



Summary:

Consular emergency preparedness of the Swedish Foreign Service – equipped for effective action?

Background and reason for the audit

In connection with the tsunami disaster in South East Asia in 2004 major deficiencies were revealed in the organisation of the Swedish Foreign Service's consular emergency preparedness. The Government and agencies concerned were subjected to severe criticism, above all for late action. After the disaster, intensive efforts were made to investigate what had gone wrong and how the deficiencies could be dealt with. The investigations resulted in several different proposals for how the Foreign Service could raise its preparedness and be better equipped for future consular crises, that is crises that occur outside Sweden where a large number of Swedish citizens and their relatives require support. Since 2010 central government has a statutory responsibility to deliver consular emergency services under certain conditions. The emergency preparedness organisation that the Foreign Service has built up since the tsunami crisis has never been scrutinised by an external actor.

The purpose of the audit was to assess whether the capacities of the consular emergency preparedness organisation to deal with a major crisis abroad are appropriate. It concerns, for example, the design of the organisation, preparations ahead of active crisis management, as well as how action is followed up to better equip the organisation for the next emergency. The premise is that appropriate capacities create good opportunities to deal effectively with an emergency. However, the Swedish NAO cannot express an opinion on how the consular emergency preparedness organisation will deal with the next crisis. That is simply not possible to predict.

The audit focused on the Foreign Service, that is the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) and missions abroad (embassies and consulates general). The Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) was also included, since the agency is involved in some of the Foreign Service's exercises and training courses in emergency preparedness questions.

Audit conclusions

The audit was based on five overall questions covering emergency preparedness work, active crisis management and evaluation and follow-up. Each question is presented in a separate chapter of the report. The overall conclusion is that the consular emergency preparedness organisation is well equipped to deal with consular crises abroad. The Swedish NAO also assesses that the organisation uses its resources effectively. However, there are some areas that can be improved to further strengthen the potential for emergency preparedness in the Foreign Service to function well, particularly in missions abroad.

Is the consular emergency preparedness organisation organised appropriately?

The question focuses on the organisation built up to develop and maintain consular emergency preparedness in the Foreign Service. The Swedish NAO assesses that it is organised appropriately. The assessment is above all based on the fact that there is a clear division of responsibilities in the organisation, that there is a special emergency preparedness group at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs that works on an ongoing basis with emergency preparedness issues, and that various reinforcement resources can be called in at short notice if needed. The measures can thus be adapted to the specific crisis, while the permanent emergency preparedness organisation can be kept at a low level. The Swedish NAO considers that this is a resource-efficient way of organising consular emergency preparedness.

Is contingency planning appropriate?

Contingency planning in the Foreign Service is assessed to be largely appropriate. Contingency planning concerns preparations for dealing with possible emergencies effectively. An important part of the planning is to draw up a contingency plan with instructions about how crisis management should be organised and operated. Within the Foreign Service a common emergency preparedness model is applied that entails organising emergency preparedness in a similar way at all missions abroad and the contingency plans following the same structure. A person who is familiar with the contingency plan at one mission can therefore quickly become familiar with the contingency plan at another mission. This is important, since the staff in the Foreign Service are rotated at regular intervals. The Swedish NAO assesses that the common emergency preparedness model forms a good foundation for contingency planning in the Foreign Service. The missions abroad could, however, improve important parts of their contingency planning. This applies in particular to updating the contingency plans regularly and that all staff also read them. The management at each mission abroad

should also ensure that the official responsible for emergency preparedness at the mission can set aside the time needed for this responsibility.

Is the emergency preparedness organisation trained and exercised appropriately and sufficiently?

The Swedish NAO considers that the emergency preparedness group at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs has developed the training and exercise activities in the Foreign Service in a determined and resource-effective way. For example, the group has prepared exercises that can be carried out by the missions abroad on their own. The Swedish NAO therefore assesses that the training and exercise activities are appropriately designed. However, it is doubtful whether training and exercise take place to a sufficient extent in the Foreign Service. It is important that all missions abroad carry out regular exercises, not least considering the staff rotation in the Foreign Service. The Ministry for Foreign Affairs encourages the missions abroad to carry out crisis management exercises at least once a year, but the audit shows that more than half of the missions abroad do not heed this. In addition, many officials responsible for emergency preparedness at missions abroad consider that they have not received the training this responsibility requires.

Has the emergency preparedness organisation functioned as intended in a crisis?

The way the Foreign Service has dealt with consular crises to date can provide important information about the capacity to deal with any future crises. If the emergency preparedness organisation has functioned well at previous events, this indicates that the capacity to deal with future crises is good. If crisis management has been deficient in important respects there may instead be reason to assume the opposite, particularly if the deficiencies have not been corrected. To assess the capacities of the Foreign Service to deal with future crises, the Swedish NAO examined written evaluations of crises handled in recent years. However, the supporting material is not sufficiently detailed to enable the Swedish NAO to make any assessment of the capacities to deal with future crises on that basis.

Are experiences of real events and exercises dealt with systematically?

The Swedish NAO assesses that there are deficiencies in the system for evaluation within the Foreign Service. To identify important experiences and feed them into the continuing work it is important to have a systematic evaluation. In an organisation with regular staff rotation, written documentation is important in ensuring organisational learning. It can also make crisis management more transparent. According to its own information, the

Ministry for Foreign Affairs conducts regular evaluation of the various parts of the emergency preparedness activities, with a focus on measures for improvement. The Swedish NAO notes, however, that there are deficiencies in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs' written documentation of evaluations. Many missions abroad can also be better at evaluating and documenting the most important experiences from their exercises.

The Swedish NAO's recommendations

The capacities of the consular emergency preparedness organisation to deal with a major crisis abroad are mainly good. On some points, however, there is room for improvement. The Swedish NAO makes the following recommendations:

- The Ministry for Foreign Affairs should consider introducing a requirement for annual consular emergency preparedness exercises in the Regulations for the Swedish Foreign Service (UF 2011:5). The missions abroad that have not held an exercise in 12 months should be followed up.
- The Ministry for Foreign Affairs should continue to develop its system, structure and documentation regarding evaluations. This is to ensure that important lessons and experiences are identified and not lost when staff rotate. A more systematic evaluation that is documented in writing can also improve transparency in crisis management.
- The Ministry for Foreign Affairs should ensure that all officials responsible for emergency preparedness understand their remit and receive sufficient training to enable them to fulfil the responsibility they have for emergency preparedness issues at missions abroad.