



## **Saving lives for over 3 decades: OCHA's Winston Chang explains the work of our emergency response services**

*As the **We the Peoples Global Leadership Awards** recognizes the lifesaving, selfless work UN Emergency First Responders, accepted by UNDAC and INSARAG team members, Winston Chang, INSARAG Global Lead since 2007, shares insights on what makes this multicultural emergency response network an asset for disaster preparedness and response, and what it takes to coordinate dozens of Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) teams worldwide.*

## **INSARAG's primary purpose is to ensure that USAR teams deployed during a disaster work at the unison in support of national rescue efforts. What does the work practically entail?**

As a professional firefighter for two decades before joining OCHA, I would describe INSARAG as the "*fire service of the world*". Whenever something big happens, anywhere, anytime, there will always be a need for help. Typically, -national responders swing into action first, but there are times where even countries with significant emergency management capacities may be overwhelmed, as it was the case during the Türkiye/Syria Earthquake response on 6 February 2024.

At the time, 11,320 responders, over 600 search dogs from 90 countries, and 87% of INSARAG classified teams came together in our largest operation, with over 60 UNDAC experts supporting the authorities in 10 coordination cells, each 200kms apart. The INSARAG system worked and USAR's international teams saved 300 lives.

The RSB team has a presence across 4 countries – with offices in Bangkok, Nairobi, Panama and Geneva. We monitor events 24/7 in collaboration with colleagues across OCHA – from storms in the Philippines and the Caribbean, to earthquakes in the Awash region of Ethiopia, and Floods in Thailand. We engage with our seismologist partners to leverage their global monitoring capabilities and valuable scientific insights.

We are also the Secretariat for the [Global Disaster Alert and Coordination System \(GDACS\)](#), a partnership between the UN and the European Commission. With this tool, we leverage the risk analysis of scientific technological monitoring systems that can accurately assess and calculate the

hazard and impact of sudden onset disasters, such as an earthquake or a tsunami, as soon as they are detected, providing an alert ranked by color (green, yellow, or red). Our partnerships with Regional Organizations such as the EU and ASEAN are strong, and we train and work together harnessing our collective strengths to assist affected governments so that they are equipped to respond to future disasters.

### **How does an operation unfold?**

Within an hour of receiving an alert, our field offices as a first port of call. We reach out to them, then to the office of the Resident Coordinator, then to national disaster management authorities, - who are INSARAG members. We first try to get a sense of what kind of support they need, offer advice and assure them on the type of assistance that OCHA's emergency response tools and services can provide.

Once an official request for international assistance is received, the ERS team will immediately swing into action and alert, mobilize and deploy UNDAC teams, technical partners and INSARAG member countries who in turn, deploy their international USAR teams. In the case of the Türkiye and Beirut port explosions, the first INSARAG and UNDAC teams arrived on the same day.

Simultaneously, OCHA's Joint Environmental Unit (JEU) activates environmental experts while civil-military engagement starts along with our collaboration with a wide range of partners on the ground.

RSB is also responsible for the immediate set up the "Virtual OSOCC" - real time information sharing between the authorities, responders and OCHA. The Emergency Response Coordination Center (ERCC) in Geneva is then established to coordinate with the team on the ground, and to inform and consult OCHA's leadership as the response progresses.

## **How do you ensure smooth team collaboration in a multicultural environment?**

All INSARAG's USAR teams, volunteer teams, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), speak a common USAR language, and abide by the same INSARAG guidelines and methodology to ensure coordinated and effective actions. This means that regardless of language, culture and background, teams work in harmony as one big INSARAG family towards a common goal: To save as many lives as possible.

## **What are the new challenges for INSARAG?**

There are two major issues that we are confronted with now.

1. Extreme climate induced crises. The engagement of INSARAG teams in Malawi following the recent flooding, in Australia's 2022 flooding and then in Spain following Valencia's tragic events show that we need to continue to adapt to and be relevant in the face of the challenges that sudden, unexpected disasters pose. INSARAG teams with flood response capabilities have voluntarily stepped in to be part of a new Flood Response Roster - and new guidance is being developed to ensure that the teams are equipped with the necessary know-how.
2. Disasters in conflict areas: Natural disasters that occur in conflict zones pose a main challenge for INSARAG, as shown by the earthquakes in Northwest Syria in February 2023. This is new terrain for the INSARAG network. Capacity building – and equipping local teams with the necessary

rescue skills are the first step. To give you an example, we have facilitated the training of the Palestinian Civil Defense team with interested donor countries and have engaged with Lebanon. The close-knit network is always willing to do more, and better.

### **What will you miss the most about OCHA and INSARAG?**

First and foremost, the people that make up our networks – the close kinship that brings member states and teams together, supporting and learning from one another in trainings and in response with one common goal – working for those affected.

I will miss the collaboration with the diverse team of devoted professionals in OCHA and especially in RSB – the “Ready-Speedy-Branch” – always alert, always on call 24/7, and ready to garner global support and the first out of the door on a mission to save lives. There is never a dull moment in this Branch!

I will miss the passion and professionalism that unites us all in the INSARAG and UNDAC family. Our network is always lively and active, ready to offer value-added help to anyone affected by sudden onsets and with the humility and willingness to learn from each other so we can do more, and better, at every response.



China USAR team members look for survivors in Hatay, Türkiye earthquake.



South African USAR team member rescue dog Jaru and his trainer in in Hatay during the response to the Türkiye earthquake.



***“INSARAG is never about individuals - it is about working as one to help people affected by disasters. As OCHA, we should be proud to be its Secretariat.”***

***- Winston Chang***





Eleven USAR teams from nine countries supported search and rescue operations in the aftermath of the Beirut explosion in 2020.



USAR team with trained search and rescue dogs during the response to the Beirut explosion.



Over 60 international USAR teams took part in the response to the 2015 earthquake in Nepal.

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