

Migrant Incident Activity – Sunday 15th August 2021

Background, Observations, Risks and Recommendations

Name

HM Coastguard Head of International Liaison

Background:

This review should be read in conjunction with the Migrant Incident Activity Review – Wednesday 4th August 2021 submitted by Name MPLI, Clandestine Operations Liaison Officer. Some of the observations, risks and recommendations will be mirrored or further supported in this review.

1. Sunday, 15th August was initially classified in the English Channel Assessment on the preceding Tuesday with low confidence as an unlikely ('green') day for small boats launching from France, changing to a realistic possibility ('yellow') on Wednesday and further changing to likely ('amber') on Friday.
2. This assessment was supported by Sunday providing a short weather window or opportunity after two days of low activity, which are usually followed by a higher level of crossings as Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) attempt to clear their backlog. These predictions were also consistent with the observation of Windy App which is the preferred tool of the OCGs.
3. The above indicated that MRCC Dover, the JRC and the Tug Haven were likely to experience a significant workload on Sunday, 15th August. On the day, 18 incidents resulted in the recovery of 285 persons over an 8-hour period.

Observations:

The incidents followed the same 5 phases as outlined in the 4th of August Review (1. Awareness / Information Gathering, 2. Locating / Tracking, 3. Interdiction / SAR, 4. 999 calls, 5. Review / Correlation).

Specific Observations from Sunday, 15th August 2021

1. Although the initial French migrant tracker only contained 3 incidents at 04:00 UTC, this increased quickly to 18 incidents by 06:00 UTC.
2. The MRCC day watch for SAR was made up of 1 x qualified Maritime Operations Officer (MOO) and 1 x MOO under training. 2 x Team Leaders were covering CNIS and SUNK VTS, but due to a short notice sickness absence of another staff member they were unable to assist the SAR team.
3. The SMC for the day was remotely located at the JRCC.

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4. As the 'apparent' number of migrant vessels in distress within the UK SRR increased, there seemed to be a lack of effective communication between the SAR team and the remote SMC which impacted situational awareness and joint understanding of risk.
5. There was a loss of situational awareness and timely access to relevant information whilst Border Force assets were coordinated and all communications handled by the Border Force Liaison Officer in the JRC, effectively cutting the operations room out of the loop.
6. There seemed to be a perception of limitations on SAR during migrant operations within the operations room.

Evidence:

The wind conditions meant that one UAS had to return to base shortly after take-off and the second UAS developed a technical fault later on, also requiring a return to base. This resulted in a much greater reliance on reports from Border Force assets to evaluate the situation on scene and limited the ability to carry out searches or to 'keep eyes on'.

The sweeping up of a group of 6 migrant vessels initially by HURRICANE and later assisted by SPEEDWELL, and all communications being handled by the JCR made it very difficult to correlate the incidents which became even more complicated once duplicate incidents started to develop through 999 calls, reports from passing merchant vessels, a range safety craft and Border Force jet skis.

Repeated 999 calls to the operations room and Kent Police as well as the EISEC information passed by Kent Police placed a migrant vessel (with reported 30 people including infants taking water) in the vicinity of Dover / South Foreland. Walmer Inshore Lifeboat (ILB) was in the vicinity on exercise at the time, however the operations room was unsure whether it was appropriate requesting the tasking of the ILB to a migrant incident.

A migrant vessel was left for approximately two hours after having been reported by the French close to the SRR boundary before further investigation was carried out, and only after the suggesting requesting a SAR helicopter to carry out a search with the SMC.*

**This was understandable given the heavy focus on the group of 6 migrant vessels at the time, the loss of both UASs, the workload on the SAR team in the operations room and the remote SMC having limited information and situational awareness.*

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Once the group of 6 vessels was dealt with, both HURRICANE and SPEEDWELL were unavailable for a prolonged period of time while offloading / processing in Dover. Once SPEEDWELL was available again, the vessel suffered engine failure and had to return to port. A third vessel, VIGILANT was unavailable due to working hours limitations. This, together with the loss of the UASs required utilising three lifeboats and one SAR helicopter, stretching resources even on an 'amber' day.

To maintain situational awareness, the remote SMC requested the SAR team to provide more information into the incidents, however due to the number of open incidents, difficulties in correlating duplicate incidents*, and the constant demand on the SAR team to speak with the SMC, the Border Force Liaison Officer, SAR units, as well as having to initially deal with other ongoing incidents within Zone 14 (one being a reported firearms incidents involving the report of someone firing a shotgun from a boat), the team simply lacked the capacity to do so.

**Despite being the correct process, this shows a lack of awareness at other stations regarding the dynamics and workload in the operation room during migrant incidents, and highlights the limitations of remote SMC conduct, as much of the information the SMC requires is not available in ViSION and the migrant incident tracker. There were a number of conversations between the SMC and the HMCG Liaison Officer which assisted in an increase of shared situational awareness and appreciation of risk but was insufficient to replace the SMC being in the operations room.*

The MOOs involved in the SAR response at MRCC Dover were at capacity throughout, with the amount of information, logging, the analysis of this data and communication with the remote SMC, Border Force Liaison and SAR units. There was no adequate time for any rest, comfort or meal breaks until mid-afternoon.

The Border Force Liaison Officer was struggling to maintain situational awareness which was visible by being unable to maintain his tracker on the white board in the JCR or adequate notes of the information received from the Border Force assets. This resulted in Border Force references being misassigned to unresolved incidents, and insufficient information being passed to correlate duplicate incidents. This is to large parts due to Border Force and HM Coastguard not having access to a combined / shared migrant incident tracker, requiring information to be passed by email or verbally, causing delays, duplication of effort and risking errors during information transfer.

Due to the issues outlined in the above paragraphs, there is no adequate or comprehensive recording / logging of information in the operations room or the JCR which impacts the ability to review or reconstruct incidents in the future.

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Risks:

1. Loss of life through ineffective/inadequate preparation and/or response.
2. Loss of organisational reputation.
3. Negative impact on staff retention, welfare, and morale.
4. Failure to recognise that days of medium / high activity (yellow / amber / red days), although not necessarily being a major incident, are not SAR business as usual. Although these days are usually accurately predictable within 48 to 72 hours' notice, no mitigations are being put in place as would be for other events with possible major SAR implications (i.e. round the island race).
5. Inability to adequately defend the organisation at any subsequent investigation, inquest or enquiry which focuses on post-incident reviews and/or lessons learnt.

Recommendations based on the above:

The below recommendations largely mirror the recommendations outlined in the 4th of August Review:

1. The presence of an SMC physically based at MRCC Dover for all 'yellow, amber and red days.'
2. Sufficient trained personnel at MRCC Dover for all 'yellow, amber and red days' to support the SMC.
3. Conducting adequate preparation and resourcing when there is credible intelligence and / or information to indicate that a 'yellow, amber and red day' is likely.
4. The implementation of standard operating procedures and protocols that are tested, trained, exercised, and regularly reviewed.
5. The implementation of migrant specific post-incident reviews both internally (and with partner agencies) to ensure that lessons are learnt and new strategy and/or tactics can be developed.
6. Welfare support for staff that are exhibiting any signs of stress, tiredness and/or a drop in performance due to repetitive exposure to 'amber and red days.'
7. The creation of one UK Migrant Incident Tracker which all parties (HMCG and BF) can access and input into.

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