



NIEUWSBRIEF ECGFF

Belgian Chairmanship 2022 - 2023

A SAFE NORTH SEA THROUGH GREATER INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

In Knokke the Belgian presidency of the European Coast Guard Functions Forum (ECGFF) is ended. In the ECGFF coast guards of several European countries work together to ensure safety at sea. On the final day of the international summit, Flemish Minister of Sea Fisheries Hilde Crevits stressed the importance of cooperation with the coast guard and other partners, raising awareness among fishermen and opting for innovation.

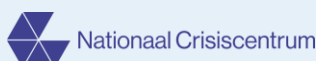
In Knokke the participants talked about maritime safety, law and order for two days, and how it can be further ensured through cooperation across European borders. Over the past year the topics had been prepared in several workshops organised by the Belgian Coast Guard as president. For example, there were workshops with Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, that included illegal immigration by sea. With EMSA, the European Maritime Safety Agency, the focus was on the impact of the European Green Deal on maritime safety and the greening of the fleet. An EFCA (the European Fisheries Control Agency) workshop zoomed in on fisheries control and more specifically on new methods of gathering evidence, and a working group on cybersecurity tried to identify challenges concerning digital security.

Nathalie Balcaen – co-chair of the Belgian Coast Guard: *“The past 12 months have been a real rollercoaster. We worked very well together with our European colleagues, exchanged a lot of know-how and at the same time inspired each other during many workshops. Most importantly, that ride does not stop here in Knokke. More cooperation and more events like this can only strengthen the clout and efficiency of our Coast Guard. We will continue to work on that, also after this Belgian presidency.”*

Piet Pieters – co-chair of the Belgian Coast Guard: *“Maybe people don’t always dwell on the thought of security risks at sea, but there are plenty, such as cargo ship accidents, environmental pollution, illegal immigration ... Every day many services are working to manage these risks and use effective crisis management to minimise the consequences of an incident. In case of such complex risks, a multidisciplinary approach is an absolute must, where sharing knowledge across services is crucial. Risks and emergencies sometimes literally float between different countries, international cooperation is a necessity. To strengthen international cooperation, Belgium as a president of the ECGFF has taken several initiatives over the past year.”*

The Coast Guard is a unique Belgian organisation that pools and coordinates the expertise of 17 different partners in the maritime sector to ensure safety and security at sea.

In 2022 - 2023, Coast Guard Belgium chairs the European Coast Guard Forum (ECGFF). Together with the European Agencies Frontex, EMSA and EFCA, it organises a number of workshops during the year. In cooperation with DG Mare of the European Commission, it also organises a Cyber security working group and the summit taking place at the end of September 2023..



The common thread in safety, law and order at sea in the Belgian presidency was illustrated by two recent incidents in the wind farms in front of the North Sea coast. When a boat carrying transmigrants ran into trouble near a wind farm in 2019, the local and federal police and security forces were only able to locate the sloop quite late. Meanwhile, in cooperation with our neighbouring countries a pilot project to deploy a special EMSA drone at sea has been submitted. More eyes focused on what is happening on the water should be able to detect incidents like this more quickly.

In February 2022, the General Emergency and Intervention Plan (ANIP) for the North Sea was declared during storm Eunice when 2 large ships went adrift near wind farms. The tanker Maersk Nimbus - with 30,000 tons of flammable cargo on board - came to a halt just 50 meters from a wind turbine. A major disaster was just avoided. Wiljan Meijvogel of the Dutch Rijkswaterstaat spoke about the emergency towing vessel used by the Netherlands in such dangerous North Sea incidents. To be able to respond more quickly to such emergencies, the Belgian Coast Guard recently placed the purchase of its own emergency tug boat on the political agenda.

The so-called Multipurpose Maritime Operations (MMO) is also an example of cross-border cooperation. In the MMO fisheries control and other coast guard functions in the same area are internationally coordinated. France and Belgium have already applied for the North Sea area, the Netherlands may also follow.

The Coast Guard is a key partner in rescue operations and, together with other services including the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, is also responsible for controlling fishing at sea. For this purpose new techniques are being used and work is increasingly being done digitally. Cooperation and teamwork is important here, as well as raising awareness and supporting fishermen and assisting them with the often complex regulations. Cooperation at European level and with countries such as the United Kingdom and Norway are also essential. This presidency has proved that too.

Flemish Minister of Sea Fisheries Hilde Crevits: *“Several partners including the coast guard and the Flemish control services cooperate in inspections on fishing vessels at sea. By joining all forces and working closely together across borders, we manage to carry out controls efficiently and with innovative techniques in the interest of the future of fisheries. Not only are these controls necessary to check fishermen's compliance with regulations, but at the same time we assist fishermen to guide them through the sometimes complicated regulations. We are also investing heavily in research and innovation in order to further refine data collection at sea to help fishermen report correctly. Finally, in collaboration with numerous partners, our mission is also to guarantee safety at sea 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.”*

In the field of maritime safety and law enforcement, Belgium is also keen on participating in a training exchange programme between 1 February 2024 and 2025. Participants will be able to follow a week's training in an administrative or operational service of the Coast Guard of another Member State.

Today, in Knokke, Belgium passed the torch of the European presidency to Portugal. Nathalie Balcaen and Piet Pieters handed over the European flag to João Aresta and Jorge Bolas from Portugal. Over the next few months the Portuguese Coast Guard will organize several workshops in which our country will also participate.



[FOTO's]