

Transcript of the interview with Polish rescuers at Bam 5th May 2004

JP: Let's start with an overview of what you were first told about the Bam Earthquake.

R(escuer)1: It was an earthquake that effected a pretty large region including a big city. The first news that we received was that probably around forty thousand people were killed, in other words – a huge catastrophe. The structure of the building were such that it didn't allow victims to survive under the ruins. First of all there was lack of armature, there was lack of beams, lack of solid elements in the construction, which could allow people to survive under the ruins. Buildings were made from bricks and cemented on a clay. And after the quake they literally got reduced to a dust.

JP: So the buildings weren't adapted to the region?

R(escuer)1: Yes, right. Structures weren't really adapted to the area, where such earthquakes occur.

JP: How did the life saving operations take shape?

R(escuer)1: We were quite quickly put into action. It turned out during our flight there that the airport in Bam was already re-opened. The other rescue crews had landed in Kerman. And this accelerated the time of our entrance to the field of operations. We were guided to the centre of city of Bam, where we were searching for victims using dogs and electronical equipment. It happened exactly in three - up to four hours after landing and pitching a camp. The reaction was quite fast. There was quite large number of volunteers from the Red Crescent. They became our guides in the city, and they were telling us where we can start the rescue action.

JP: What do you know of the Red Crescent?

R(escuer)2: It's an international organization, like Red Cross but Red Crescent is in the muslim countries only.

R(escuer)1: There were quite a lot of volunteers and all the guides were co-operating with us. Besides they spoke good English so we didn't have bigger problems. There was also a headquarters set up by international organizations. We were located inside the soldiers barracks and because of that our access to information was easy and comfortable.

JP: How did the help of Iranian government take shape? Because some people say that they didn't do their best.

R(escuer)1: It's very difficult to judge it univocally. We did benefited from Iranians' help, for example we used their transport. Of course there were some mistakes. But

in such a huge operation some lapses have to happen and they did happen. We didn't have direct contact with Iranians because first of all we were busy with work on the ruins. And this was our primary responsibility so we were interested in it the most. But from the organizational side, and how it looked like outside the city - it's difficult to say. But I can add that in localities which are destroyed to that extent - the local governments stop to exist, because either someone from their families perish or the governors themselves perish and thus there is no local government that could organize any life saving action.

JP: For how many days did you stay there?

R(escuer)1: We landed in Bam on 28th in the morning and we were working until 31 December. On the 1st January we flew from Kerman and we were back in Poland on 2nd in the morning.

JP: And how many people did you manage to rescue?

R(escuer)1: Unfortunately we didn't manage to find anyone alive. We assisted in drawing out dead bodies. Our work consisted in offering facilities or in lighting up the area at the night time.

JP: Amir, any questions?

AK: The problem is that I don't know what has been said up to now. I don't understand Polish! When we had an interview with Lech Wałęsa I was in the same situation...

One comment from the people inside Iran, from the survivors of the Bam tragedy is: Why is it that the foreigners who are from 10 thousand or 5 thousand miles away, are here helping us and they are doing a better job than the people from our own main cities which are closer by. Is this the feeling that they shared with you? What was your opinion of your Iranian counterparts and their desire to save more lives and aggressively bring more citizens out of the rubble.

JP: This was translated into Polish.

R(escuer)2: Like my colleague just said, it's difficult for us to give any opinions. Definitely we have to take in consideration that the local government had suffered during the earthquake as well, and there was a problem with getting in touch with anyone from Bam. And there was even problems with gathering basic information because some representatives of local government had died or suffered.

JP: What about official government and officials of the other cities?

R(escuer)2: We must say that troops were quite substantial. There was also a significant situation which also influenced the way we were working - destroyed

districts were closed after twilight and rescuers practically didn't have access to those districts.

We could work at night only with the understanding that if we started to work somewhere, we could continue this work there even till late night hours but we had an order that if anyone came back to the camp they won't be allowed to go out again till morning. They did this for security reasons. Of course it's not our role to get insight into this, but all those zones were closed.

