

THE PREPARATION OF A NON-COMBAT OPERATION AS A KEY ELEMENT OF THE SUCCESS OF THE ENGAGEMENT OF THE RIVER FLOTILLA IN THE OPERATION OF ASSISTING CIVIL AUTHORITIES DURING FLOODS*

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The River Flotilla (RF), as an integral part of the Army, is one of the inevitable subjects of the protection and rescue of the population, environment and material goods during floods. The emergencies declared due to the threat of water overflow from river bed require the use of some equipment such as ships, boats, amphibious and other types of vessels. Due to their main purpose, manoeuvrability, capacity and specificity of the environment in which they are used (rivers, lakes, canals, etc.), the successful engagement of the protection and rescue forces during the execution of various types of non-combat activities in a flooded area is inconceivable. However, the success of a flood relief operation depends not only on the equipment used in carrying out tasks, but also on many challenges such as: how to select and organize adequate protection and rescue forces, how to bring forces to a flood-affected area, how to organize their logistic support and how to establish successful coordination with civil authorities in an affected area.

In this regard, and through the analysis of the existing doctrinal solutions, the key elements of the successful engagement of the RF

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during floods have been generated in the form of preparation of operation, command in operation, cooperation and coordination, non-combat activities and logistic support to operation. The paper proposes solutions related to the phase of preparation of operation as one of the key elements of the success of the engagement of the RF in assisting civil authorities during floods.

Key words: River Flotilla, state of emergency, floods, preparation of operation

Introduction

Floods, as a natural disaster, result in endangering human life and health, destroying households and infrastructure. The River Flotilla, as an integral part of the Army, is one of the indispensable factors in the execution of the tasks of the protection and rescue of the population, environment and material goods during floods. The main objective of this paper is to define a new approach in the execution phase of non-combat operation preparation, whose implementation should provide efficient and effective solutions during planning, organizing and preparing forces for the engagement in rendering assistance to civil authorities during floods. In this regard, the topics related to the River Flotilla (concept, purpose, tasks and organization), a state of emergency and preparation of operation as the key elements of the successful engagement of the River Flotilla during floods have been presented with proposed measures for possible improvement.

The concept, purpose and tasks of the River Flotilla

The River Flotilla of the Serbian Armed Forces is recognized in the defence system as a tactical unit of the Army, of a brigade level, organized according to a modular principle, which integrates river and engineering units into a functional unit in order to perform assigned missions (Figure 1). It carries out its tasks independently or within the operations of the Army and other defence forces.¹ Furthermore, the RF is a system whose elements are based on certain laws and principles, and a clear structural organization² provides efficient execution of tasks, primarily on rivers, canals and lakes independently or in cooperation with other defence forces.

¹ Šerif Bajrami i Rade Slavković, "Doktrinarna rešenja upotrebe Rečne flotile u vanrednim situacijama", *Vojno delo*, br. 5, 2016, p. 218.

² The phrase "structural organization" is taken from the Army Doctrine and represents an organizational relationship that is manifested through the representation of branches and services (*Doktrina Kopnene vojske*, Medija centar "Odbrana", Beograd, 2012, p. 18).

