

Overview

The INSARAG Africa, Europe, and Middle East (AEME) Regional Meeting took place in Bucharest, Romania, from 2 to 3 October 2024. The event was generously hosted by the Government of Romania. A total of 101 participants from 24 countries and 36 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 2024, breakout consultations around the four INSARAG Strategic Objectives, group discussions on the Governance Review, regional initiatives, announcements from Member States, and the nomination of the Regional Troika for 2025. All presentations are included in **Annex C**. The meeting was moderated by Ms. Stefania Trassari, INSARAG Regional Focal Point for Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Mr. Lucien Jaggi, INSARAG Regional Focal Point for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Ms. Janet Muthama from the INSARAG Secretariat, and Mr. Bruce Wong, INSARAG Consultant. It was emphasized throughout the meeting that INSARAG is not a political platform, but rather a professional community dedicated to the humanitarian cause, and that all actions should be guided by the core humanitarian principles.

Day 1 – Session 1: Welcome and Official Opening

Dr. Raed Arafat, Secretary of State, Head of the Department for Emergency Situations in Romania, welcomed the participants to Romania and addressed several key topics, focusing on improving preparedness and response capabilities and capacities for emergencies within the region. Dr. Arafat emphasized the importance of the meeting, particularly considering the recent global context, characterized by the pandemic, wars, conflicts, and severe natural disasters, all of which have had devastating consequences at both the national and international levels. The Secretary of State further highlighted the importance of unity and collaboration among the Member States of the INSARAG network, emphasizing that this cooperation is essential for enhancing the capacity to respond to disasters. He explained that Romania currently has one medium-classified urban search and rescue team (M-USAR), and the process to reclassify this team to a heavy classification (H-USAR) began in 2024. Looking ahead, the Secretary of State referred to the Government of Romania's intention to create three additional classified modules and to develop one urban search-and-rescue module in each county, with the aim of complying with INSARAG standards. He concluded his remarks by outlining a proactive approach to disaster management, emphasizing coordination, resilience, and innovation as the pillars of an effective emergency response framework.

Ambassador Dominik Stillhart, INSARAG Global Chair and Deputy Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), expressed appreciation for the network's commitment to the INSARAG Governance Review, emphasizing the network's need for adaptability and improvement to maintain effectiveness, efficiency, and inclusivity. The Global Chair underlined the importance of INSARAG as a humanitarian network of practitioners that must not be instrumentalized by politics and be guided by the humanitarian principles. He acknowledged the support from China, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States for their financial and logistical contributions, helping the Governance Review stay on track with objectives and timelines. Ambassador Stillhart focused on the identification and recommendations from the Governance Review, which serve as a starting point, with an emphasis now on the implementation of the eight thematic areas identified for improvement. These areas cover institutional, strategic, and operational aspects, including Leadership and Governance, Accountability and Compliance, and the Localization and Classification System. He noted that the recommendations aimed to strengthen INSARAG's ability to respond effectively in crisis situations, with an

overarching purpose: saving lives efficiently and in coordination. He further noted that the network's responsibility, endorsed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2002, remains central to INSARAG's operations.

On regional contributions and global collaboration, Ambassador Stillhart stated that each region's position on the governance review recommendations will contribute to INSARAG's collective position, to be consolidated by the INSARAG Secretariat. The draft Global Position will subsequently be presented at the New Year Call in January 2025, with a view towards endorsement at the Steering Group (ISG) meeting in March 2025. The Global Chair committed to ensuring that regional efforts will be combined efficiently, culminating in an endorsement of recommendations at the 2025 ISG in Geneva. While finalizing his remarks, the Global Chair encouraged participants to engage actively in the discussions, shaping INSARAG's future direction. Lastly, he expressed optimism for achieving significant improvements to INSARAG's Governance structure by 2025, emphasizing collective pride in these advancements.

