

# SUMMARY

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Netherlands was steeped in grief in the wake of the crash of Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 on 17 July 2014. First and foremost, the impact the downing had on the victims' families was beyond words. The families found themselves faced with the fact that their loved ones had been suddenly ripped away from them, leaving them to grapple with their grief. The ensuing sorrow touched more people than just the direct relatives; it affected Dutch society as a whole. The impact was also felt throughout the world. The fact that the commercial airliner flew over a conflict zone raised numerous questions and concerns about the international political situation.

Following the crash of flight MH17 the Dutch national crisis structure entered into effect. As prescribed by the protocols, an official crisis management committee was formed in which senior officials of various departments were represented. The crash also activated the ministerial crisis management committee. The ministers of the departments involved convened at the Ministry of Security and Justice. The two committees jointly formed the heart of the national crisis management organisation. In addition, numerous other organisations and private parties started operations to manage the crisis.

The National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations prescribes that the government's actions must be evaluated after a crisis. This evaluation was commissioned by the Scientific Research and Documentation Centre and carried out by a team of researchers of University of Twente.

### **The evaluation research**

The research intended to clarify how the national crisis management organisation functioned after the crash of flight MH17 and to what extent that contributed to the management of the crisis. It also aimed to establish how well the central government communicated with the victims' families, society, the House of Representatives and the media.

The evaluation consisted of three subsidiary studies. First, interdepartmental crisis management was reviewed, which entailed an evaluation of various actors and their mutual collaboration. It was also assessed to what extent the international political context of the conflict in Ukraine influenced the decision-making process and the performance of the crisis management organisation.

The second subsidiary study evaluated the communication with, and after-care to, the victims' families. The third subsidiary study explored the question how information was provided to the House of Representatives, the media, and society as a whole.

The results of the evaluation research aim to provide lessons about the performance of the national crisis management organisation in future crises.

### **Main activities**

The national crisis management organisation and other organisations involved developed various crisis management activities in connection with the crash of flight MH17. This concerned the initial crisis response immediately following the crash of flight MH17, the acquisition of relevant information, the decision-making process of the crisis management organisation throughout the weeks and months following the crash, as well as cooperation between the organisations involved. This also included the organisation of the various ceremonies, such as the national day of mourning and the national memorial day. The repatriation of the victims' remains and the wreckage of the plane to the Netherlands, as well as the manner in which the House of Representatives, the media, and society were kept abreast of developments, were all activities that formed part of the crisis management.

In order to introduce structure to all these activities, they were grouped in six main crisis management activities:

- crisis response in The Hague
- international diplomacy
- crisis response at the crash site
- crisis response to the victims' families
- information provision to the House of Representatives
- information provision to the media and society

These six main activities form the central part of the three subsidiary studies. It was assessed how the national crisis management organisation performed the six main activities in the various stages of the crisis in order to determine whether crisis management was adequate. Adequate crisis management is taken to mean: an effective structuring and managing of the initially complex and chaotic crisis situation.

### **Time line**

Subsidiary study 1, the investigation of the interdepartmental crisis management, ran from 17 July 2014 to 8 September 2014. This is the moment at which the national crisis management organisation transited into a project organisation. Subsidiary studies 2 and 3 ran from 17 July 2014 to Spring 2015 as communication with the victims' relatives, the House of Representatives, the media and society as a whole was still ongoing at the time.

## 2. ANSWERS TO SUBQUESTIONS

### Subsidiary study 1 – the performance of the national crisis management organisation

#### Subquestion 1.1

Which role did the actors play in the crisis management organisation and to what extent did their performance dovetail with their prescribed task description?

**Structure.** The structure of the MH17 national crisis management organisation is a simple version of the structure described in the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations. Despite the many different activities which had to be deployed simultaneously, the difficult circumstances in Ukraine, and the sensitive international political context, the activated national crisis management organisation had a simple structure.

**Crisis decision-making process.** The decisions taken during the crisis involving flight MH17 partly followed the regulations described in the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations. The National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) served as the link between the Interdepartmental Crisis Management Committee (ICCb) and the Ministerial Crisis Management Committee (MCCb). The MCCb coordinated its activities with the cabinet while decisions about the missions in Ukraine were made during two cabinet meetings. The Chief of Defence, the National Police Chief, and the NCTV played an advisory role during the meetings.

