countries. When we are on holidays we are open-minded and are interested to cross borders.

But are we open-minded in our daily being ? At home, or in our jobs ? Are we prepared to cross borders in our way of thinking ? Let's say YES.

But then: do we expect others to be as open-minded as we are ?

Well, since this is not a philosophical lecture, I will not explore these questions further.....But I am sure you already started thinking yourselves.

Pilot area

(slide 1) West-Flanders and Zeeland have a history of working together. Until 1830 we even were one country. But also after the independency of Belgium we kept working together. The European stimulating programmes are used successfully in our cross-border region Scheldemond. The last 20 years we see cooperation on matters of economics, agriculture, tourism, environment and, the subject of today, safety.

(slide 2) Our cooperation on safety-policy and practical agreements is on a structural base with a policy-board, an executive board and working committees.

(slide 3) A fine example is the Agreement on crisis-management in case the important salt-water nature resort Het Zwin is threatened by a pollution coming from the sea.

(slide 4) Our cooperation has been made possible by a bi-national agreement between the member states in 1985. This has been worked out in a bilateral agreement between our provinces in 1992. and from 2003 we even have a Euregional Protocol on Crisis Management, dealing with all sorts of cross-border cooperation in a crisis. We also follow each other's courses and exercises.

Today I will focus on the pilot contingency plan for a coastal flooding in our cross-border area, and on the exercise that was held earlier this week. As you can see on the map we have a common coastline.

Pilot plan

In the Pilot Plan a special scenario on coastal flooding has been worked out. The organization of cross-border cooperation follows the structure and schemes for alarming, information exchange and mutual assistance that has already been arranged in our Euregional Agreement I mentioned before.

(slide 5) The following processes in crisismanagement are worked out for this specific scenario:

- Alarming
 - Which organization is responsible for alarming ?
 - Which authorities should be alarmed in the different countries ?
 - How is the alarming of our neighbours arranged ?
- Respons
 - Which tasks are specific for each of the different authorities ?
- Shelter and evacuation
 - Are calculations available what area will be first affected ?
 - Are calculations available how long it will take to evacuate this whole area ?
 - Are there specific places appointed for sheltering groups ?
 - Is there a plan to evacuate large areas ?
- Responsible command
 - How is the coordination arranged in the field ?
 - How is the coordination arranged in the coordination centres ?
 - Is the responsible command in one hand or divided ?
 - Is there a similar approach in both countries ?
- Traffic
 - Are there specific routes appointed for evacuation the public to go out of the area?
 - Are there specific routes appointed for the safety services to go in the area ?
- Logistics
 - Is arranged what organization leads or coordinates all logistics ? Or is each service or authority responsible for the logistics that go with their tasks ?
 - Can we depend on logistics from our neighbours ?
- Crisiscommunication to the public
 - How is the communication to the public organized ?
 - Is the public informed about what they must do themselves and about what they can expect the authorities will arrange ?
 - What communication systems are used ?
- Recovery
 - When can be started with recovery-measures ?
 - Is there a check-list of measures to deal with in the recovery-phase ?
 - When do we allow people to go back and how will we support them ?

I will not go further into detail on these processes. You can read them yourselves later, because this Pilot Plan is in the conference-box that you will receive this afternoon.

And I can recommend you to do so. The Pilot Plan gives you an interesting framework and example for other regions around the North Sea.

(slide 6) Exercise

This Pilot Plan was tested in a two-days exercise on 19 and 20 May. So even this week, and so very close to this final conference. I will now lead you through the exercise and conclude with the global evaluation.

Each day had two timeframes of 90 minutes.

- timeframe 1 was 24 hours before the peak of a very severe storm;
- in timeframe 2 a breach of the coastal defence was simulated; first there was a breach in West-Flanders, later in Zeeland as well;
- timeframe 3 was 3 hours after the breaches;
- and timeframe 4 was 60 hours after the breaches;

Each country started their own crisis-organization. In both countries on a regional scale, but with the local input of the mayors of the involved municipalities.

(slide 7) A crisis-coordination centre was set up for West-Flanders in Zeebrugge, under my command.

In Zeeland the provincial crisis-coordination centre was set up by my colleague, the Queens Commissioner.

Because in The Netherlands there are major responsibilities in crisis-management on the local and regional level, these were simulated in the exercise-staff.

In the exercise-staff also the national authorities were simulated.

What were the lessons learned ?

(slide 8) The cooperation between the crisis-coordination centres in both countries started just after the breach. During the period before the breach the need for cooperation was focussing on the information exchange. There is an actual need for concerted prognoses and scenarios. We informed the population through the media and advised them to leave.

(slide 9) In timeframe 1 we got a storm search warning from our national meteorological offices. On this warning the assessment of the situation was made. We started the decision-making process regarding necessary preparations and started planning arrangements. All safety-services were in stand-by.

(slide 10) Timeframe 2 confronted us with an actual breach. It took us some time to overview the situation and to overview all tasks.

We had contact with the area in our neighbour country. First to see if we could evacuate to Zeeland, then together to see if we could evacuate to East-Flanders, our neighbouring province in Belgium.

(slide 11) In timeframe 3 we had to organize the support of the remaining population. The main goal was to provide them with food and water. The non-self reliance population was our first concern. The inundated zone was too large to evacuate. The assistance was asked in both countries on the national level.

(slide 12) Timeframe 4 was an interesting part of the exercise. Here we decided to make an analysis of the damages. And started the preparations of restoration of functions.

(slide 13) We began to develop a recovery-plan, including the aftercare. The checklist for the recovery-phase in our Pilot Plan was crucial for this. In Zeeland this had already started in timeframe 3.

Crisis-management learned that risk-management is the basic for a good preparation. The communication between the provinces went very well. And also the communication between the operational services and the public authorities went according to plan.

(slide 14) After all we can conclude that with this exercise we all were forced to focus on the scenario of a coastal flooding. Because we have a blind belief in our coastal defences this was not a priority in our preparation on crises before. But we must not close our eyes.

Climate change forces us to think of the possibility.

Well, we did. And it gave us good insight in our capability. We must come to the conclusion that cooperation with our neighbours and from others is very welcome in this scenario.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In this Pilot action, developing the contingency-plan and doing such an exercise, we crossed borders. We crossed borders in our job and we crossed borders in our way of thinking and acting.

And I can tell you: This was a very pleasant way of working and thinking.

I can recommend it to all of you.

And as I said before.....: I am sure you already started thinking yourselves.

I wish you success from this point of view with acting cross-border !

Thank you for your attention !!