Mr. Sebastian Rhodes Stampa, INSARAG Secretary and Chief of the Emergency Response Section at OCHA, expressed gratitude to the Government of Romania, specifically the Department for Emergency Situations and key individuals who organized the meeting. He further welcomed all 101 participants from 24 countries and 36 organizations, acknowledging their commitment to attending. Subsequently, he articulated that one of the purposes of the meeting was to create a platform for collaboration through discussing ideas, promoting best practices, and addressing the eight thematic recommendations for the INSARAG guidelines review. He went on to highlight the importance of contributing to regional perspectives that will shape revised INSARAG policy guidance, aiming to keep the organization "fit for purpose." On the progress of the 2024 work plan, Mr. Rhodes Stampa noted the milestone achievements, including recognizing Azerbaijan as the 58th country to receive an INSARAG External Classification, with additional members (Egypt, Iran, Kenya, Lebanon, and oPt) expressing interest in classification. He further noted the planned Earthquake Response Exercises (EREs) across all three regions to increase disaster response awareness and strengthening of national response capacities. Additionally, Mr. Rhodes Stampa expressed appreciation for the Working Groups' contributions to urban search and rescue (USAR) preparedness and coordination and further acknowledged the crucial role of Working Group members in advancing INSARAG's mission. Mr. Rhodes Stampa urged participants to approach discussions with openness and shared purpose, emphasizing the importance of this meeting in shaping regional disaster response capabilities and reinforcing the global network of USAR teams, and encouraged collective efforts to drive progress and protect lives affected by disasters. The address concluded with appreciation for the participants' engagement and a call for productive discussions that will strengthen INSARAG's disaster response mission.

Brigadier General Marius Dogeanu, INSARAG AEME Regional Chair for 2024 and Head of the Directorate General for Civil Protection, Romania, emphasized the privilege that Romania had to host this important event. He highlighted the role the meeting played in strengthening the INSARAG network, sharing lessons learned, and contributing to the continued development of the network. General Dogeanu also highlighted the importance of these meetings as essential steps in the process of continuous preparation, given the new challenges that constantly arise. He further emphasized the relevance of the Governance Review, which would ensure that the processes and procedures remain uniform across the entire INSARAG network. In addition, General Dogeanu mentioned the priority of allocating the right resources to meet the growing challenges. Furthermore, he presented the activities carried out during 2024, highlighting the important achievements of the regional work plan. These included the IER of the Heavy USAR Team of RUS-01 from EMERCOM of Russia (24-28 June), the IEC for the Medium USAR Team of AZE-01 in Azerbaijan (23-26 September), and the IER for the Heavy USAR Team of HUN-01 (23-27 September) in Hungary. General Dogeanu also mentioned the series of training courses and exercises that took place in 2024, as well as future activities. He highlighted the importance of the EU MODEX integrated USAR and EMT exercises, with the participation of UNDAC, which will be held from 16-21 October in Venice, Italy. In conclusion, General Dogeanu emphasized that the most important resource is human resources, stressing the need for investments in the training of teams and their development.

Session 2: Regional Workplan and Global Updates 2024

Brigadier General Marius Dogeanu highlighted the activities carried out during 2024 and praised the good work undertaken in the region related to preparedness initiatives. In particular, he emphasized the five USAR Coordination Courses conducted in 2024: Doha, Qatar (7-11 January); Nogent-le-Rotrou, France (12-16 February); Valabre, France (15-19 April); Istanbul, Türkiye (22-26 April); and Dombóvár, Hungary (26-30 August). Additionally, an INSARAG USAR Capacities Assessment was held in Iran, with the participation of EMERCOM of Russia and the INSARAG Secretariat (21-25 January); this initiative aimed to support the Iranian USAR team in their preparation for an IEC.

Mr. Lucien Jaggi, INSARAG Regional Focal Point for MENA, presented the activities carried out by the network in 2024 and provided global updates. While outlining upcoming events, Mr. Jaggi highlighted key items on the INSARAG agenda for the region, including additional UC courses scheduled in Volterra, Italy, (14-18 October); Liverpool, UK (28 October-1 November); and Ulm, Germany (10-15 November). He also noted the UC Training of Trainers course in Ankara, Türkiye (2-6 December); USAR exercises in the region, such as the EU Module Exercises combining USAR and EMT components, including UNDAC, in Venice, Italy (16-21 October), and the International Earthquake Response Exercise in Tunis, Tunisia (10-14 November); as well as the INSARAG reclassification of the Qatari Heavy Team, scheduled for 25-28 November. The session on global updates focused on the key activities within the network, including the latest developments in the selection of the IEC/R Cadre, analysis of the current IEC/R Roster, and key outcomes from the INSARAG Steering Group Meeting. Mr. Jaggi provided an overview of major events in the larger INSARAG network, referencing the three IERs conducted during the year (US California Task Force-2 as a Heavy Team, Fire and Emergency New Zealand as a Heavy Team, and Bomberos de Chile as a Heavy Team). He further emphasized that all regions actively contribute to strengthening the INSARAG network by conducting activities throughout the year. Notable events mentioned included the Working Group Meeting & Team Leader Meeting in Brazil (12-17 April), the INSARAG Steering Group in Geneva (7 May), the UC Training in China (3-7 June), the INSARAG Recognized National Accreditation Process (IRNAP) Leadership Course in Korea (2-5 September), and the Guidelines Review Group's (GRG) Meeting in Türkiye (5-7 September).