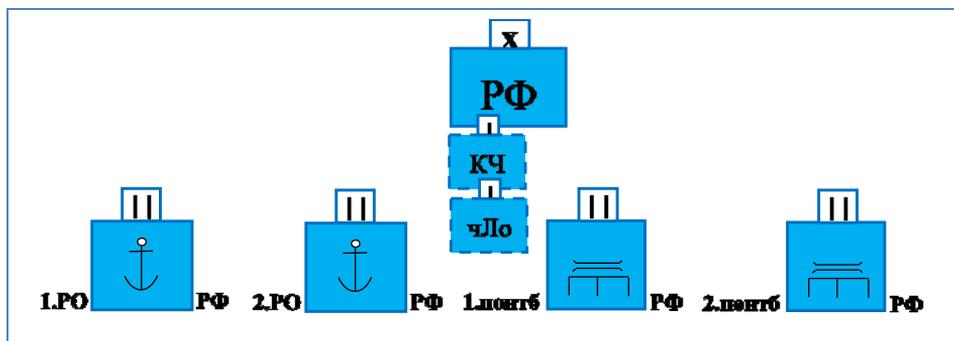


Figure 1 – The organizational structure of the River Flotilla³

The main purpose of the RF of the Serbian Armed Forces is defined in the RF Regulation (temporary) in the following way: „The River Flotilla is intended for executing combat and non-combat activities on and within the inland waterways and other running and standing water, in all hydrological and metrological conditions, independently or in cooperation with the Army units and other defence forces and in collaboration with civil society actors.”⁴ The tasks for which the Command and subordinate units are trained and exercised to build and maintain operational capabilities, and in relation to the execution of the requirements of the third mission of the Serbian Armed Forces, are: 1. search and rescue, 2. the evacuation of the population, property and animals from flood-affected areas, primarily by water, and partly by land, 3. the distribution of vital food supplies, 4. longitudinal and transverse transport, 5. the provision of temporary accommodation for endangered persons, 6. rendering medical assistance to endangered or sick persons in flood-affected areas and 7. building, i.e. strengthening dams and embankments.⁵

A state of emergency

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, as the main and highest legal act of our country, does not recognize the concept of emergency, but exclusively a state of emergency and war⁶. The Law on Defence also deals with these two states much more precisely than the Constitution, while the concept of a state of emergency is finally recognized and defined in the Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management as “a state arising from the declaration by the competent

³ The figure has been created on the basis of available data on the website of the Serbian Armed Forces, https://www.vs.rs/sr_cyr/jedinice/vojska-srbije/kopnena-vojska/recna-flotila, 08/11/2021.

⁴ *Pravilo Rečna flotila (privremeno)*, KKoV, Niš, 2020, p. 9.

⁵ These tasks are defined on the basis of the analysis of the Training Plan for the River Flotilla commands and units.

⁶ Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 98, Belgrade, 2006, Article 200 and 201.

authority when risks and threats or consequences for the population, environment and material and cultural goods are of such scope and intensity that their occurrence or consequences cannot be prevented or eliminated by regular action of competent bodies and services, therefore it is necessary to use special measures, forces and funds with an intensified regime of work to alleviate and eliminate them.”⁷

Referring to foreign literature and definitions of emergencies by other authors, Bajrami, Karović and Radić conclude that the concept of a state of emergency, in a broader sense, implies a sudden and unique event that disrupts regular processes and phenomena, greatly affecting human lives, property and environment, that is, as a factor of instability, it leads to the dysfunction of the existing social system.⁸

When it comes to natural disasters in our area, floods are the most common cause of emergencies. According to Marina Babić Mladenović, flood is defined through the concept of great waters: “When the flow of great water exceeds the capacity of the main river bed, overflowing, that is, flooding begins, which, if area is not protected by facilities, endangers human lives, property and infrastructure. Floods are among the greatest natural disasters at global level, and in our area they often cause emergencies, followed by great damage and loss of human lives.”⁹

During floods, the degree of endangerment of human lives and material goods is mostly at a high level and requires the engagement of special forces. The River Flotilla is one of such units which, due to its specificity, definitely represents one of the most important elements of the integrated protection and rescue system, and the outcome of a state of emergency often depends on it. The evidence for this claim are the experiences during the May 2014 floods, when diving and pontoon units played a crucial role in the execution of the search and rescue task, as well as the evacuation of the population from the endangered territory.

Preparation of operation as a key element of the successful engagement of the River Flotilla in the operation of assisting civil authorities during floods

The success of the operation of rendering assistance to civil authorities during floods depends on many factors, such as: preparation of operation, command in operation, cooperation and coordination, non-combat activities and logistic support to operation. However, the continuation and success of every military operation begins with and directly depends on the phase of its preparation.

⁷ Law on Disaster Risk Reduction and Emergency Management, Article 2, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, no. 87, Belgrade, 2018.

⁸ Šerif Bajrami, Samed Karović i Goran Radić, “Upotreba Rečne flotile u pružanju pomoći civilnim vlastima u slučaju velikih poplava”, *Vojno delo*, br. 7, 2016, p. 254.

