

Czech DREF – Storm BORIS 2024 (MDRCZ003) Lessons learned workshop report



Background

Devastation caused by the storm Boris in September 2024 led to large deployment of the Czech Red Cross to affected communities. The Czech Red Cross (CzRC) established and ran evacuation centers, assisted evacuation efforts and supported those in need. Teams were also helping construct flood protection measures and mobile flood protection systems (including sandbags, rubber-textile walls, metal walls). Volunteers were involved in various activities, e.g., helped to fill sandbags and provided logistical support to first responders (meals and beverages) and monitored the immediate needs of affected population, damages, and psychosocial requirements. We took part in the distribution of essential supplies, including food, drinking water, and hygiene items in affected areas. Nine regional branches were fully mobilized to support operations and over twenty other branches provided human resources including volunteers, members and staff to help people in need. Also, the Emergency Operations Centre of Central Crisis Staff was activated to lead and coordinate our relief efforts. In the most affected areas, CzRC established strong points and forward bases. We provided psychosocial

support in areas with ongoing evacuations to address immediate emotional and psychological needs of affected population.

Methodology

In order to improve our services to communities in future disasters, we conducted a long and complex feedback process aimed at assessing our abilities, processes and skills.

Apart from feedback discussions between volunteers and their team leaders during their deployment, CzRC administered on-line surveys in November 2024 when the main operation was coming to an end. Four different questionnaires were sent to the leadership of all regional branches to collect feedback on four different deployment areas:

- “Front line” deployment covering all areas, from first aid provision through needs monitoring to MHPSS support of impacted communities
- Establishment and operation of the evacuation center
- Logistics operations
- Coordination and command of our operations at all levels

All four questionnaires included common sections to survey the psycho-emotional treatment of volunteers and gathering overall reflections of the Czech Red Cross deployment during response.

Over 110 questionnaires were collected from respondents with various levels of deployment and experience. The next stage of the feedback process was conducting on-line feedback sessions for each of the areas mentioned above while the final step was holding a Lessons Learned Workshop in March 2025.

Achievements

Throughout all mentioned stages of the feedback process, several achievements stood out with the caveat that within the collected feedback there was little note on suggestions for improvement.

These achievements can be split into two categories: achievements in CzRC’s actions towards affected communities and individuals; and achievements in CzRC’s internal processes and operations.

Achievements relating to service delivery for affected communities include:

- Delivering urgently needed help in a timely manner with some cases the Czech Red Cross being the only provider of certain supplies or services. Often, our volunteers were first responders of the integrated emergency system to reach affected households, mainly in the very remote areas of Jeseník.
- Deploying MHPSS specialists: a capacity, which CzRC has built over the last three years thanks to the IFRC’s EU4 Health project and helped hundreds of affected people. Due to the increased size of our national MHPSS team, we have now sustainable capacity to provide MHPSS services and longer-term support than before. In addition, thanks to the mobilization of our volunteers, we were able to provide Psychosocial Support Services for more than 5,000 people.
- At the start of the operation, we quickly identified the need for communication and decided to create Strong Points. While the Czech Red Cross had no prior experience or

Standard Operating Procedures for this activity, our volunteers were able to create several Strong Points in very remote areas. In some cases, even municipal authorities and EMS partners relied on the connection provided by our teams and equipment which we delivered to affected areas.

- Even though the main focus of our activities was on the areas of North Moravia and Silesia, our local branches were able to support smaller operations also in the rest of the country. High alert duties, setting up of evacuation centers and other actions were conducted by the Czech Red Cross volunteers all across the nation, proving our ability to mobilize and manage resources effectively in order to help affected communities.

In terms of the Czech Red Cross internal operational achievements, the following was identified:

- The organization with “peacetime” size of 13thousand members and volunteers was able to mobilize and deploy over 500 volunteers in two of the most affected regions with little impact on our operations in other parts of the country.
- Despite the slower start of our response (see “Challenges”), we were able to quickly establish lines of command and control, and the operation was managed centrally from day one of the flood response.
- The new platforms and channels that were used for internal communication proved to be a significant improvement compared to previous emergencies.

Challenges

Our response to the floods caused by storm Boris faced several challenges. These were identified throughout the feedback process and validated during the Lessons Learned Workshop in March 2025.

