

ARGENTINE RED CROSS

OUR SELECTED EXPERIENCE

PRACTICAL RESOURCE PACK

Our context

The Argentine Red Cross is a volunteer-based humanitarian organization operating throughout Argentina. Through our network of 64 branches and over 6,500 volunteers, we carry out humanitarian work in accordance with our mission to improve people's lives and particularly those of the most vulnerable, to work with communities to make them stronger and healthier and to spread our Fundamental Principles and humanitarian values.

When the Fourth Summit of the Americas was held in Mar del Plata in November 2005, an "anti-summit" or "people's summit" was staged to coincide with it in protest against the Free Trade Area of the Americas and the militarization of the continent. An impressive security operation was mounted, with around 7,000 military and police personnel assigned to maintain order, covering not only the official summit, but also the Third People's Summit of the Americas and all other acts of protest. In addition to the challenges presented by strong popular feeling against the event, the presence of so many State presidents in one place, and the attendance of the US President in particular, made this summit a potential target for violence.

As part of the response, an emergency operations committee (EOC) was set up. It was formed by the Mar del Plata municipal government and comprised representatives of the provincial and national governments, the provincial civil defence services, the army, air force and navy, the national gendarmerie, the coast guard, the city's fire service department, the traffic department, the municipal, provincial and national health authorities, the provincial and federal police forces and the intelligence services. Two members of the Argentine Red Cross Mar del Plata branch were also invited to participate.



A team of Argentine Red Cross volunteers stands ready in case of need during a demonstration in the city of Mar del Plata in 2005.

The purpose of the EOC was to plan, organize, direct and control security operations in general, facilitating decision-making, coordinating intersectoral activities and providing unified information. In addition to the planning meetings held over the three months leading up to the event, the EOC met twice a day and remained on operational standby around the clock.

How our acceptance, security and access were affected

There were many different actors involved in the two summits, with opposing ideologies and differing advocacy approaches, making contacts challenging. The overall hostile atmosphere fuelled social tensions throughout the city, resulting in various disturbances. Demonstrators and

pro-government picketers (*piqueteros*) attempted to break through the police barriers, prompting the police to use tear gas. Although the demonstrators retreated, they began to vandalize nearby businesses, including a Banco Galicia branch, which was set on fire, completely destroying the premises and endangering the safety of the occupants of the flats above it. Many people in the area were injured.

What we did and learned

A health post was set up for three days in one of the city's squares in coordination with the provincial health and civil defence services. National Society resources were deployed in the vicinity of the summit, anti-summit and protest march sites, providing medical attention for people injured in the disturbances and transferring them to health facilities when necessary.

To facilitate coordination of our response, we set up our own emergency operations committee. An example of a decision taken by this committee was the evacuation of all medical services (including those of the Argentine Red Cross) from a sector of the city directly affected by the clashes between demonstrators and security forces.

We held meetings with each of the actors participating in the summit and anti-summit to inform them about our organization and explain our neutral, impartial and independent stance, our relationship with other organizations and our role during the event.

All our volunteers were trained in the Safer Access Framework and first aid. An evacuation plan was formulated for the health post, which was to be implemented in the event of disturbances, which did in fact occur.

The response included the presence of an ICRC delegate, who made official visits to the EOC, permanent health care facilities (hospitals) and mobile medical units.

We derived the following lessons from this experience:

Acceptance of the organization

- It is important to ensure that all key stakeholders are identified and contacted. Ongoing contact with the different actors in advance of the event to explain how we operate in accordance with the Fundamental Principles and the characteristics and roles of the Argentine Red Cross contributed to establishing a relationship of trust with all



actors and helped ensure their acceptance of the National Society's role, even when violence flared up (disturbances).

Acceptance of the individual/Operational security risk management

- The time and effort invested in providing training and guidance for volunteers in the Safer Access Framework prior to the event enables individuals to work effectively without compromising the National Society's image and security.

Internal and external communication and coordination

- Strong internal and external coordination mechanisms are essential to facilitate access and to tighten up security.
- On the down side, poor communication among the response teams (lack of radios and mobile telephones) during outbreaks of social tension lead to situations of uncertainty and involve greater risks for the personal safety of volunteers.