⁹ Marina Babić Mladenović, “Uređenje vodotokova”, Institut za vodoprivredu “Jaroslav Černi”, Beograd, 2018, p. 217.

Preparation of operation implies the work of commands and units that takes place before the phase of its execution, and whose main purpose is to build and maintain a high level of operational capabilities necessary for the successful execution of the upcoming operation. The purposeful and timely preparation should provide the efficient engagement of units in accordance with a unique plan (operational order) and under single command during operation. The conditions in which preparation of operation takes place are very complex and depend on many parameters: the condition of equipment, the number of personnel and its competence, the way of commanding units, as well as the amount of information the command has during planning, preparing and performing operation. However, time as a factor necessary for the successful and high-quality preparation is crucial.

Accordingly, the preparation phase should not be viewed only as a period that is conducted *immediately* before operation, but as a long-term process, whose initiation is necessary to begin long before flood. For these reasons, in the proposed concept of preparation of operation, as a key element of success, the preparation phase is considered through two time units: *the period of readiness* and *the period of activation of forces* (Figure 2). The main goal of this classification is to provide sufficient time for the purposeful and efficient preparation of forces, even in conditions when it is greatly limited due to premature or sudden occurrence of natural disasters (e.g. in the case of earthquakes).

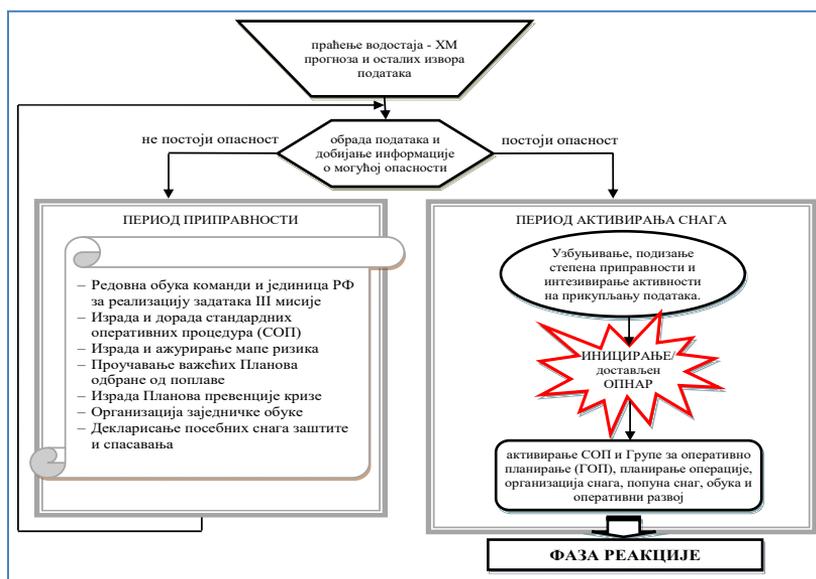


Figure 2 – The proposed concept of preparation of operation with activities¹⁰

¹⁰ The figure and content have been created by the authors.

During the complete phase of preparation, the internal service bodies constantly monitor and process the data issued through the early warning, notification and alert system. The inland water level, its tendency to develop and other hydrometeorological parameters are data that are collected and processed in order to obtain timely information needed to decide on measures to be taken in accordance with the current situation. If there is no real flood danger, the unit continues to carry out preventive measures characteristic of the readiness period or, conversely, when flood danger is certain, it takes concrete measures to initiate or activate the response forces (Figure 2).

The measures characteristic of the readiness period, as already mentioned, are mainly of preventive importance because the low level of flood risk allows units to carry out high-quality and extensive preparatory activities. At this stage of preparation of operation, the proposed concept stipulates the execution of the following preventive activities:

1. *The regular training of the River Flotilla commands and units for the execution of the tasks of the third mission of the Serbian Armed Forces with the focus on the engagement of forces during floods.* The comprehensive training and exercising during the readiness period creates the basic preconditions for achieving the necessary operational capabilities for the execution of a wide range of non-combat activities. Later, in the period immediately before operation, training is concretized and intensified in order to accomplish the final competence of the declared forces to perform planned tasks during operation.