Challenges were identified in the following areas:

1. Staff (HQ) activities

Despite many years of training staff of branches and Headquarters in implementing a standard operation model – a system used by our key civil defense and disaster response partner, the Firefighters Corps – we were not able to deploy enough experienced leaders who have the capacity to effectively manage staff at various levels. This led to slower and less efficient operation on national, regional and local level. In one case, regional staff had to be bypassed and a new, forward detached team was deployed to circumvent inefficient regional staff.

2. Mandates and hierarchy in nationwide coordination

Czech Red Cross is a decentralized organization with all our 61 regional branches having a significant level of independence. The decentralized structure combined with insufficient experience and training in emergency- and staff operations caused challenges in coordination, decision-making as well as duplications in mandates and responsibilities.

3. Level of training and education

The decentralized organizational structure of the Czech Red Cross proved to have an impact on staff and volunteers’ training and knowledge, which significantly varied among volunteers depending not only on their experience, but also on the regional

branch the volunteers are affiliated with. This led to delays in deployment, miscommunication and issues related to the use of some emergency response tools we deployed during storm Boris.

4. Difficult and inefficient activation process

There was no mobilization procedure approved and in place before the storm hit our country and the ad hoc system established in the first hours proved to have certain limitations. While volunteer deployment had to be approved by branch directors, information about the place and time of their deployment was shared just a few hours prior to the action or even canceled while teams were already on their way to affected areas¹.

5. Awareness and monitoring before and during the disaster

We experienced a different approach to forecasted storms on all levels of the organization. Although the Government and National Weather Service were predicting heavy rains and possible floods and a central team was put on alert, no alert message was shared with branches and their humanitarian units (key elements of the Czech Red Cross response to any emergency, established in majority of our local branches). The lack of awareness and alert before the floods led to confusion and possibly slowed down our response to the needs of affected communities.

Lessons learned and recommendations for the future

The lessons learned workshop format and process



With five areas identified as key challenges during our deployment, participants of the lessons learned workshop attended several sessions to address not only the mentioned issues, but also to focus on the overall improvement of our response to similar disasters and emergencies.

¹ The main reason of the cancellations was that regional staff often hold their meetings late in the evening.

Representatives from all over the country and from various levels of the organization came to Prague to present and share their experiences and suggestions. A total of 24 members and employees actively participated in the workshop, which was led by the Secretary General of the CzRC, Karol Čukan. The President of the Czech Red Cross, Marek Jukl, the Commander of Emergency Response Unit, Iva Jelínková, and Disaster Preparedness Executive, Ondřej Hadaš, facilitated the sessions over the course of two days and led the discussion on necessary improvements to our preparedness.

Recommendation 1 – new scope of activities in disasters

The participants' first task was to identify the partial activities that the CzRC should ideally perform during various emergencies. In small groups, they gradually developed their proposals for events ranging from a major train accident to a nationwide blackout. Participants also determined at which of the three levels – regional branch, neighborhood help between branches and national – the given activity should be performed. Annex 2 illustrates the list of identified activities and is subject to an approval process to replace the declared 5 activities from the current CzRC Disaster Preparedness Concept. The results of this exercise will also serve to adjust standard activities, create a terminological dictionary of disaster preparedness in the Czech Red Cross and create standard events such as tornado, nuclear accident, etc.

SWOT analysis

As the next step, participants assessed the CzRC's human and material resource readiness through a SWOT analysis. They then delved into several areas in greater depth to identify the root causes of weaknesses and explore ways for improvement and correction.

The groups explored the following weaknesses in the area of human resources:

- lack of financial resources for personnel development (not only) for disaster preparedness,
- insufficient communication, both technically and "processual",
- inconsistent and insufficient education of members for disaster preparedness and
- the phenomenon of "Frogs on the Spring²".

In the area of material equipment and preparedness, the groups worked on:

- insufficient logistics system within the CzRC,
- absence of necessary software tools and their knowledge across the CzRC,
- insufficient IT equipment (not only) for disaster preparedness and
- uneven quality of equipment and its standardization.

Partial solutions proposed by the groups will be analyzed and further developed according to the capabilities of the CzRC HQ and the Emergency Response Unit which plays the lead role in disaster preparedness.