**National Crisis Centre (NCC).** The NCC functioned as described in the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations and had an active role in coordinating the cooperative efforts of the crisis partners. Although prescribed by the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations, no advisory team with advisers from various ministries and the NCC, plus experts, was formed. The lack of an advisory team increased the decisiveness in the crisis decision-making process. However, the downside was that the crisis centres of the ministries involved did not have a direct link to the crisis decision-making process concerning flight MH17.

**Steering group MH17 Recovery.** The steering group MH17 Recovery was established to prepare and support the missions in Ukraine. In the course of the process, the steering group took over responsibilities of the NCTV, more specifically, those concerning the interpretation of the security situation in Ukraine and the operational command of the missions.

**National Crisis Communication Core Team (NKC).** The NKC functioned as described in the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations. Moreover, it took on tasks concerning the information provision to and organisation of after-care to the victims' families, including the coordination of the ceremonies at Eindhoven Air Base.

**Parliamentary accountability team.** A new addition to the national crisis management organisation was the parliamentary accountability team, which took care of the information provision to the House of Representatives.

### Subquestion 1.2a

How much room did the protocols leave and could they be flexibly interpreted?

The main structure of the national crisis management organisation for flight MH17 was based on the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations. In some areas, the main structure was flexibly implemented, and complemented, to achieve an adequate crisis management. Owing to the international political context, many diplomatic activities had to be developed. The Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs took responsibility for these activities and submitted them in the MCCb.

At the strategic and operational level, missions had to be prepared and commanded. To this end, a parallel meeting track and the interdepartmental steering group MH17 Recovery were established. Changing circumstances resulted in more tasks and responsibilities for the steering group. As advisers, the National Police Chief and the Chief of Defence were directly involved in the strategic decision-making process. This flexible application of the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations stimulated the development of adequate crisis management.

Despite this, the national crisis management organisation initially invested too little in cooperation with other relevant organisations and actors involved. As a result, the national crisis management organisation was not connected with the initial crisis response regarding the crash of flight MH17.

### Subquestion 1.2b

How was the cooperation with the parties that were not part of the national crisis management organisation?

The national crisis management organisation took too little effort to cooperate with other relevant organisations involved in the initial crisis response for the crash of flight MH17. It should have provided more support to the organisations and officials that were involved in the initial crisis response phase and helped attune their activities. This applies to both the crisis response in Ukraine and to the victims' families. As a consequence, too little use was made of the expertise and information available to these organisations, which hampered an adequate crisis management.

After several days, cooperation between the national crisis management organisation and the organisations involved in the crisis response improved. Clear agreements were made and the organisations and actors were assigned autonomous tasks.

After-care for staff involved in the crisis management varied widely between the organisations. One striking result of this evaluation is that after-care facilities for administrators were lacking.

### Subquestion 1.2c

How did the international political context of the conflict in Ukraine influence the decision-making process and the performance of the crisis management organisation?

From the start, the national crisis management organisation demonstrated to respect international law. In doing so, the crisis management organisation proactively created the preconditions for a successful performance of the missions to the crash site.

It is paramount to implement fully-fledged expertise in international politics and conflict management at the early stages of international crisis management. However, this failed to materialise early on in the crisis management involving flight MH17. The NCTV initially took control of the coordination and information assessment efforts of the mission, as a result of which the crisis management organisation lacked the knowledge to correctly anticipate the security situation in Eastern Ukraine.

Departments and services of the ministries which had expertise in international politics and conflict management were involved only several days after crisis management had started. Their close involvement did improve adequate crisis management later on.

The national crisis management organisation could and should have adhered to the stipulations regarding crises abroad as described in the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations better. These stipulations were insufficiently put into practice during the MH17 disaster despite the fact that the crash site was situated in a foreign war zone.

## Subsidiary study 2 – after-care to and communication with the victims' families

### Subquestion 2a

How was the after-care to the victims' families organised?