Ms. Natallia Hurko, INSARAG Secretariat, provided an update on the Call for Classifiers in 2025 and roster statistics for the AEME region. Ms. Hurko outlined that the roster has expanded from 177 to 242 classifiers, with the AEME region contributing 76% of these, which reflects a fair global representation given the number of classified teams in the region. She emphasized that, while the number of classifiers has grown, there remains a shortage of experienced classifiers in critical roles, particularly in Team Leader and Deputy Team Leader positions. Ms. Hurko expressed gratitude on behalf of the INSARAG Secretariat to teams that contributed classifiers to support the IEC/R system in 2025, particularly those exceeding the requested nominations number of three classifiers per team. Ms. Hurko noted an increase in global response rates to the call for classifiers compared to last year, with the AEME region reaching 79% of teams' responses; however, she highlighted that nine teams in the region have yet to respond. Ms. Hurko further encouraged classified teams to maintain experienced classifiers in the roster and consider nominating experienced classifiers for participation in the 2025 Leadership Course in Qatar. She noted that the Secretariat will support a more diverse selection of experienced applicants for the course, particularly those from teams that have not yet nominated representatives and qualified female applicants. On gender representation, Ms. Hurko noted that female classifiers in the AEME region are predominantly nominated for the medical function, while the rescue function remains the least chosen by women. She acknowledged efforts by some AEME teams to nominate more female classifiers but emphasized that women still represent only 9% of classifiers globally. Finally, Ms. Hurko outlined that the Secretariat is coordinating assignments of classifiers for the 15 upcoming IEC/Rs in 2025, with most classifier roles already filled.

Session 3: INSARAG Strategic Plan 2021-2026 and Its Application to the AEME Work Plan 2025

This session focused on discussions regarding the INSARAG Strategic Plan 2021–2026. Participants were divided into four groups, each focused on one of the Strategic Objectives:

1. Quality Standards
2. Localization
3. Flexible Response
4. Partnerships

Each group, facilitated by INSARAG experts, shared perspectives, and exchanged insights. The session concluded after four rotations.

Day 2 – Session 4: Reporting Back - Summary of the AEME Workplan 2025

The second day began with a recap of the four discussions held during the first day. **Mr. David Sochor** (Switzerland) and **Ms. Annika Coll** (Spain) reported on Quality Standards. **Mr. Lucien Jaggi** reported on Partnerships, highlighting the need to identify specific partnerships based on the gaps and needs of the network. Through the discussions, several areas for potential new partnerships were identified, particularly in logistics support (air transport and IATA regulations), field communication security (intelligence sharing at the field level), and engineering (infrastructure assessment and coordination). It was suggested that partnerships could also be developed with local in-country actors in earthquake-prone regions, including private sector initiatives, such as the Connecting Business initiative (CBI). Before seeking new partnerships, participants noted that existing collaborations might require revitalization or expansion to maximize their potential. For instance, partnerships with the European Union could be leveraged to include additional activities in training and IT support, particularly for the ICMS platform.

During the discussion, it was observed that the INSARAG network lacks a dedicated system or entity to facilitate connections among stakeholders for partnerships or knowledge-sharing purposes. Currently, communication between potential new partners, companies contacting the INSARAG Secretariat, and INSARAG teams is handled on an ad-hoc basis. To address this, participants welcomed the idea of establishing a "marketplace", an "innovation network", or a dedicated working group to manage partnerships more effectively. Such a platform could enable members to share projects, solutions, and expertise. **Mr. Sebastian Mocarquer** (Chile) presented the discussions and key takeaways on Localization, while **Mr. Russ Gauden** (United Kingdom) and **Mr. Michal Langner** (Poland) provided insights on Flexible Response, sharing updates and recommendations from their group discussions.

