

Quick response to maritime and riverine emergencies in Brazil - a diagnosis of maritime services

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Response to incidents and emergencies with boats in Brazil is a constitutional duty of the Navy, which is the maritime authority in the country. However, due to the length of the Brazilian coast and its large river network, which cuts the country, most of this aid is made through the Fire Brigades, alone or in partnership with the Navy, because these brigades are spread practically all over the country.

The objective is to scale the structure of maritime and riverine emergencies' response in Brazil, used by the Fire Brigades and other bodies but the Navy, and to identify weaknesses in this structure.

The method used in this work is the field research, through surveys to the Fire Brigades and analysis of accident records of the Navy.

Results

Brazil has a coastline of 8000 km, and a wide navigable river network, particularly in the Amazon region (8% of all the fresh water in the world is in Brazil). There are 17 states bordering the Atlantic Ocean, and two cut down by the Amazon River and its streams. There are several other navigable rivers in other regions of the country, which will be mentioned here only regarding the devices for emergency response.

Together, the lifeguard service of Fire Brigades have 63 fast rescue boats and 4 rescue ship, 70% of these crafts are in the south of the country, especially between the states of Rio de Janeiro and Rio Grande do Sul. 30% of them serve the navigable rivers – 20% in the Amazon rivers. Most vessels are medium sized (up to 20 feet and outboard engine up to 200 HP), serving a sea area of up to 6 NM of the coast and inland areas. However, there are larger vessels (from 40 to 100 feet and up to 1.200 HP engine, such as the rescue ship) that serve every area of the territorial sea (12 NM from the coast).

Despite this distribution, around 54% of boating accidents fatalities occur in Amazonian rivers. Between 2012 and 2013, 99 people died in boating accidents in Brazil, 54 of which died in Amazonian rivers. This is mainly due to huge fleet of ships navigating these rivers, being, in many cases, the only means of transportation. The vast majority of crashed boats in Amazonian rivers are used for transportation of people and, in many cases; numerous victims have to be rescued. However, in the southern states, most crashed boats are for fishing or sports and recreation, representing fewer casualties.

The Brazilian region with less assistance by the Fire Brigade rescue boats is the Northeast, where the Navy alone serves nearly all maritime emergencies. This region accounts for less than 10% of boating accidents.

Conclusion

We know there's still a lot to be done so that navigation in Brazilian waters is considered safe. There are vast river and coastal regions without adequate assistance by rescue boats. However, the most urgent measure we've identified is to increment and reinforce means and devices to assist emergencies on rivers, since rivers are where most fatal accidents occur.

The Brazilian Fire Brigades, due to their dimension and distribution in the country, are apparently the Organization best prepared and more apt for the task. Aware of this factor, they have increased investments in rescue crafts and crew training, doubling the number of fast rescue boats in the last 10 years.