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Security district Zeeland keeps in touch

How can the police, fire brigade and ambulance services still communicate after land lines have been submerged and the mobile network has become inaccessible? Under these circumstances communication via satellite is the only option left. It is a conclusion shared by Veiligheidsregio Zeeland, the regional government body responsible for the coordination of emergency situations in the Netherlands' south-western province of the same name. Putting their ideas into action the security district recently asked 2connect-IT to provide them with six emergency cases kitted out with an Inmarsat BGAN satellite system.

"Imagine a big flood rolling in from the sea and water levels rising until we're literally knee-deep in it," Veiligheidsregio Zeeland's staff member Information Management Marc Nagelkerke thinks out loud. "Will we still be able to communicate under those circumstances?"

It was this question that was at the core of the 2008 project Watersnoodaanpak Veiligheidsregio Zeeland (WaVe), initiated by the Taskforce Management Overstromingen (TMO flood management task force). The project ended with the flood exercise 'Waterproef', in which the other Dutch coastal provinces also participated and parts of the coastal town of Terneuzen were fictitiously evacuated.

An important finding of the project and its concluding exercise was that, in the direct aftermath of a flood, regular communications facilities will soon cease to work. Nagelkerke: "Water levels in excess of sixty centimetres will mean that land lines have been drowned and crucial sections of our nationwide emergency communications network C2000, which largely depends on those very land lines, will be inaccessible. Our primary fall-back option, the UMTS network, will quickly get overburdened and become inaccessible, too. Our only recourse then will be to look up, to the satellite."

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Inmarsat BGAN

Inmarsat BGAN

Veiligheidsregio Zeeland first came across satellite communications at the venue of Concert at SEA, a yearly music festival held on the Brouwersdam, the flood barrier between the former islands of Goeree-Overflakkee in Zuid-Holland and Schouwen-Duiveland in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen. "The ideal spot for a pop concert, but a logistical nightmare in terms of evacuating people," Nagelkerke observes drily. "People suffering from hypothermia after a thunderstorm, for example, are our concern as regional safety unit. With that responsibility in mind we always have people on the spot who feed their real-time reports of the situation at the venue into our crisis management system Osiris. Should a calamity arise, Osiris is ready to provide government agencies with fully up to date information regarding the situation."

As part of the so-called Intensivering Civiel-Militaire Samenwerking (ICMS), a project aimed at tightening the cooperation between the military and the civil government, for the 2008 edition of Concert at SEA a tactical unit of the Ministry of Defence was invited to lay down communication links. "The system they set up was so secure, that we couldn't access our Citrix environment," Nagelkerke remembers. "Fortunately the MoD- guys had also brought an Inmarsat BGAN satellite system that we were able to plug our laptop into. That way, via satellite, we were still able to access our systems and do our job."

Emergency cases

The lessons learned from the Concert at SEA and the Waterproof exercise left Veiligheidsregio Zeeland in no doubt that the step towards satellite communication was an inevitable one. "We asked 2connect-IT as our supplier and advisor", Nagelkerke says. "2connect-IT has also played a supporting role during roll-out, and even now we are in regular contact in the run-up to major events like this year's Koninginnedag (the Queen's Birthday)." Together Veiligheidsregio Zeeland and 2connect-IT decided to put together 'emergency cases' that were kitted out with a satellite dish, an Inmarsat Broadband Global Area Network (BGAN) modem, an Iridium satellite phone, a UMTS plug-in card from telecom provider KPN and a laptop.



"We use our BGAN solely for data like e-mail, for which our default platform is UMTS," Nagelkerke explains. "If and when UMTS fails, it is just a question of inserting the plug that connects us to the satellite dish. The whole thing is 'plug & play' and always works, actually. The Iridium phone comes into play if our dedicated C2000 communications network goes belly-up."

Three of the emergency cases are on board the liaison and command vehicles operated by the regional fire brigade. "In case of a large scale emergency that requires the local presence of a command team, the VC-2-teams' job is to set up a connection with the security district's network," Nagelkerke says. "In the old situation a VC-2-team would go out into the field and send in their initial assessment of the situation by fax. In an era in which people en masse start using Twitter and updating their own internet pages, however, fax messaging is no longer sufficient. Having said that, our guess is that fax messaging will remain our fall-back option for the foreseeable future." At Veiligheidsregio Zeeland's central location in Middelburg, where the Gezamenlijke Meldkamer (joint incident room) Zeeland is also located, another two emergency cases are held in stock. In addition to this the Veiligheidsregio has at its disposal a nautical version with a self-aligning antenna for deployment during emergency situations out on the estuaries of Zeeland.

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Viprinet

At the 2009 edition of Concert at SEA the equipment contained in the emergency cases was put to real use for the first time. "It functioned brilliantly", Nagelkerke assures. A year on, for testing purposes the satellite communications equipment was deployed in combination with a Viprinet router, also provided by 2connect-IT. "Presently we use UMTS to set up a virtual private network connection with the network. If the network subsequently drops off, we hook up to the satellite dish and configure a new VPN." Viprinet should make this manual reconfiguration work a thing of the past. "Viprinet stays in touch not only with a number of different UMTS providers, but also with the satellite, which means connectivity at all times."

In April 2010 Veiligheidsregio Zeeland began a series of large-scale experiments with the emergency cases, the final assessment of which will take place in December. Nagelkerke: "At that point we will also look into the possibility of fitting our VC2's with the kind of self-aligning antenna that our nautical emergency case contains."



Veiligheidsregio Zeeland

Veiligheidsregio Zeeland is the regional body responsible for physical security, disaster control and crisis management. The organisation encompasses the fire department, emergency medical services, the joint incident room and disaster control and crisis management groups. All its activities are aimed at guaranteeing and enhancing the security of both the population and visitors of Zeeland.

Veiligheidsregio Zeeland closely cooperates with the Zeeland police corps, the thirteen municipalities of Zeeland, Zeeland's provincial government, Rijkswaterstaat (the Dutch Ministry of Waterways and Public Works), the Zeeland water district boards, the Dutch MoD, health care institutions and many other partners.

Overall the Netherlands has 25 security regions in which various government bodies and administrations cooperate. The division into security regions mirrors that of the 25 police regions into which the Netherlands is split up.

2connect-IT

can look back on many years of experience within the industry of wireless and mobile communication and has a profound knowledge of the market and its requirements.

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