

Disaster Preparedness Workshop

George MacKenzie

The workshop, held October 6, 1999, was attended by 25 delegates from 16 countries.

George MacKenzie reported on a survey of 23 national archives in Eastern and Central Europe that he had carried out. Responses were received from 63 percent of them and of these exactly half had a disaster plan. All those that did not have a plan indicated their intention of preparing one. Less than half the archives had staff trained in how to respond to disasters, and the same number had some equipment available for disaster response. Only 21 percent had a budget for this purpose. Actual disasters had been experienced by half of the archives, and a total of 15 different events were mentioned since 1944, 10 of them since 1990. The vast majority were floods, but two were armed conflicts.

The workshop then went on to look at three case studies: archives in Yugoslavia, Poland and Albania.

YUGOSLAVIA

The NATO air attacks resulted in significant damage to archive materials in Belgrade. Representatives from the archives there pointed out that the ICA call for all sides in the Kosovo crisis to observe the international rules for protection of cultural property during armed conflict appeared to have been circulated only to neighbouring countries, and not to NATO countries. The main lessons learned were:

- all parts of the archive had detailed disaster plans, but the extent of the damage sustained, particularly the loss of infrastructure such as power supplies and telephone services, severely hampered efforts to put the plans into operation;
- it had been impossible to evacuate material, partly because of the scale of the problem and partly because transport convoys were liable to attack; and
- the only solution is to microfilm archive material and store the films separately from the originals.

POLAND

Severe flooding in 1997 hit one third of the country, with three kilometres of archives under water and seven kilometres affected. This overwhelmed disaster preparations.

Drying was the major preoccupation. Air drying under cover was the simplest and most effective, and vacuum drying at temperatures up to 40 degrees also worked well. Warm air dryers provided by a specialist company caused mould growth. Freeze drying required careful preparation and was useful for small amounts of material only. Freezing was also used to stabilize material, which was later defrosted and air dried. The main lessons learned were:

- with normal phone services out of action, mobile phones are a valuable means of contact with emergency services;
- basements should not be used for archive storage, unless the building is on high ground;
- flooding brings contamination from oil and sewage, and means that archive material has to be washed in clean water before it is dried;
- with power supplies disrupted, generators would be needed for all electrical equipment;
- flooding causes physical damage (for example, collapsed shelving), and metal-cutting equipment may have to be used in some cases to gain access;
- there is only limited time to react to flooded material, as mould begins to appear within 48-72 hours; and
- the costs of reaction and recovery are enormous, and in the Polish case amount to one-third of the entire national archive budget.

ALBANIA

Representatives of the National Archives of Albania gave an example of a different type which they had experienced in the period after 1997. Faced with increasing civil disturbances, they had to move the contents of three regional archives into Tirana for protection. Neither the national army nor the international forces could offer assistance, so only archival staff made the move, working magnificently under difficult and dangerous conditions. A number of trucks were used, and some thousands of metres of material moved in only a few days. The building in Tirana had been refurbished to accept the material with the help of the Swiss government. The main lessons learned were:

- the need for self-sufficiency in extreme circumstances;
- the dedication of archival staff is a major asset in reacting to disasters; and
- evacuating archive material to safer conditions was worthwhile.

CONCLUSIONS

Disaster Plans

- All archival institutions should draw up disaster plans; advice on how to do so is contained in ICA Study 11 Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Disasters (ICA, December 1997).
- Disaster plans must be fully supported by senior management, and they must be tested and revised regularly.
- Disaster plans should be able to cope with a range of emergencies, and include measures by which the institution and its staff can be self-sufficient for a significant period.
- Simple risk assessment, which measures the seriousness of the threat against the probability of it happening, can help to identify the most serious risks facing an archive.

Protective Measures

- Protection of archival material *in situ* is generally preferable to evacuation.
- Evacuation of archival material should be carried out only after full risk assessment and evaluation have shown it to be the best course of action.
- The provision (and remote storage) of surrogates, such as microfilm, should be considered for the most valuable archival material.

General

- There are three types of disasters: natural, accidental and deliberate. The last may be the most difficult to control and to recover from.
- International co-operation and discussion should focus on the professional level and avoid political questions.
- Archives should cooperate with other institutions and professions in drawing up, testing and implementing risk preparedness measures and disaster plans.
- The formation of national Blue Shield committees will facilitate such cooperation.