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Close-up:

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Chinese teams set up to save lives – Switzerland's contribution

Recognition of Swiss training for Chinese search and rescue teams

For seven years, Swiss experts have been supporting China in its efforts to establish search and rescue teams primarily for deployment following earthquakes. Urban search and rescue (USAR) experts from Switzerland's Humanitarian Aid Unit have made a major contribution to helping China become the country with the most USAR teams in the world. One Swiss expert has recently been awarded a prestigious prize by the Chinese state.

More than 50 per cent of all deaths caused by earthquakes in the world are Chinese. Until only a few years ago, China did not have any well trained, equipped and co-ordinated rescue teams. Today, China has about 30 USAR teams - more than the USA - and is near to meeting its target of one team per province. Chinese search and rescue dogs are among the best-trained in Asia and have attained Swiss standards. There is a reason for this.

50 lives saved

Since 2002, Swiss experts from the Humanitarian Aid Unit of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sports (DDPS) have been training Chinese trainers with the aim of building up top-level USAR teams that can be deployed anywhere in the world. The progress made by Chinese rescue teams in the last few years was demonstrated with the deployment of a local USAR team following the devastating earthquake in Sichuan in 2008. The team was able to save about 50 lives. "That alone is tremendous," comments Beat Künzi, a longstanding and now retired SDC USAR expert, who participated in the training programme from the very start.

At the end of September 2009, Beat Künzi was honoured with the 2009 Chinese Government Friendship Award for his commitment. It is the highest award given by the Chinese Government to foreigners. The prize was conferred by the Chinese Prime Minister, Wen Jiabao, to 100 foreign experts in various different fields in connection with the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The prize is an expression of China's satisfaction with the work of the Swiss USAR trainers, in particular with the work on this three-year project. "It is a gesture of great satisfaction and appreciation of our work", says Künzi.

25 trainers trained

In 2001, when a Chinese government delegation made a tour of Europe to find out about training search and rescue teams, Beat Künzi was responsible for "Prevention and Preparedness" of Swiss Humanitarian Aid. He gave a lecture on the work of the Swiss USAR teams for the Chinese visitors, who knew about Switzerland's experience and success in this field.

In 2002, the Chinese government decided to collaborate in this field with Switzerland. About 25 Chinese trainers were trained by Swiss experts both in China and in Switzerland. The training programme included information gathering following a disaster, working with search dogs, rescue, training methods, creating a training basis, material procurement and maintenance, logistics, team structure and management.

In 2006, the decision was made to support China organise a meeting of the International Search and Rescue Advisory Group INSARAG in combination with a rescue exercise, and to second Künzi on a long-term mission to China. The secondment, which was originally planned to take three-to six months, finally lasted three years. Toni Frisch, head of Humanitarian Aid and the Swiss Humanitarian Aid Unit is chairman of INSARAG, which is a UN agency.

Next objective: UN Classification

The Chinese government has now set itself the highest target: INSARAG External Classification (IEC). For this reason, Switzerland has decided to prolong its support for China until the conclusion of the UN classification process. IEC certificate would permit Chinese USAR teams, among other things, to participate in international deployments.

IEC classification involves a 36-hour exercise - "a deployment in slow-motion" as Künzi puts it - and will take place in China at the beginning of November. If it succeeds to have IEC classification, Switzerland will also have made its contribution.

Great sense of mutual trust

“It is very gratifying to have collaborated successfully with the right people in the right place. China has become a USAR skills centre in Asia. China’s gratitude to Switzerland is considerable,” says Künzi. “I and the other Swiss experts have also learned a lot. There is a great sense of mutual trust.”

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