Disaster in Ramat Gan

by

Dr Jay Levinson
Disaster Victim Identification Officer
Israel National Police Headquarters
Jerusalem

On 22 January 1991 emergency response teams in Israel were operating on full alert. The Gulf War was almost one week old, and the civilian population of Israel already had been the object of Iraqi-launched Scud missles. At 2015 hours sirens were sounded throughout the country, then moments later a missile hit an urban residential neighbourhood in Ramat Gan, Israel's fifth largest city. This paper deals with some of the civilian disaster response issues which were involved nd with the lessons learnt.

Extensive damage included broken gas lines, downed electrical wires, and the very real threat of building collapse. Immediate assessment indicated that the effected area included some twenty buildings, at least four of which were later judged beyond repair and marked by civil engineers for destruction; it was later determined that a far larger number of buildings had suffered some amount of damage. It was into this situation that local neighbours, then rescue and extrication forces entered. The consequences were not always immediately obvious to responding forces who tried to set up operations as quickly as possible. To cite one example, a police mobile crime unit started filming the scene from what was thought to be a safe distance. After several minutes of work, the team noticed a wavering balcony overhead and quickly evacuated the post.

Local residents pose an interesting problem. In the immediate moments after an incident these people comprise a critical life saving force. Once professional teams arrive, their role is eclipsed, and they often become candidates for evacuation or mere spectators whose presence can hinder professional efforts. On the other hand,totally removingthem from familiar surroundingsonly complicates their personal status and self-perception.

The curious often pose problems at a disaster scene, and in Ramat Gan this was the case. Radio and television pleas called upon spectators to leave the strickened area. A special trouble shooting unit was also called out for crowd control. (This provided certain cameramen with television footage. The immediate incident scene was dangerous and quickly closed. The press, therefore, filled the news void at one stage of their coverage by recording police removal of spectators blocking entry and exit paths.)

It is relatively easy to remove civilians from a disaster scene; it is much more complicated to distance official personnel who have no real function. Fortunately, a large number of rescue personnel responded to the initial call for help --- in retrospect, a larger number than was actually needed. This caused a strain on logistical lines and communications. Many of these excess officials were, in fact, no different from civilian spectators. It s just that it is much more difficult. if not impossible, to remove these officials.

It has often been debated if looting is a factor in mass disasters. In this case there were confirmed instances of theft in the wide area in which windows were broken. and several arrests were made. Although this theft was not anywhere as extensive as in the civil disturbances which many American

cities experienced in the late 1960's, it was enough of a problem that significant numbers of policemen were assigned to the matter.

Initial estimates of injury spoke of some twenty fatalities, in light of which a decision was taken to utilize the Institute of Forensic Medicine (Abu Kabir) for body identification rather than a temporary morgue facility, pre-approved as part of the national emergency response programme. That estimated number, fortunately, was quickly reduced. It was also found that establishing death due to the incident was not so simple. Although only one person died directly from wounds caused by building collapse, one other died of heart attack suffered as destruction struck.

There was also a general reluctance on the part of medical personnel to pronounce people dead at the scene. It was prefered to evacuate them to hospital (in this case each of the three fatalities was taken to a different hospital) and there declare death. For police purposes this had the effect of rendering useless the decision to transport the dead directly to the Institute of Forensic Medicine (Abu Kabir).

Ambulances also evacuated a number of "dis-oriented" people to hospital. It was found, in, fact that these people needed no medical treatment at all. They were, however, in need of psychologists and social workers (whom the hospital could not provide from its own staff.)

No particular problems were encountered in body identification. One strong contributing factor was that each of the deceased persons died in his own apartment. Nonetheless, to avoid potential later problems of unbelieving relatives it was decided to impliment emergency DVI procedures for the

victim who died of direct injury from the building collapse. DVI teams (comprising an evidence technician, investigator, and 1 or 2 odontologists) were dispatched. Photographs and fingerprints were taken from the body, and a detailed description form was completed (including the recording of dental data). This was done as a backup to personal identification testimony which has been known to be less than 100% accurate in times of stress.

Communications is a key element in disaster response. In this case, good commo was essential in quickly scaling down the response effort from prepredness to receive dozens wounded and twenty dead (as was initialBly reported) to the reality of several intermediate injuries and "only" three dead

Although several rear command centers were set up by the various agencies participating in the response effort, the police network of site-to-command communications proved extremely effective and accurate. One basic reason was evaluated to be the fact that it employed methods and personnel involved in this function on a daily basis and not only in times of emergency.

Two computer systems were prepared to handle information from the field. One programme was placed on the police main frame computer, and the second was designed for a personal computer. In light of the relatively small scale neither system was activated.

Another basic factor in the communications system was the assignment of uniformed police liaison officers to the command centers of agencies involved in the disaster response effort. The primary function of these

policemen was to monitor information flow and make certain that all agencies benefited from updated reports.

When forces returned to base and the log book on Ramat Gan was closed, the incident was not over for the DVI teams which had been fielded. Plans were made at Headquarters to dispatch a psychologist several days later, just to be certain that no problems had developed. Although all members of the DVI tems had been at murder scenes and had undergone training on cadavers, it was felt that viewing wanton destruction in a large disaster scene might spark psychological problems.

Note

This is a basic overview of disaster response in Ramat Gan on the night of 22 January 1991. During the days that followed there were similar events in the Greater Tel Aviv area. Procedures and conclusions from Ramat Gan provided the model for emergency workers.