Deep dive into activities

Thereafter, the groups focused on some of the CzRC's partial activities during emergencies and discussed the following four questions:

1. What are we doing well in a given activity?
2. What are we not doing well in a given activity?

² A Czech description of a person keeping his/her resources, people or information to her/himself

3. What should we start doing in a given activity?
4. What should we stop doing?

Selected were the following activities:

- establishment and operation of a regional operations center
- establishment and operation of a communication and resilience point
- establishment and operation of an evacuation center,
- on-site coordination,
- care for vulnerable people and
- on-site first aid.

A separate chapter was a discussion on a yet undefined activity, rapid assessment, i.e., the ability to quickly map the situation and needs of those affected. The group that was dedicated to this topic created a list of assumptions, challenges and considerations that we need to explore when defining this activity, which will certainly be one of the key activities of the CzRC in the future during emergencies.

In the next block, the focus of the discussion was on the ideal procedure for transmitting information during an emergency, or rather when there is a prospect of such an event. Participants discussed details e.g., who communicates with their regional branch, who is then subsequently informed by the person authorized by the branch – when they give an “echo” to the surrounding branches so that they are on standby for possible neighborly assistance and when they communicate with the Central Operations Center command for possible activation of our national response mechanism called AVERIN. The scheme that was the result of this session will be further developed and submitted for approval to lead to a uniform procedure throughout the Czech Red Cross.

An important topic of 2024 floods – and every emergency of a national scope – is the call for members and volunteers to be deployed. Two models were presented: the first "ideal" one which counts on the emergence of a technological solution, for example an application; and a second that is more practical and applicable in the event of an emergency, which could occur within a few weeks. Both models will be further tuned so that the call and activation of the most important source of our capabilities – people – is faster, more efficient and less demanding on human resources.

Next Steps

The suggestions of participants will be elaborated in more detail by Iva Jelínková and Ondřej Hadaš, in the coming weeks and months and depending on the nature of the recommendation, they will ensure their adequate approval and dissemination. The goal is to implement as many of the proposed changes as possible within a period of approximately three months after the workshop, if there are capacities and the complexity of the recommendation allows. Some suggestions are already actionable given that there is necessary time and resource allocation.

The suggestions include:

- Updating existing standard activities
- Updating the concept of crisis preparedness to include additional activities of the CzRC during emergencies
- Standardization of material
- Logistic information system
- Creating manuals (IT, communications and others)
- Developing job descriptions for coordinators, commanders and others
- Creating a module for Humanitarian Unit within the framework of providing First Aid
- Creating a Rapid Assessment training module
- Creating a database of volunteers and modules for emergency management

Annex 1 – reflections from the on-line questionnaires

Front line

In total, 90 deployed volunteers completed the questionnaire, out of around 500 who took part in our operations. Their reflections were mostly positive, regarding their own preparedness – both in terms of equipment and skills – for the disaster response, or the support they received from the branch in the area of their deployment. Main criticism was towards the lack or insufficient level of communication before the deployment.

- Updated information for volunteers:
 - Accommodation and catering options
 - Late handover of information (usually in the evening, depending on information from the crisis staff, which met in the evening)
- Ongoing information on the situation

If any equipment was missing, it was mainly the uniforms, maps of affected regions and cars for improved mobility.

Three subareas for feedback were needs monitoring, first aid, and MHPSS activities.

Most respondents felt well prepared for the **needs monitoring**, knowing the tools used and seeing it as a very important activity. Field coordination with the integrated rescue system partners, mainly firefighters, was considered very good. Coordination with other NGOs operating in the area was named as one of the main points for improvement.

Just over 50% of survey respondents had delivered **first aid** to affected people. While most were well trained and equipped, a clear policy regarding the distribution of medicine is needed in the future.

Just over half of the survey respondents delivered some form of **psychosocial support**. Years of investment in education were hailed as a key to our ability to deliver this support. Coordination within and cooperation with external partners (Fire Department, Army of the Czech Republic, other non-profit organizations (People in Need, ADRA and others)) were appreciated by survey participants.