#### Initial support

The evaluation reveals that in general the victims' families were displeased with the initial support they received from the government. In the first hours after the crash it was difficult for them to establish contact with the authorities involved. Some families have stated that they were treated unprofessionally and with suspicion. They reported a lacking coordination for the initial support. They were not called back, were forced to provide the same information several times, and experienced a lack of clarity on how the information they had provided would be used. The families which travelled to Schiphol reported positively on the reception of staff of Schiphol and Malaysia Airlines.

#### Family liaison officers of the Dutch police

All families have reported their satisfaction with the work of the police family liaison officers, who proved to be an important link in the after-care and information provision of the national crisis

management organisation to the victims' families. Many families felt that the family liaison officers were their main sources of support and allies.

### **Victim Support Netherlands and IVC**

Regarding the deployment and support of Victim Support Netherlands, most complaints concerned the lacking expertise and professional conduct of the volunteers, whose services were extensively made use of due to the scope of the disaster. Victims' families who made use of the contact with fellow-sufferers facilities provided by Victim Support Netherlands were generally happy with this service. Families have also stated that they were pleased with the availability of the Information and Referral Centre (IVC) for victims' families although they made infrequent and differing use of the centre.

### **Involvement**

The great personal involvement of cabinet ministers, members of the Royal House and mayors was a great source of support for many families.

Victims' families were particularly happy with the ceremonies held at Eindhoven Air Base where the aircraft with the human remains arrived. The families were also satisfied with the national day of mourning and the national memorial day. Regarding the after-care services provided by the government, the national day of mourning proved to be a positive tipping point in the appreciation of the victims' families.

### **Subquestion 2b**

How was the communication with and to the victims' families organised?

### **Formal confirmation**

The victims' families have stated that they attached great importance to receiving a formal confirmation of the death of their loved ones. Only Malaysia Airlines called the victims' families of whom they had contact details. Families of the victims who were registered only via the national emergency number were left to conclude from the published passenger list or a visit from one of the police family liaison officers that their loved ones had died. About a third of the victims' families has stated to have never received a formal notification of the fact that their loved ones had been on board flight MH17 bound for Kuala Lumpur on 17 July 2014.

### **Information and information meetings**

Many families have stated that they were very unhappy with the first information meeting which was held in Nieuwegein. This was mainly brought on by the fact that those present were allowed to express their feelings, but that this part of the meeting was not dealt with suitably at that moment. Their experiences during this first meeting discouraged several families from attending the follow-up meetings. The follow-up meetings were experienced more positively by the victims' families.

Many families have reported that they were, at times, inundated with information from the government and that much of that information was redundant. They were, however, pleased with the IVC newsletter. The personal contact with the police family liaison officers, and the fact that they

could always contact them, was named as highly positive.

### **Incidents**

Two incidents in the communication to and with the victims' families were reported on by almost all families in the evaluation. The first incident concerned the allusion of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the oxygen mask that was discovered around the neck of one of the passengers. The police family liaison officers immediately responded and contacted the victims' families to provide more information about this statement. Thanks to their intervention, the families have assessed this incident as less grievous.

The second incident concerns reports about a presentation which was held by a member of the National Forensic Investigation Team (LTFO) in which he allegedly showed images of the victims. The families' response to these reports varied widely, from very understanding to outraged.

Several families reported two other incidents. The Minister of Security and Justice stated at a press conference on 19 July 2014 that the government had contacted everyone and that everything was fine. But this was not the case at all for many of the families.

The other incident concerned the general statement: "*the* grief of *the* victims' families" which was used as an argument in communications of parties in the House of Representatives. Several families have reported their discomfort with this statement.

### **Repatriation and identification**

Several families have reported incidents that occurred in the process of identification and repatriation. Examples include: negligent handling of human remains, failure to show photographs or other/wrong photographs. Many families have stated that the procedure involving the identification and claiming of victims' belongings by means of an online catalogue could stand to be improved. The photographs were unclear, the system was not user-friendly and the handling procedure was ambiguous.

## **Subsidiary study 3 – communication with the House of Representatives, the media and society**

### **Subquestion 3a**

How was the information provision to the House of Representatives organised?

