

Protocol for HMCG Termination of SAR

Published 13/09/2021

This Op Detail provides background information on the protocol for terminating a SAR response.

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Responsibility for SAR

Within the UK Government, the Department for Transport has overall responsibility for the establishment, operation and maintenance of an adequate and effective Civil Maritime and Civil Aeronautical Search and Rescue Service.

For maritime SAR, the Coastguard Act 1925 has placed a statutory duty upon HM Coastguard to carry out those duties. The UK Search and Rescue Region covers approximately 2 million square miles. A determination laid down in Parliament in 1992 stated that:

“HM Coastguard is responsible for the initiation and coordination of civil maritime search and rescue within the UK search and rescue region. This includes the mobilisation, organisation and tasking of adequate resources to respond to persons either in distress at sea, or to persons at risk of injury or death on the cliffs or shoreline of the UK”.

The role of HMCG is to prevent loss of life at sea by coordinating SAR. The UK organisation or SAR is derived from the UK Government's adherence to international conventions:

- Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) (1982)
- Convention on the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) (1974)
- International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention) (1979)
- Convention of International Civil Aviation (Chicago Convention) 1944) (Annex 12)

Section 4.8 in the Maritime SAR Convention (1979) refers to the Termination and Suspension of Search and Rescue Operations. Paragraph 4.8.3 states that:

"When a rescue co-ordination centre or rescue sub-centre considers, on the basis of reliable information, that search and rescue operation has been successful, or that the emergency no longer exists, it shall terminate the search and rescue operation and promptly so inform any authority, facility or service which has been activated or notified".

In addition, IAMSAR Chapter 9 states "SAR operations enter the conclusion stage when:

- Information is received that the ship, aircraft, other craft, or persons who are the subject of the SAR incident are no longer in distress;
- The ship, aircraft, or persons for whom SAR facilities are searching have been located and the survivors rescued; or
- During the distress phase, the SMC or other proper authority determines that further search would be to no avail because additional effort cannot appreciably increase the probability of successfully finding any remaining survivors or because there is no longer any reasonable probability that the distressed persons have survived."

Incident Classification

When HMCG are made aware of an incident they will assign the initial incident classification based on the information received and the urgency of the situation at that given time. The incident phase classifications are:

Distress Phase

"A situation wherein there is reasonable certainty that a person, vessel or other

craft, is threatened by grave and imminent danger and requires immediate assistance”

Alert Phase

“A situation exists wherein apprehension exists as to the safety of an aircraft or marine vessel, and of the person on board”

Uncertainty Phase

“A situation wherein doubt exists as to the safety of an aircraft or a marine vessel, and of the person on board”

No enforcement action is permitted to be delivered against any vessel in the distress, alert or uncertainty phases of a SAR incident.

Tasking of Resources

HMCG will also task appropriate resources to respond. Throughout the incident the SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC) shall re-evaluate the incident based on information received and consider a revised incident classification as appropriate. The result of this review will either be that the incident remains at the initial classification, the incident continues to require a SAR response but with a lower urgency assigned (move from distress to alert or uncertainty situation) or that a SAR response is no longer required and can be terminated.

Declared assets such as the RNLI and additional assets for SAR, such as Border Force/Ministry of Defence will be deployed to the incident under the coordination of HM Coastguard to deliver a SAR function only.

During all SAR incidents, the attending assets remain under the coordination of HM Coastguard and should not leave the scene unless directed or agreed by the SMC.

Terminating SAR

When information is received from credible sources confirming that the vessel and/or persons are no longer in need of a SAR response, the SMC is to verify that SAR assistance is no longer required. SAR action will be terminated, and the Coastguard will close the incident with on scene/responding assets advised accordingly. An entry will be recorded within the incident log as follows:

“Confirm SAR operations terminated DTGXXXXXXUTC. This is XXXXX Coastguard.”

The SMC will then advise the appropriate authorities of the termination of the SAR mission.

The SMC will then arrange for an appropriate broadcast to be made on VHF radio to terminate SAR working in accordance with procedures (e.g. Seelonce Feenee broadcast). The broadcast action must define which incident is having SAR working terminated (e.g. by providing the position of the vessel).

SAR Operations Involving Suspected Migrant Incidents

For SAR operations involving suspected migrant incidents in the English Channel, the following considerations are to be made by the SMC:

Distress - Risk to Migrants

HM Coastguard categorise all migrant vessels to which they are notified of as being 'in distress' ("a situation wherein there is reasonable certainty that a person, a vessel or other craft is threatened by grave and imminent danger and requires immediate assistance" - SAR Convention) by default, due to several common features which make them unsuited to the cross-Channel journey, including:

- Vessels being overloaded
- No maritime experience onboard
- Vessel is not sea worthy and is unsuitable for Channel crossing (e.g. using swimming pool inflatable, rowing boat, makeshift paddles)
- The risk of transiting/crossing one of the busiest waterways in the world
- The risk of often transiting at night with no navigation lights
- Vulnerable persons on board (e.g. women, children, disabled or anyone displaying with medical condition)
- Many migrants not wearing lifejackets
- There is no other life-saving apparatus onboard
- Communications have been limited to a mobile phone (which is often discarded once migrants believe they are going to be rescued as the phone has usually been supplied by a facilitator)
- Vessel cannot determine their position
- General Channel sea and weather conditions

Distress - Risk to Other Vessels

In crossing the Channel, migrants are not only posing a risk to themselves but also to other mariners operating in the area.

The categorisation of the vessel as being 'in distress' will lead to the instigation of a SAR response by HM Coastguard as per paragraph 4 above. The incident classification (based on the best available information) is provided to the SMC

classification/phase is to be kept under continuous review by the SMC throughout the SAR incident and the assessment made as to the appropriate phase based on the information being received.

If a Border Force asset encounters a migrant vessel whilst on patrol (within the UK SRR), which has not been reported to HM Coastguard and/or is not subject to a SAR response, the Border Force Commander is to immediately advise HMCG who will then assume coordination of the SAR response. This will include discussion with the Border Force Commander to confirm the appropriate SAR action or, if no SAR response is required, will terminate SAR operations.

Distress - Coordinated Response Required

During a coordinated SAR incident, HM Coastguard will only support the use of tactics to physically stop vessels at sea if the action is required to immediately save life.

Once the migrant vessel has been located, the responding vessel's master / coxswain will be required to assess and report the on-scene situation and to discuss with the SMC whether the incident remains a SAR incident – remaining in the distress phase or downgrading to the alert/uncertainty phase, or if SAR is no longer applicable and SAR operations can be terminated.

As the migrant vessel is presumed to be in distress, based on the factors common to the overwhelming majority of such vessels, downgrading could only take place if there is sufficient specific information to say there is no "apprehension as to the safety of a person, a vessel or other craft" (alert phase) or "reasonable certainty that a person, a vessel or other craft is threatened by grave and imminent danger and requires immediate assistance" (distress phase). If there is insufficient information to terminate the emergency phase, the default presumption continues, and it remains a SAR incident.

If Border Force or MoD proceed to conduct any enforcement operations against small boats crossing the Channel, should that activity result in a SAR incident, then HMCG is to be informed immediately and will then assume coordination of the SAR incident under standard operational procedures.

This policy will remain dynamic and can be reviewed at any time.

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