Key areas for future development

While overall reflection of our field operations was positive, some topics were subject to discussion and improvement before the next possible deployment:

- Role in rapid assessment and the improvement of needs assessment questionnaire and work with collected data
- Minor improvements to MHPSS front line should be made with “modular” approach to match different emergencies
- A guide for regional branch directors – who are often not that involved in disaster preparedness, yet have a major role in any activity in the region – should be created

Establishment and operation of the evacuation center

The CzRC opened a total of 11 evacuation centers, mainly in affected areas. Some were open in other parts of the Czech Republic in anticipation of possible emergency. Out of a total of 8 survey respondents, half of the respondents came from the Opava regional branch, which operated three of the eleven mentioned centers.

Preparedness was evaluated as very good, mainly thanks to the effective weather forecast – the storm and its effects were anticipated. The quality and availability of equipment in evacuation centers was considered insufficient and in need for improvement. Quick activation and good locations of evacuation centers were a plus while insufficient hygienic capacities were mentioned as a lesson learnt and a room for future improvement.

Logistics operations

A total of 12 people completed the questionnaire focusing on the distribution and logistical support with humanitarian aid. Our own preparedness was considered lower than needed, mainly due to lack of systems and stocking lists. Still, all respondents agreed on the fact that CzRC managed to get the needed humanitarian aid to the affected population. An important issue to consider for improvement is a set of essentials (water, disinfection, some basic tools etc.) to be available in the field with the rapid assessment teams from the very start of our deployment.

Coordination and command of our operations at all levels

A total of 32 people responded and shared their opinion about coordination and command work at various levels, from local HQ through local branch leadership to the national level.

The majority considered their own preparedness for the task very good or good. The main issues mentioned were support from regional branches – this was case in one of the forward operation centers, where the regional branch was not present – and lack of clear mandate. Also, insufficient information sharing was pointed out by respondents, mainly from national HQ level.

The issue of mandate was seen as problematic both within the teams and among teams as well as bottom-up and top-down. In the Coordination & Command area, respondents were requesting more training and exercises.

On-line follow-ups

Five on-line sessions, open to all respondents who were open to continuing the feedback process, were held in December 2024 with the aim to clarify findings from the on-line survey. One session per topic evacuation centers, logistics and coordination & command were held, as well as two sessions were dedicated to field operations. All sessions proved to be useful in adding more details to key findings from questionnaires.

Questionnaire – summary

Positive elements were present throughout the responses, such as the ability of the Czech Red Cross to help those affected, the willingness of people to get involved, even significantly beyond the expected hours, tasks, and efforts to solve problems. In several areas, a shift was perceived compared to past emergencies, while sometimes conflicting opinions were encountered on the same activity, process, or event.

In order for us as the Czech Red Cross to be better prepared to help in the future, five areas for analysis and improvement were proposed. As a step zero, before the five areas are tackled, it was necessary to clarify what role the Czech Red Cross wants to have in emergencies, what relationship it should have with partners (from municipalities, IZS to other non-profit organizations), and most importantly, how it should help people affected by an emergency. A statement of the CzRC's main emergency activities is in Annex 2 (Proposal for activities to be deployed by the Czech Red Cross in emergencies).

Annex 2 –

Proposal for activities to be deployed by the Czech Red Cross in emergencies

Activity	Level sufficient to deliver the activity			
	Regional Branch	Neighbours Help	National level	IFRC/ICRC
First aid, first psychosocial aid, support to own people	X	X		
Food and hygiene to impacted people	X	X		
Evacuation center, assistance center	X	X	X	
Connection point and resilience/energy point, infopoint	X	X		
Assistance in decontamination after CBRN accident			X – trained team	
Participation in communal emergency staff	X			
Field “dressing station” and triage	X	X		
Sharing of information as a prevention mechanism – both internal and external	X		X	
Collection and distribution of material aid	X	X	X	X
Volunteers – external – coordination on-site	X			
Volunteers – external – activation			X	
Personal protection aids – use and training for others	X	X		
Cooperation with EMS elements and NGOs	X		X	
PR	X		X	
Fundraising			X	X
Monitoring, Rapid Assessment	X	X		
Staff (operations center) activities	X	X	X	
Provision of basic needs	X	X		
Tracing service (RFL)			X	X
Activation of volunteers (internal) for national emergency			X	