Besides that, the people we were meeting were from outside of Bam. From different, sometimes very distant places. Some of them came very well organized, some came because of their own initiative. And most people, who we met, I mean - Iranian rescuers, were people from outside Bam and this is also linked with the fact that local government and services were destroyed. What can we say? I think that, and here my colleagues will agree with me, that Red Crescent was a very significant help. This we can say.

About the troops, yes sometimes those troops were acting a bit parallel. And maybe actions of civilian services from one side and international help from the other side weren't very coordinated. But we have to consider that there was over a thousand rescuers. I don't remember exact number.

R(escuer)1: There were about 1700 rescuers.

R(escuer)2: There were highly qualified groups of rescuers with extensive experience there, including ourselves. And all together we managed to pull out only one person. This was mainly due to the building standards which provided minimal chances of survival under the ruins. Of course we've received news that Iranian rescuers have managed to save a few or even more people. This was on the sixth or seventh day after the earthquake. International help was mainly concentrated in Bam, and even in some particular quarters of Bam. We also heard that people felt that some parts of the city were forgotten for this or that reason. Let's not debate today what were the causes, but some were certainly were forgotten. In other words help was not equally spread out.

But I think that this is the result off the problems associated of such a large operation - it's really a huge organizational effort to bring together such a life saving operation.

JP: And when did you get there? I mean which day after the earthquake?

R(escuer)1: We were there on 28th December, it was second day after the earthquake.

JP: Quite fast. And what was your impression as a doctor. You didn't rescue anyone, so in the end there was no one to cure. How was the medical side organized?

D(occtor): The medical side, how it was organized... All injured people were quite quickly taken away from Bam. We didn't have real contact with injured people unless they were people who had suffered during the work on ruins itself. So, they weren't victims of the earthquake, anyway we didn't get out anyone alive.

All injured and alive people were drawn out in the first twenty-four hours when international help wasn't there yet and they were quite efficiently taken away from Bam to the neighbouring cities. Our medical help was focused on the international crews or Iranians crews that had suffered during the rescue operation. Hospitals in Bam didn't work. There were no hospitals. Everything was a ruin.

JP: And how was the Red Crescent organized? Did they give you materials... Did you bring all the equipment with yourselves?

D(occtor): No, we had our own equipment. And how the Red Crescent was organized, I don't really know. There were cars driving in the streets of Bam and they were distributing water and bread. But I don't know how the Red Crescent's medical team was organized. When we were coming back we saw that at the Kerman airport a medical point was set up and all those people from Kerman airport were taken by planes to the different parts of Iran.

JP: What happened with all those people who had survived?

R(escuer) IN UNIFORM: I would like to add something in reference to this question about the Red Crescent help. There were lots of tents distributed. And they had symbols of the Red Crescent, this means that they were given by this organization and there was really plenty of them - practically in every quarter of the city, wherever possible, even on the roundabout. And all those people whose houses were destroyed by the earthquake were living there. That means that the organization was working efficiently. We haven't seen anyone homeless. Somehow they managed to bring those tents, and the rest of the people were probably taken out of town.

JP: So everything was organized, water, and...

R(escuer) IN UNIFORM: If we can compare... And this is my personal opinion, I would say that in comparison to the other operations after earthquakes (I talk about only those which our group was participating) - let's say India or Turkey, I really think that this operation was organized quite well. International groups entered the action much earlier, and all this help which was organized for the inhabitants... If I compare to those other countries - it was much, much better.

JP: Short summary translation for Amir of what was said.

AK: I was on a trip to Iran couple of years ago. And I went to most of Iran's historic cities with a camera, on holiday. When people asked me upon my return, which of

all the cities I visited was the best in my opinion, which one particularly stood out, it was difficult for me to say, but I had said, and this is two years ago – Bam! For me Bam was the best experience.

The reason for this was that I had a feeling, when in Bam, of an ancient town with good people who behaved in a certain kindly way. And also the location came out very good in the photo's I took, due to the lighting and contrast I think.

What was the impression of our friends here of that town? Did they leave with an impression of the ancient city or is that all lost now?

JP: Translation into Polish. Not very good, but ok.