2. *The revisions and upgrades of the existing standard operating procedures (SOP) in this field.* In order to establish a unified decision-making system at tactical level and an efficient flow of information to all entities and forces engaged in the protection and rescue tasks, it is necessary to develop appropriate SOP. The development of precise and concrete SOP, based on lessons learned and previously acquired experiences, creates conditions for each member of the RF to recognize and understand his role during the engagement in the execution of very complex and risky tasks.

3. *The development and update of a risk map,* based on previously defined flood zones and the endangerment level of coastal content, is another measure that should be taken during the readiness period.

4. *The study of relevant flood defence plans* is a measure by which forces are acquainted in advance with possible obligations and tasks that they may encounter during their engagement.

5. *The development of crisis prevention plans.* Crisis prevention plans are prepared to respond to possible emergencies, based on their different outbreak and development scenarios, and are developed at all levels of command. Its development in conditions of readiness and availability of sufficient time provides high-quality training and exercising of commands in the decision-making process for the efficient use of forces, whose solutions later in real circumstances can serve as a good basis for making a successful response to new crisis.

6. *The organization of joint training with representatives of civil authorities and public institutions in the field of protection and rescue.* Through joint training, different subjects of the protection and rescue system get acquainted with competencies, equipment, procedures and possibilities of other actors. The advantages and weak-

nesses of the system are discovered, potential obstacles in communication and coordinated work during a state of emergency are removed, etc.

7. *The declaration of the special forces from the RF for the execution of specialized tasks from the third mission of the Serbian Armed Forces and their training.*¹¹ The proposed concept of preparation of operation implies that special teams are established from the River Flotilla units to be engaged in the protection and rescue tasks, which require special skills and knowledge. These forces, in principle the same units, would be periodically trained according to a special plan and programme, in the function of conducting adequate and timely preparation for the execution of the specific protection and rescue tasks.

From the moment of crisis onwards, all the undertaken activities are no longer preventive, but proactive because the certainty of flood is obvious and requires exclusively the active role of the river forces. In such circumstances, the previously conducted preparatory actions, during *the period of readiness*, gain additional importance because they enable the successful continuation of the started process, but this time in the conditions of limited time. The advantage of the proposed solutions in the phase of preparation of operation is reflected by this capability to quickly adapt to new circumstances.

The end of the readiness period enables the continuation of preparation through the period of activation of response forces. The moment of transition from one subphase to other is initiated by the collected data, which unequivocally indicate the potential danger and the increased probability of its occurrence or by the order of the superior command. At this stage of preparation of operation, the proposed concept suggests the execution of the following proactive measures:

1. *Alarming and raising the level of readiness of the River Flotilla commands and units* are activities that are undertaken at a moment when a threat to facilities and members of the River Flotilla is increasingly present. In these circumstances, an order is issued for alerting, i.e. raising the level of readiness in order to carry out immediate preparation for potential engagement of forces. Thus, among the first steps that are undertaken at the beginning of *the period of activation of forces* is alerting and raising their readiness in a situation when a danger of a threatening phenomenon is real and objective.

2. *Intensifying activities on collecting additional information on impending floods.* The proposed concept of preparation of operation suggests that additional information about potentially endangered areas is provided by timely reconnaissance, as well as by sending persons to appropriate institutions in charge of early warning, notification and alert (with the prior consent of the competent military authorities).

3. *Activating the SOP for a given crisis and the establishment of an operational planning group (OPG).* Upon receiving and checking information on possible danger, the

¹¹ With relevant legal and doctrinal solutions, the Serbian Armed Forces declare forces only for their first and second mission, having in mind that since 2009, the Department for Emergency Management has passed into the competence of the Ministry of Interior. However, the experiences during the engagement of the Serbian Armed Forces units in emergencies indicate the need to establish and continuously train special units to perform search and rescue tasks, i.e. to provide assistance to civil authorities during various natural disasters.

operational duty officer of the River Flotilla informs the River Flotilla Commander and the Chief of Staff of the River Flotilla Command (the head of OPG) about the crisis indicators. The River Flotilla Commander orders via the operational duty officer of the River Flotilla to call the OPG members in order to start working, after gathering, on making proposals on the engagement and manner of non-military response to new crisis.