### **Frequency and amount of information**

The House of Representatives received frequent and detailed information updates on the MH17 crisis, as a consequence of the Prime Minister's promise to regularly inform the House. Coupled with the complexity of the crisis, this resulted in the fact that information was often revised or updated. The starting point was to always inform the victims' families before the House of Representatives. This made the process of information provision complex and sometimes difficult to attune.

### **Tipping points in appreciation**

Two tipping points in appreciation have been identified in the process of information provision to the House of Representatives. The first tipping point occurred in early October 2014, after a briefing of the Dutch Safety Board at which the government was asked many questions about the feasibility and effectiveness of possible follow-up missions to Ukraine.

The second tipping point occurred in early January 2015, when it became clear that three days prior to the crash diplomats had convened to discuss security of Ukrainian air space. The report of this meeting did not end up at the responsible ministry in the Netherlands. The House of Representatives had many questions about information provision by the government and the fact that this diplomats' meeting had not been reported on earlier.

Some opposition parties had a growing perception as of January 2015 that the government was withholding information about the crash of flight MH17. Their perception was reinforced by the fact that the government did not provide access to the classified information of the ICCb and MCCb. Large sections of the documents that were released were blacked out.

### **Subquestion 3b**

How was the information provision to the media and society organised?

During the crisis with flight MH17 information was made abundantly and continuously available via the website [www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten) and [www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/vliegramp-mh17](http://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/vliegramp-mh17). Information consisted of Parliamentary Papers, speeches, and footage of press conferences. In addition to the generally available information to the public, much attention was paid to answering individual questions of citizens.

During the MH17 crisis, many efforts were spent on coordinating the provision of information in order to achieve as much unity in crisis communication as possible. To this end, the National Crisis Communication Core Team (NKC) was responsible for all the communications and crisis communication. Press conferences were also held according to a clear format, at fixed intervals, and at the same location. This coordination was also expressed in the three priority points the cabinet had established, namely the repatriation of the victims' remains, an investigation into the cause of the crash, and the prosecution of the possible perpetrators.

The information provision to the House of Representatives reached society indirectly. Journalists and the media used the briefings and status update letters of the cabinet as a source of information. Here, too, the starting point was always to inform the victims' families before the House of Representatives and society. This means that the flow of information had to be properly coordinated.

In the context of the Government Information Act the central government released a lot of documents. Much of the information contained in these documents was, however, blacked out.

### Subquestion 3c

How did the media and society appreciate the information provision?

The information provision regarding the MH17 crisis mainly reached the Dutch population through television, websites, newspapers and press conferences, while open government sources were hardly consulted. Citizens deemed reports on television, websites and in the newspapers as most reliable. Social media, on the other hand, was viewed as least reliable.

Coverage in the media and social media reached a peak in the first three weeks following the crash, thereafter intensity waned. Coverage increased again around some crucial events, such as the presentation of the report of the Dutch Safety Board with the preliminary findings, the ensuing meeting in the House of Representatives, the national memorial day, and reporting on the diplomats' briefing in Kiev. The coverage of these events was generally critical except regarding the national memorial day. The publication of documents that contained many blacked out passages reinforced the perception of some media outlets that the government was withholding information.

Many critical reports appeared in the media, and a change in tone could be observed. At first, the government received praise for its approach and information provision about the MH17 crash, but this changed into a critical attitude starting in September 2014. From that time onward, social media content and tone of voice also clearly became more negative than in the first period after the crash.

The majority of the Dutch population thought the national day of mourning was impressive and found the information provision about the MH17 crisis by the central government as generally positive. Only a slight minority (around 15%) was displeased with the information provision.

## 3. MAIN CONCLUSIONS

### General

The initial crisis response regarding MH17 was unnecessarily cumbersome and complex, as the national crisis management organisation was insufficiently geared towards cooperation with and between the organisations involved and the ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defence.

Other necessary activities were taken up energetically by the national crisis management organisation, such as the decision-making process in The Hague, international diplomacy, the crisis communication, and the organisation of the various ceremonies.

The NCTV organisation took on too many responsibilities in the first days after the crash. After that, cooperation between the ministries improved, enabling all parties to contribute.