R(escuer)2: We knew that it's an ancient city and we had heard about the fortress in Bam. And for me the most disheartening was the view of the destroyed fortress. It looked like a washed-away sand-castle. And awareness of the fact that this fortress is two thousand years old was... It was a symbol of annihilation of this city. At least for me it was a striking image. To say nothing of the human aspect, but I'm answering your question. We have seen this fortress, it's difficult not to see it, as we were working in its area.

YOUNG BOY: I would like to add, that this Bam which you saw two years ago and Bam which we saw they were totally different cities. It's important to realise that at the time we came there nearly hundred percent of buildings were destroyed. Only few of them remained and they remained in such a state that in coming few weeks they just collapsed themselves or they will have to be destroyed because of the danger. So this Bam we saw, and Bam you can read about on the internet and see truly beautiful photos of has turned into a pile of ruins.

And somewhere there, there still live some people, the inhabitants of Bam. The ruins of the fortress dominated the town and still the spirit of the old splendour existed. There was a mosque there, which was all cracked so probably it didn't stay there for a long time. But basically we've seen ruins everywhere, everywhere ruins...

R IN UNIFORM: And everything was covered with a clay dust and this gave one colour to everything.

JP: Rough English translation of this for Amir.

AK: The earthquake happened around Christmas. How did the news get to you here in Poland? What is your notification process when a big disaster happens somewhere? And why this team in Nowy Sącz was sent not the one in Warsaw? Basically, what I am asking is: what are the very initial steps, the steps one, two, three going from here and helping someone elsewhere? And who finances this, is it local fire station in Nowy Sącz or is it Polish government?

JP: Translation into Polish..

R(escuer)1: The first information came to us from the media and later we had a few pieces of information from our General Headquarters, which is responsible for putting all those groups into a state of readiness. They had told us that such an expedition is possible and all the procedures for it then started. Of course such a journey is financed by Polish government and after gaining certain acceptances from above, from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - we were ready to go in the evening of 26th, but unfortunately we flew on 27th in the afternoon hours and this delayed our entrance into the action.

And the flight itself delayed everything - it was 14 hours long. We had the feeling that it was possible to start the action much earlier. The other reason for our delay was problems with the airports - in the beginning the airport in Bam was closed and everyone was landing in Kerman. De facto we started action in the morning of the second twenty four hours after the earthquake.

R(escuer)2: And there are two fire-brigade groups - in Nowy Sacz and in Gdansk. Those are two international exploratory - rescue groups, prepared for actions not only in our country but also abroad.

JP: But why Nowy Sacz and not Gdansk?

R(escuer)2: Because there is such a procedure, such a system that once - they go, and the other time - we go. Last time the group from Gdansk went to Algeria, now it was our time. Regarding procedures, it's how our colleague just said, that all of that is the decision of the Polish government. Representative of the effected country has to officially apply to the Polish government. In this case it was the Ambassador of Iran. His reaction was fast so there was no problem. We were quite quickly on the spot, but anyway the conclusion is that we still should have shorten the time for the intervention. But of course it's linked with many problems, which have to be solved.

JP: Rough translation of what they have said, to Amir.

AK: When you landed what's the first thing that happened? You asked someone where to go? You organized your based camp at the airport?

JP: Translation for a crew.

R2: There are usually three possibilities, sometimes the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs sends a person, who is suppose to be in contact with groups of the effected country. In this case it wasn't like that. International organization is the next source of contact. I mean that the UN sends their representatives as soon as possible and they organize a centre of international coordination of groups. And it happens very often that when we come to the airport, we see such a rallying point and everyone registers there to say who has arrived, what's the equipement one has brought with

them and what one can do. And based on ones resoures one is sent to perform certain duties.

And the local government is the third source, and in this case strait away we got in touch with Iranian services. It means that in this case the rallying point was organized by Iranian government, and we were directed to the army base and in the base we got in touch with the international headquarters, which was responsible for directing us to the certain tasks.

JP: Rough translation for Amir.

JP: Did any group get into the way of another one? For example did the Polish group get into the way of the Swiss group?

R(escuer)2: At least it shouldn't be like that. This is why the coordination points exists. And of course when you deal with such a big operation - you can't really avoid some duplication of efforts. These coordination points exists to prevent such cases, that some groups come into the way of the other. But after such an earthquake it's not possible to avoid problems - that some parts of the town are omitted and others for some reason are searched many times.