4. *Planning of operation.* The process of planning the River Flotilla operation in support to civil authorities in case of floods is an integral part of comprehensive preparation, whose main holder is the River Flotilla Commander with his command, i.e. with the directly established OPG. In the organizational structure of OPG, and as innovative solutions for efficient collection, processing and distribution of relevant data, the proposed concept suggests the introduction of two established elements: 1. team for reconnaissance and data collection and 2. situation centre (Figure 3).

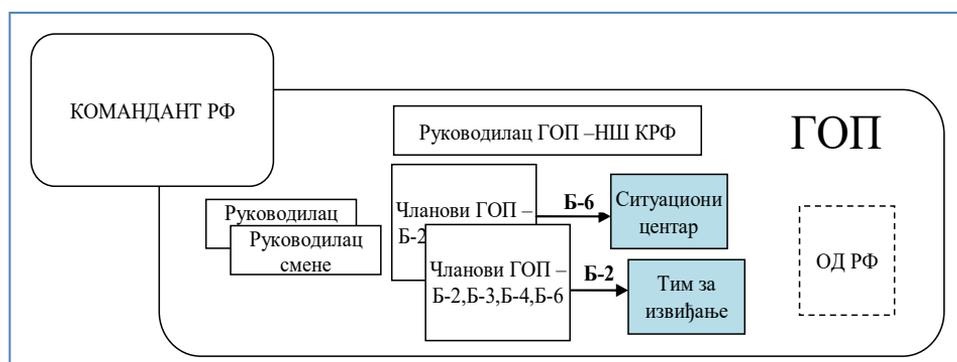


Figure 3 – The organization of OPG in the preparation phase of operation¹²

The mentioned organization should provide relevant and accurate data from the field, efficient flow of information, continuous work, transfer of management actions in real time, efficient reporting to superiors and relieving the duty officers during a state of emergency.

5. *Organizing forces.* The key moment in the preparatory phase, as a result of planning, is the process in which the most suitable organizational structure of forces is found for the execution of assigned tasks. The main goal of the organization is to establish an optimal operational schedule for successful (organized) execution of operation. The defined organizational form is assigned the required number of executors and managers, their tasks, rights and responsibilities are defined, then the manner of their coordination, the use of necessary methods and techniques, etc.¹³ Consequently, by studying the organization and formation structure, type and capacity of equipment available to the RF, units that would be engaged in the operation of rendering assistance to civil authorities in case of floods would be organized in principle like: 1. command forces, 2. forces for the execution of tasks

¹² The figure and content have been created by the authors.

¹³ Petar Jovanović, *Upravljanje projektom*, Visoka škola za projektni menadžment, Beograd, 2008, p. 57.

divided into teams for reconnaissance, search and rescue, transport and evacuation, road clearance, assistance in sanitation and delivery of vital groceries, 3. security forces, 4. logistic support forces and 5. reserve.

6. *Forces replacement.* The replacement with the necessary human and material resources is done during preparation of operation and its execution, in order to provide the sustainability of forces.¹⁴ In this regard, the proposed concept of operation planning sees the solution to improve the replacement process of forces for operation execution in high-quality cooperation with many diving clubs, local construction companies, Mountain Rescue Service, amateur radio, sailing, fishing and other associations. They could, through the competent regional centres of the MoD, provide potential staff for occupying critical military specialties, such as divers, construction machinery operators, signals officers, persons that are trained for safe and secure work on water, etc.

7. *Specialized training.* The proposed concept suggests that the training process in the phase of preparation for operation includes, in addition to general, specific training contents, such as the knowledge of the rules of engagement of unit in performing specific non-combat activities, negotiation and mediation techniques, communication with the media and the knowledge of authorities and procedures in the case of various types of criminal activities.

8. *Operational development of forces* should provide the most purposeful engagement of units and resources, the best use of land and waters, the necessary dispersing and grouping of forces, the continuity of coordination and cooperation with neighbours, achieving the planned manoeuvre and the efficient logistic support. The proposed concept of operation preparation meets the defined requirements by considering different options for bringing forces to the endangered area by a combination of land and water communications, as well as defining possible exit routes in case forces are captured in the endangered area. In this way, an operational schedule is provided that is elastic and fully adaptable to sudden changes caused by the unpredictable action of the flood wave.

