

Responding to the unexpected



The International Association of Fire and Rescue Services – CTIF – aims to ensure that skilled firefighters are safe and healthy in order to guarantee the safety of citizens around the world, writes **Taina Hanhikoski**

As far back as the 19th Century, professionals in the fire and rescue field saw the benefits of international co-operation in promoting development. Thus, the CTIF (Comité Technique International de Prévention et d'Extinction du Feu) was founded in Paris in 1900 for encouraging and promoting co-operation among firefighters and other experts in the fire and rescue field.

"International co-operation is about exchanging knowledge and avoiding unnecessary duplication," says Tore Eriksson, President of CTIF and Project Manager at the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, MSB.

The CTIF's goal is to encourage and promote co-operation among firefighters and other experts in fire and rescue throughout the world. This work is carried out through 13 thematic commissions and working groups, which deal with various issues such as hazardous materials, new technologies, women in fire and rescue services and training and education in the field of fire and rescue.

These commissions and working groups produce a vast amount of information and knowledge that is designed to benefit all. Outcomes include procedures, software tools, videos or manuals. As an example of this, there is an ongoing discussion with car manufacturers about having comprehensive, standardised written documents of power supplies in vehicles in order to make first responders' work safer.

To highlight excellent outcomes in this field, the CTIF recently awarded its first Best Practice Procedure to a manual that elaborates extrication from electric and hybrid vehicles.

"Our goal is to bring important results forward and make sure they are taken into practice as widely as possible," says Eriksson. "This way we avoid duplication and save resources for something else, so we don't have to do the same things over and over again."

Emergency response community

Even though the term first responder usually refers to law enforcement, fire and emergency medical personnel, the tasks emerging from successful response to manmade or natural disasters are multiple and involve professionals from various different groups, such as experts on hazardous materials, new technologies, wildland fires and those responsible for safety at airports. As the threats become more versatile, so do preparedness, preparation, response and recovery from those threats. This requires both professionals and volunteers who are well-trained, healthy and well-equipped.

Even though the CTIF's motto is 'Skilled firefighters, safe citizens', the organisation takes a comprehensive view on the emergency response community – both professionals and support staff on the field – and wants to develop their capacities as well as bring forward their needs and requirements. As a network

of experts, the CTIF aims to connect people in the emergency response community from all over the world. However, this is not always the easiest of tasks. "There are big challenges in being a global expert network actor, mainly revolving around the aspect of availability of resources," states Eriksson.

One of the ways to address this challenge is through international co-operation, which is on the increase. The CTIF is a major international player with its 36 member countries and nearly 50 associate members, among them several private and public organisations such as fire equipment manufacturers, fire and rescue associations and training centres. The CTIF also co-operates with The Confederation of Fire Protection Association Europe (CFPA-Europe) and The Federation of the European Union Fire Officers Associations (FEU).

In addition, different organisations and authorities, as well as organisations involved in large international projects are increasingly asking for the CTIF's views on, or direct involvement in, a number of activities. While this indicates that the work carried out within the organisation is effective and going in the right direction, selecting the best representatives and financing CTIF's participation remains a tough challenge.

"Another challenge is the complexity in today's and tomorrow's fire and rescue, specifically when talking about new developments. New technologies are often very complex and to gain a comprehensive understanding of them there is often a need for experts from various areas within the CTIF," says Eriksson.

As well as traditional fires and accidents, infectious diseases, terrorist attacks, extreme weather conditions caused by climate change, migrant crises, as well as cyber and hybrid threats are

The CTIF has a proud history, having been established in Paris, France, back in 1900

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all affecting the emergency community more and more.

"Even firefighters' reality is no longer just about fires. It's much more complex and demanding," according to Eriksson.

While the effects of fires can be unclear at times, there is a difference in terms of deliberate attacks and natural or man-made events. In the former, first responders themselves can be the target (or part of a target), which means their capabilities to respond can be severely damaged. Supporting systems such as management, communication and/or equipment, can also be targeted. This means that there is no confirmation whether the accident scene is safe for response and recovery. Also, the scene itself might not be easily determined if deliberate attacks are conducted in several unknown locations, possibly even simultaneously.

Thus, as the world has been getting smaller owing to the Internet and burgeoning communication networks, this provides emergency services with new challenges and possibilities. Communication in disasters, large or small, is a key issue. New ways of communication provide first responders with opportunities to share information faster and better than ever before, but they also create new vulnerabilities and needs for education and capacity building. There is a requirement for greater situational awareness.

In order to develop various communication methods, CTIF is involved in a project called POP-ALERT, which is a two-year project financed by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme (see CRJ 11:1). The project aims to create a toolkit to help prepare and alert EU populations in case of a crisis through behavioural research and empirical studies.

The CTIF is not, however, losing focus from its original mission either. It is developing understanding on a variety of issues. One point of interest for the CTIF is fire behaviour and different aspects of fire – that smoke is combustible too, for example.

Finland and Sweden have not seen accidents resulting in firefighter fatalities for several years, but unfortunately this is not the case everywhere: for example a 33-year-old firefighter was killed on a response in Greece in 2014 and in Belgium several firefighters were killed in action a few years ago. The UK has also seen firefighter deaths in recent years. Says Eriksson: "I think it's astonishing that in these days firefighters still die in indoor firefighting activities. This is down to a lack of training in understanding fire behaviour." The CTIF aims to fill this gap.

The CTIF will hold its annual Delegates' Assembly in Helsinki, Finland on September 7–9, 2016. Around 140 delegates from around the world are expected to take part. The event, which is made possible by Finland's Fire Protection Fund (PSR), consists of the CTIF's annual meeting and two symposiums open for the public.

The main focus of the first symposium will be the health and safety of firefighters. The aim is to present recent findings concerning health and performance of firefighters in relation to new technologies, such as health technology and technology relating to extrication, and firefighter safety. In the second symposium, the focus is on new threats and the role emergency services play in responding to them. Capacities and prerequisites for safe and successful work will also be discussed.



The CTIF takes a comprehensive view of the emergency services community, recognising the many professionals from various different groups that are involved

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