AK: Where there any miracle stories that you have heard of? We have one already, where the cupboard fell on old lady, and long time later she came out. Also did you witness any specific acts of courage?

R(escuer)2: This woman was, I think, 90 years old. We received this information when we were there, no, rather it was when we were back in Poland. And there, while we were preparing to leave Bam, I think it was sixth day, we had information that a whole family with little children were found.

R(escuer) IN UNIFORM: It had happened in a village outside Bam.

R(escuer)2: Because everyone was in the kitchen. They had some family problem to discuss. And this kitchen's build was stronger, they had also access to food and water. There were few cases like that. There was one man found but unfortunately he died. But we heard about it after we came back to Poland, we knew it from media.

JP: Any examples of the special courage of rescuers...

R(escuer)2: It's difficult to think in such a categories...

R(escuer) IN UNIFORM: What was peculiar to those ruins was that it was a pile of little rubble, they weren't blocks like say in Turkey. There was no need to crawl into big structures of ruins. We had a big pile of ruins which we had to overturn and

search, so it was totally different way of working and there was no necessity of making any breakneck miracles.

R(escuer)2: And even secondary quakes didn't cause any danger for rescuers because everything had already crumbled and everything which stayed wasn't tall...

JP: I wanted to ask about co-operation between rescuers and dogs...

R(escuer) IN UNIFORM: It was a very nice surprise for us, we weren't prepared for that. We knew that animals are not welcome in this part of the world, particularly dogs. Because they are considered dirty animals. And it ended up being totally opposite. Everyone wanted to caress our dogs and take photos with them. And everything was ok until the moment when we had to go by bus from Bam to Kerman's airport, where the bus driver didn't want to take dogs. It was just this one case, but after some negotiations he allowed dogs to stay but on the condition that they will lie down quietly in a corridor.

AK: When and how was it decided that your work is complete? That you should be going back to Poland, that there is nothing more that can be done. Did you decide for your section or area, that there is nothing more that can be done or some authority said never mind, it's time to wrap up.

JP: Translation into Polish.

R(escuer)2: Especially for us - the rescuers this is a very big problem, a dilemma as to when to decide that there are certain information and a certain situation which suggests that we should accept defeat. And it's really big problem.

What's the procedure? All working groups should pass information to the headquarters about their results. The coordination point gathers all the information and calculate the possibility of someone's survival, the number of lost people who still can be under ruins etc. There are additional informations referring to the danger of an epidemic (because of dead bodies). And facts like the structure of the ruins, climate conditions - all of that influence the decision of the headquarters. Because there is always a possibility that someone is still alive under the ruins. So it's not a decision of an individual group, it's decision of the headquarters and it's taken in liason with the international organization and the local one.

Practically the most competent one is usually the local headquarters and because of this the international organisation may only suggest the decision. So the last decision belongs to the local government.

And there is always the one problem – until when is there still sense to continue searching? We always think that it's worth to lengthen the search because we believe that there is always possibility to save more people. But unfortunately, sometimes we can't influence this decision about admitting defeat or the decision

about changing the character of the action from search and rescue to that of removing rubble, when the heavy equipment is brought in. And at this stage we know that even if someone is alive, with the use of the heavy equipment, this man will be buried alive. And this is why it's a very responsible decision and usually controversial.

JP: And for how long are people able to survive?

R(escuer)2: There is a rule of the three threesome. One can survive without oxygen three minutes, one can survive without water three days, and without food one can survive three weeks. It's well known that the biggest possibility of surviving are the first two 24 hours. But from the other side, I know cases of people who were drew out in quite good condition after 10 days, even after two weeks, and it is not necessarily a miracle that such people survived. It's widely known that people survive under ruins, but sometimes the decision about retreat has to be taken. It's not that easy.

AK: This region, Kerman, is very famous for pistachio. Did you try some, did you like them?

R(escuer): Yes, I even brought them with myself.

AK: Thank you very much. I appreciate it. I'd like to thank you very much for what you've done in Iran and also for the time you have given us today. Thank you.