Implementing all these measures (preventive and proactive) during the preparation phase of operation, in the manner proposed in the paper, solves the problem of the lack of time for highquality planning, organizing and preparing forces to be engaged in providing assistance to civil authorities during floods. However, in addition to the limited time for planning operation, other problems have been identified, most often related to the intertwining of competencies in the process of initiating the engagement of the RF and the imprecise procedure of defining and submitting requests for its engagement.

Formulating unrealistic and inexpedient demands of the representatives of civil authorities towards the River Flotilla and disrespecting the principle of gradualness in the engagement of the Serbian Armed Forces (units are engaged only under the condition that all local self-government capacities have been previously used) requires a new approach to solving these problems. The legal and doctrinal principles provide certain solutions, but they are still too general. Therefore, the proposed concept stipulates the implementation of concrete measures that would be conducted during the phase of

¹⁴ *Doktrina operacija Vojske Srbije*, Medija centar "Obrana", Beograd, 2012, p. 68.

preparation and execution of operation. The concretization of the procedure of competence in the process of engaging the RF and defining the real request for its engagement, by implementing specific and precise measures, are explained below.

Figure 4 shows the order of implementation of activities in the process of distinction of competencies in the process of engaging the RF, which implies that the initiation of the RF forces for its engagement is performed exclusively by competent authorities with strict adherence to chain of command. Moreover, the other measures proposed in the function of overcoming the identified problem include the implementation of some activities, such as: 1. the development of precise and unique SOP for alerting the RF units during a state of emergency; 2. submitting a request by civil authorities for assistance, which has to be approved in advance by competent military authorities; 3. the management of the forces engaged by the emergency headquarters, which is carried out in accordance with the approved request of civil authorities for assistance (Item 2); 4. obligatory regulation of each additional engagement with a new request and, according to the defined procedure, beginning of its approval; and 5. command of the engaged forces through responsible officers – commanders, whose freedom in decision-making and the manner of unit engagement in the execution of the protection and rescue tasks must not be disputed.

The implementation of these measures prevents spontaneous and unplanned initiation of forces to provide assistance during floods, allows the engagement of units only within the approved plan and reduces the subjective influence of military or civil authorities on the decision to engage forces.

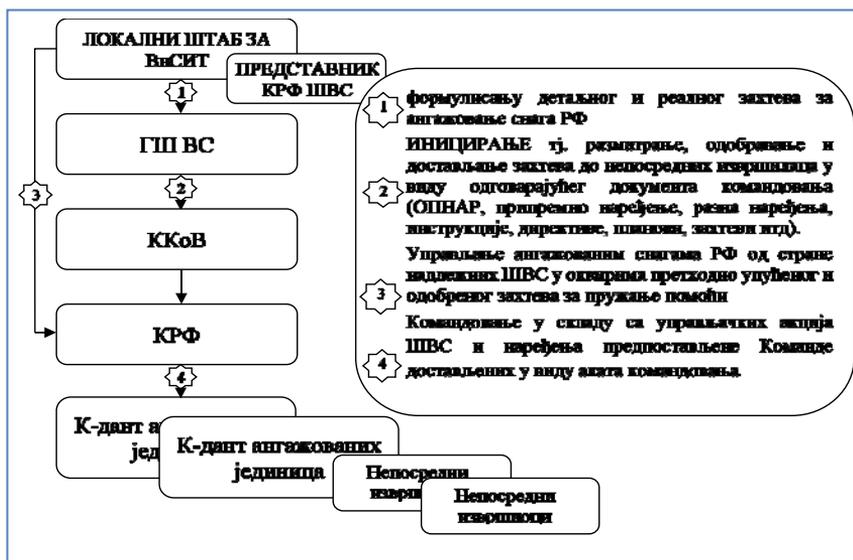


Figure 4 – The competencies in the engagement process and precise procedure for defining and submitting requests for the engagement of the River Flotill¹⁵

¹⁵ The figure and content have been created by the authors.