Session 5: INSARAG Governance Review

Mr. Bruce Wong, INSARAG Consultant, divided all participants into four groups for breakout sessions to share ideas and provide suggestions on the regional consultation regarding the INSARAG Governance Review. Four leading facilitators from the INSARAG Secretariat guided each group in discussions on the following topics:

- Group A: Leadership and Governance & Decision-Making Mandate and Responsibilities
- Group B: Accountability and Compliance & Classification
- Group C: Global Meeting & Global Strategy 2026 - 2030
- Group D: NGOs and Partners & Localization

Session 6: Outcomes of the Governance Review Discussion and Drafting the AEME Regional position on the Governance Review

Leadership, Governance, and Decision-Making Mandates – facilitated by **Mr. Bruce Wong**

Participants deliberated on the creation of a Deputy Global Chair position, with the consensus being that such a position, chosen from the Regional Chairs, is unnecessary. AEME Regional Chairs have effectively supported INSARAG activities and engaged stakeholders, and the proposed rotational system would add unnecessary complexity, given the one-year term of Regional Chairs. It was concluded that this position would not enhance the ISG's effectiveness. Participants also agreed on defining consensus as the absence of objections from eligible voters, which could streamline decision-making in specific contexts. They emphasized the need to ensure meeting participants are authorized to make decisions or accept proxy votes, safeguarding the validity of outcomes.

Accountability, Compliance, and Classification – facilitated by **Ms. Natallia Hurko** and **Ms. Janet Mwikya Muthama**

Participants expressed differing views, with some considering compliance as "minimum standards" for international preparedness and response, while others regarded them as mandatory requirements, particularly regarding the IEC/R checklist adherence. The group supported maintaining mandatory elements while allowing flexibility for contextual adaptation. There was no support for adding an internal investigations framework to the guidelines, as the current system was considered adequate. Introducing such a framework would require additional regulations and oversight, which could complicate enforcement without a penalty system. Participants favored 'soft' penalties for non-compliance, citing challenges in implementing 'hard' penalties without a robust accountability process. Hard penalties were deemed appropriate only for significant non-compliance cases without clear justifications. Participants recommended making IRNAP an optional framework to respect the varying contexts and capacities of member countries. Many Member States preferred focusing on immediate national priorities before pursuing classifications like NAP or IRNAP, especially in regions with lower disaster risk.

Global Meeting and Strategy for 2026–2030 - facilitated by **Mr. Lucien Jaggi**

Participants discussed the importance of the Global Meeting for fostering regional cohesion, strategic alignment, and global networking. Concerns were raised that without this meeting, the three regions might operate more autonomously. While some suggested hosting the meeting outside Geneva to reduce travel costs, a hybrid format was proposed to improve inclusivity. Participants also recommended separating the Regional Meeting agenda into operational and policy tracks to allow for focused discussions with specific audiences. Extending the Regional Meeting's duration was suggested to ensure comprehensive coverage of operational issues.

NGO and Partners & Localization – facilitated by **Ms. Stefania Trassari**

Participants underscored the critical role of Policy Focal Points (PFPs) in representing their countries. They reassured NGOs that the PFPs' decision-making authority should not be viewed as a limitation but rather as an essential aspect of international missions. The discussion also emphasized the need to review the roles of Operational Focal Points, reaffirming that PFPs should retain the final authority on NGO admissions to the INSARAG network. Participants recommended establishing clear criteria to help NGOs understand network expectations and developing robust quality assurance processes to ensure that only suitable organizations are admitted. It was also agreed that communications should be directed to NGO teams, with PFPs and Operational Focal Points kept informed. Participants highlighted the importance of involving affected populations in identifying their needs and suggested prioritizing countries based on risk levels through regional comparisons. They recommended replacing the term "gap" with "challenges" and creating a map categorizing countries by their status in NAP, IRNAP, and IEC initiatives. The idea of a repository for capacity-building initiatives was well-received, with the understanding that each Member State should handle its own assessments while the network provides expertise as needed, considering technical and financial resources alongside existing mandates. The discussion concluded with a strong

emphasis on INSARAG's priorities: enhancing technical expertise, ensuring sufficient resources, and fostering clarity and alignment with the organization's mandate to enable effective operations.

