

# **The Spanish Military Emergencies Unit (MEU): A project come true**

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Society in general and citizens in particular increasingly require that the State acts as the guarantor of the safety and security thereof. Said demands, which extend beyond the daily duties of the State Security Forces and Corps and healthcare services, requires the implementation of the necessary resources and capabilities in order to deal with natural disasters and the catastrophes related to technological and environmental risks.

Natural disasters which took place in 2005, such as Hurricane Katrina in the United States or the series of forest fires which left south west Europe desolated during the summer season, to cite only two examples, caused certain governments to study the need to create specialised military units in order to immediately and orderly counteract the devastating effects that said natural phenomenon cause to the civil population.

In Spain, catastrophes such as the forest fires which scorched thousands of hectares of land in the Autonomous Region of Galicia and which left part of the province of Guadalajara desolated; the sinking of the “Prestige” ship, which blackened the coast of Galicia, Asturias and Cantabria; or the snow storms throughout different provinces; represented a turning point in Spain in relation to the study and adoption of decisions in respect of the necessary State participation for crisis and emergency situations, because, until then, the majority of said responsibility was attributable to the autonomous regions of Spain.

On 7 October 2005, the Council of Ministers of the Government of Spain approved the creation, under the auspices of the Armed Forces, of a Military Unit specialised in Emergency situations. The purpose thereof was simple. A national unit was created in order to strengthen and support the Autonomous Regions when faced with an emergency situation, and in situations of significant disasters, in order to be able to manage an emergency situation at a national level. Accordingly, an additional part of the National Civil Protection System was created.

The person that was initially designated to formulate this idea was General Fulgencio Coll who created, in a clear and concise manner, a project called the Military Emergencies Unit (MEU): a joint force formed by personnel of the three armies which would operationally and hierarchically report to the Chief of Defence Staff of Spain (JEMAD), with military procedures and a significant degree of specialisation in specific missions.

Service, discipline, efficacy, commitment and the spirit of sacrifice shall constitute the values and the essence of this new unit. The availability and

permanent improvement thereof, shall represent a benchmark for national cohesion and solidarity among Spanish people, which shall provide significant added value to the management of emergencies, thereby generating trust and confidence within society.

The scope of action of this new unit required new levels of organisation and structuring and (why not) the implementation of different mental approaches, as it exists in a world in which public and private civil companies are engaged in and participate in the necessary basic services for the effective management of an emergency.

The implementation and creation thereof required, as from the very start, the need to delimit the specific "role" thereof among all of the bodies of the General Central State and Autonomous Region Administrations with responsibility for alert mechanisms and the management of emergencies. The method used was that of dialogue and collaboration. Accordingly, a range of different collaboration conventions were formalised with the foregoing State Administrations which have enabled the mutual support and collaboration in relation to procedures, action methods, interoperability, training and practical and theoretical experience.

The personnel which formed part of the MEU, although initially the troops were recruited by means of direct access procedures from civil ranks, thereafter, the calls for recruitment had extremely satisfactory results and in a relatively short period of time one of the initial challenges which the unit had faced had been satisfied: namely that of a sufficient number of personnel from other units of the Spanish Armed Forces in order to be able to carry out emergency actions on the first occasions in which they were required (years 2007 and 2008). Currently, the human and material resources amount to 97%, approximately 3,500 military personnel.

It could be stated that the MEU has quickly matured. Shortly, the unit shall commemorate its "X Anniversary" as it has become not only a useful instrument available to civil authorities in order to respond to difficult situations, but rather has contributed to substantially strengthen the image of the Spanish Armed Forces and the prestige thereof among citizens.

The capacities thereof already include a high degree of operative capabilities in relation to forest fires, heavy snow falls, earthquakes, floods and NRBQ (Nuclear, Radiological, Biological and Chemical situations). Throughout the few years of its existence the unit has been involved in approximately 300 catastrophes. Among the operational capabilities of the MEU, it is worthy of mention the urban search and rescue team (USAR) certified by the United Nations in December 2011, which received its international baptism during the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal.

This singular "MEU" model, created and defined in Spain, without doubt raises a lot of interest and is currently being significantly extended through the Military Emergencies Units Training Plan (FORUME). This plan, which extends to a worldwide level, is exported not only to neighbouring countries, the rest of Europe and Northern Africa, but also to nationals within the American continent, Africa and

throughout Asia. The unit has already been presented at the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, within the framework of the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council for Civil Emergencies (EAPC), before 51 nations and forms part of the Civil Protection Units provided to the European Union. Some of the foregoing nations have commenced an analysis and profitability study process of the project for the creation of a similar type of Unit, as part of the support to the Armed Forces of the civil authorities in emergency situations.

The visit of high ranking officials of the public administrations of other states and the ever increasing participation of international Armed Forces in National Interest Emergency drills and exercises which are drafted, scheduled and executed in Spain, is proof of the foregoing.

The MEU looks to the future and is committed to continue to grow and evolve, with its demanding preparation, availability and through the permanent pursuit of excellence, in order to provide responses to the vulnerabilities and risks which are created by emergency situations.

The national and international leadership of the MEU in all types of emergencies adds value to the "Spanish brand", by means of the provision of a range of tools and solutions which enable the unit to constitute the initial emergency response in the interests of society, and which strives to continuously and permanently improve its actions in order to avoid the risks and threats which represent doubts or improvised actions regarding the management of any type of emergency situation.