The proposed concept also solves the problem arising from unrealistic requests for assistance issued by civil authorities and the imprecise procedure of submitting them to competent military authorities by the implementation of appropriate concrete measures in the preparation phase. These measures are mainly related to improving the process of cooperation between the commands of the units planned for engagement and the representatives of civil authorities. Thus, for example, before crisis, it is necessary to undertake some coordination activities, such as: 1. the joint training of the RF representatives and other members of the emergency staff, which provides knowledge of opportunities, capacities, and also obligations of all the protection and rescue subjects; 2. the development of high-quality risk assessments and flood-defence plans (prepared by civil authorities); 3. the joint study of the mentioned plans in order to identify the difference between necessary and current possibilities of local self-governments for their implementation, all in the function of formulating a realistic request for assistance and 5. strict adherence to the hierarchical structure in the initiation procedure, which implies that the request is firstly submitted to the General Staff of the Serbian Armed Forces through competent emergency headquarters, so that after consideration, in the form of appropriate commanding documents (OPORD, preparatory order, various orders, instructions, directives, plans, requirements, etc.), and through competent operational command (in this case the Army Command), it is submitted to the River Flotilla for execution.

Conclusion

On the basis of the findings of this paper, conditions have been created for effective problem solving such as the lack of time for high-quality planning of operation in conditions of dynamic and complex changes characteristic of flood emergencies. Furthermore, the activities for successful distinction of competencies in the process of initiating the River Flotilla forces and measures to prevent unrealistic requests for assistance submitted by civil authorities are proposed.

The preparation phase of operation is successful if it is completed before flood because in that case unit can carry out all preventive actions in order to be ready and meet the impending threat in an organized manner. In fact, one of the factors of the success of every military operation is the intention to carry out preparatory actions in a high-quality, purposeful manner and, if possible, before crisis breaks out. The proposed concept of preparation of operation can provide the necessary time for successful planning and preparation of units for efficient engagement, primarily from the aspect of proper initiation of the RF forces and their rational engagement during assistance to civil authorities during floods.

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S u m m a r y

Through the analysis of the existing doctrinal solutions, the key elements of the success of the engagement of the River Flotilla during floods have been generated in the form of preparation of operation, command in operation, cooperation and coordination, non-combat activities and logistical support to operation. However, the paper emphasizes the solutions related to the phase of preparation of operation as one of the key elements of the success of the engagement of the River Flotilla in assisting civil authorities during floods. Defining a new approach in the execution of the phase of the preparation for non-combat operations is the main goal

of this paper, whose implementation should provide efficient and effective solutions during planning, organizing and preparing forces for the engagement in providing assistance to civil authorities during floods. Accordingly, this paper deals with the topics related to the River Flotilla (concept, purpose, tasks and organization), a state of emergency and proposes measures to improve the preparation phase of operation as one of the key factors for the success of the engagement of the River Flotilla during floods.

The proposed concept, the phase of the preparation for operation is considered through two time units: *the period of readiness* and *the period of activation of forces*. The measures characteristic of the period of readiness are mainly of preventive importance and include the execution of various preventive activities ranging from training, the development of Crisis Response Plans, the improvement of the existing standard operating procedures to the declaration of forces for non-combat activities. The end of the standby (readiness) period provides the continuation of preparation through the period of activation of the response forces. The moment of transition from one subphase to other is initiated by collected data that unequivocally indicate a potential danger or by the order of the superior command.

Also, the paper presents proposals for solving the problem of intertwining competencies in the process of initiating the engagement of the RF and imprecise procedure for defining and submitting requests for its engagement by civil authorities. The solutions are based on the implementation of appropriate concrete measures in the preparation phase, but above all on strict adherence to the chain of command when initiating the River Flotilla forces for its engagement. Based on the findings of this paper, conditions have been created for effective problem solving such as the lack of time for high-quality planning of operations in conditions of dynamic and complex changes characteristic of flood emergencies (emergencies caused by floods). The proposed concept of preparation of operation can provide the necessary time for high-quality planning and preparation of units for efficient engagement, primarily in terms of proper initiation of the RF forces and their rational engagement in providing assistance to civil authorities during floods.

Key words: River Flotilla, state of emergency, floods, preparation of operation

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