Session 7: Regional Initiatives & Updates

The session highlighted regional initiatives and updates, focusing on progress related to the 2026–2031 INSARAG Guidelines and the GRG Working Group. **Mr. Martin Evers**, Co-Chair of the Guidelines Review Group (GRG), outlined the key tasks and responsibilities of the group for 2023–2025. These include supporting the dissemination and implementation of the INSARAG Guidelines 2026, as well as implementing changes requested by various INSARAG Working Groups and endorsed by the TLM/ISG. He also emphasized the importance of providing clarifications regarding the guidelines, identifying key issues for discussion during the current revision, and considering ways to contemporize the accessibility, integrity, consistency, and administration of the guidelines.

Subsequently, the IEC/QA Working Group, which had met two days prior to the AEME regional meeting, welcomed new members from the Asia-Pacific and Americas regions and briefly discussed the outcomes of their meeting. These included efforts to ensure quality during the INSARAG External Classification process and to guarantee that all stipulated standards are met during the accreditation of USAR teams. The National Capacity Building Working Group was scheduled to meet after the AEME regional meeting to deliberate on several issues, including strengthening, enhancing, and supporting the capacity of national governments and organizations in building and improving their USAR teams to meet international standards. The goal is to ensure these teams can deploy domestically and potentially internationally to respond to disasters, particularly those involving collapsed structures and other USAR operations.

Mr. Vlad Petre, Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) provided an update on EU MODEX. He emphasized that the program is a critical component of the European Union's Civil Protection Mechanism, aimed at enhancing disaster response readiness through comprehensive training and simulation exercises. These exercises ensure that response teams and their equipment are fully prepared for efficient and effective deployment during emergencies. A key aspect of EU MODEX includes training for INSARAG classification and reclassification exercises, particularly for USAR teams, enabling them to meet international deployment standards. This collaboration strengthens disaster response systems, both within Europe and globally, ensuring rapid, well-coordinated, and highly skilled responses during crises.

The session continued with an update from the Türkiye Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) on the 2023 earthquakes that struck Türkiye and Syria. The presentation highlighted the simultaneous occurrence of multiple earthquakes, their significant magnitudes, the vast areas affected, and the immense impact on the population. The discussion also addressed the widespread structural collapses and the international response mechanisms activated in the aftermath. An After-Action Review conducted subsequently identified gaps and deficiencies, many of which have since been addressed. Before concluding the session, various videos were presented, including one on the Earthquake Response Exercise 2024 in Tunisia and another showcasing the Ras Laffan Emergency & Safety College in Qatar.

Session 8: Member States Announcements

The INSARAG Secretariat requested support from the network to continue funding ICMS, encouraging contributions from Member States, and seeking assistance with hosting the Earthquake Response Exercise in 2025.

It was highlighted that the Joint USAR Coordination Course (UCC) managers are responsible for tracking and scheduling various UCCs in the region. Currently, this process operates on an ad-hoc basis, and it was suggested that regions could establish a system to monitor these training courses and invite other teams to participate. The Joint OSOCC & UC Managers Course, designed for UNDAC Liaison Officers (LOs) and prospective UC managers from classified USAR teams, was also discussed. The course content will be adapted from both the OSOCC and UCC curricula, incorporating insights from the After-Action Review (AAR) following the Türkiye response. It was further highlighted that the Earthquake Response Exercise (ERE) is scheduled for 11-14 November in Tunis, Tunisia, and the UC Training of Trainers (TOT) will take place from 2-6 December 2024 in Ankara, Türkiye.

Session 9: Key Regional Meeting Outcomes, Presentation of the New Troika 2025, AOB & Closing Address

The session introduced the new AEME Troika for 2025, with Romania as the Outgoing Regional Chair, the Czech Republic as the new Regional Chair, and the Russian Federation as the Incoming Regional Chair.

Annexes:

Annex A: List of Participants

Annex B: Meeting Agenda

Annex C: AEME Meeting Presentation