The victims' families are generally satisfied with the after-care and information provision. Although the House of Representatives and the media began to gradually assess the information provision by

the central government as less positive starting from September 2014, the Dutch population was generally pleased with the provision of information.

### **Subsidiary study 1 – the performance of the national crisis management organisation**

Despite the complexity of the MH17 crisis the activated national crisis management organisation had a simple structure. The decisions taken during the crisis partly followed the protocol described in the National Manual on Decision-Making in Crisis Situations. In some areas, the main structure was flexibly implemented, and complemented, to achieve an adequate crisis management.

Despite this, the national crisis management organisation initially failed to sufficiently invest in cooperation with relevant organisations and actors involved. As a result, the national crisis management organisation was not connected with the initial crisis response regarding the crash of flight MH17. After several days, cooperation between the national crisis management organisation and the organisations involved in the crisis response improved.

The national crisis management organisation has taken into account the international political sensitivities from the beginning of the crisis. In doing so, it created the preconditions for a successful performance of the missions to the crash site. The NCTV organisation, however, initially took too much control of the coordination and information assessment efforts of the mission, thus preventing the national crisis management organisation from taking optimal measures in response to the security situation in Eastern Ukraine. Departments and services of the ministries which had expertise in international politics and conflict management were not involved until several days after crisis management had started. Their close involvement contributed to an adequate crisis management.

### **Subsidiary study 2 – after-care to and communication with the victims' families**

On the whole, the victims' families were generally displeased with the support they initially received from the government. They mainly experienced a lacking coordination.

The involvement of cabinet ministers, members of the Royal House and mayors was a great source of support for many families. The national ceremonies and the deployment of police family liaison officers were perceived as highly positive. The national day of mourning was a positive tipping point in the families' appreciation of the government's after-care. From that point onward, the families generally expressed their satisfaction with the after-care they received.

Many families have reported that they were, at times, inundated with information from the government and that much of that information was redundant. The thing many of them missed, on the other hand, was a formal confirmation of the death of their loved ones. Several incidents in the communication with and to the victims' families increased their suffering. There were several incidents in the repatriation and identification of victims and their belongings.

### **Subsidiary study 3 – communication with the House of Representatives, the media and society**

The House of Representatives received frequent and detailed information updates on the MH17 crisis. A change is visible in the House of Representatives' appreciation of the information provision. Initially, the information provided by the government was appreciated, but opposition parties

gradually developed the perception that the government was withholding information about the MH17 crisis.

The government provided the media and society with ample and constant flows of information. The NKC spent many efforts on coordinating the provision of information in order to achieve as much unity in crisis communication as possible.

At first, the government received praise for its approach and information provision about the MH17 crash from journalists, the media and social media, but this changed into a critical attitude starting in September 2014.

The majority of the Dutch population found the national day of mourning impressive and experienced the information provision about the MH17 crisis by the central government as positive.

#### **4. ASSESSMENT**

At this time, 18 months after the crash of flight MH17, the remains of virtually all Dutch passengers (except two) have been identified and repatriated. Not too long ago, the Dutch Safety Board established that a Russian built BUK anti-aircraft missile downed flight MH17. It was fired from an area that was controlled by pro-Russian separatists at the time. This act, carried out in the context of an armed conflict just outside the borders of the European Union, claimed the lives of nearly 300 civilians.

Many of the interviewed key informants stated that this scenario was beyond their comprehension. The circumstances in which the crisis management was carried out were not only unexpected but also complex. The evaluation investigation shows that, given the circumstances and despite the laborious initial crisis response, the national crisis management organisation in the broadest sense of the word, so including its crisis partners, gradually succeeded in adequately managing the situation.

This does not alter the fact that based on this evaluation important lessons should be learned for future crises. Perhaps the crisis situation of the crash of flight MH17 will prove not to be unique at all. Sometimes, the lines between a national crisis and a foreign or even international crisis are blurry. Sometimes, crises are connected to international armed conflicts that threaten the safety of Dutch citizens. The MH17 crisis has shown that it is important to swiftly initiate cooperation with the departments concerned as well as with other organisations operating in the area of crisis response. Lessons from the crisis management situation concerning flight MH17 might help to better prepare the national crisis management organisation for future situations in which the safety of Dutch citizens is under threat.