

Summary of the Audit on the Preparations for the Prevention of Natural Disasters (0518)

The State Audit Office has recently finished auditing the preparations for the prevention of natural disasters. In the introduction of our report we intend to present the importance of the subject and the factor that determined the direction of the audit in Hungary. Due to the local climate and geographical conditions we basically have to count with floods, inland waters, thus hazards due to extreme weather conditions. The flood conditions experienced in the last few months give the audited subject special actuality. Considering that in order to implement flood safety duly considered co-ordinated activities are required that can be realised in the long term, thus our report highlights the key critical points of the prevention process in a systematic approach.

We reviewed the tasks concerning the prevention of disasters assigned to governmental and branch levels and, applying the methodology of performance audit, we assessed the evolution of those regulatory, control and institutional conditions that play an important role in the prevention of disaster of hydrological nature. In the course of our investigation we laid special emphasis on the efficiency of the measures taken for the flood safety of the Tisza river valley. The flood prevention of the Upper Tisza region was studied in a joint Ukrainian-Hungarian audit based on the success of the issues dealt with by the Trans-boundary Water Agreement.

The legal regulation of prevention of disasters on the highest level indicated significant progress with regard to both the EU legal harmonisation process and the organisational structuring of the domestic disaster prevention system; protection control, harmonization of prevention and execution and the implementation of the government-level planning task was assigned to the competence of the Government. Concerning the regulation of the prevention of natural disasters – with regard to the dominance of disasters of hydrological nature – the Act on Water Management and the legal provisions on protection against and prevention of water damages also prevail. The review of the branch regulations revealed that in the use of definitions in the provisions of disaster prevention and protection management the desired harmony was not realised.

The Governmental Co-ordination Committee (GCC) that was established to facilitate the inter-ministerial co-ordination of tasks related to disaster prevention, operated efficiently during the protection, however it could not fully perform the prevention tasks. (The final format of the National Disaster Protection Strategy has not been prepared despite of several attempts, co-ordination was less effective concerning the prevention tasks, the basic requirements of the establishment of the national disaster prevention information system were not clarified.)

The further development of the so-called “Vásárhelyi Plan” (“VTT”) starting as a flood prevention program and evolving into a complex area and regional

development program from 2003, and the Tisza region complex program both require governmental control and co-ordination as well. No analysis has been done yet and no decision has been made whether these should be linked to the provisional tasks stipulated for the GCC or managed separately. On the basis of requesting reports from the committees established on different grounds (general disaster prevention considerations and flood prevention development considerations) we called the Government's attention that in order to vindicate the principle of unified state control it is necessary to harmonize the operation of the committees.

No co-operation in merit evolved between the organs of national authority concerned in the prevention of disasters of hydrological nature in disaster prevention planning and implementation of the international agreements, although there were co-operation agreements. Due to the lack of direct connection of their information systems the harmonization of system development could not be realized either.

With reference to the professional analyses performed on the occurring floods (and repeating the findings of previous SAO audits) we considered it a regulation defect that in case of local governments, taking care of ramparts was neglected, there was no legal prescription for solving the drainage of inland waters in settlements and of rainwater. We also found that concerning decision-making on prevention on the local level the occasional inadequate preparedness of local administrative leaders and Mayors implies a risk factor, which can also be traced back to the lack of provisional obligations in this respect.

In the domain of protection against water damages, from 2000 the annual planning was based on a complex water damage prevention strategy, however it was not fully realizable. Certain main directions of development were supported by individual and occasional government decrees; other goals of water management – including the acceptance of standards – did not become recognized. Taking into account the extent of the expected damages the flood risk assessment did not become a generally applied method of disaster prevention. In view of all the above, the audit urged planning based on the amount of risk acceptable on the society's level. Our recommendations accentuated based on governmental and branch competence called the attention to this subject.

The staff downsizing realized in the water management branch jeopardized the safety of the activities of the technical management of protection and of the protection squad performing special protection tasks. Primarily the under-financing of maintenance duties had influenced negatively the effectiveness of prevention. There was no opportunity to procure assets necessary for reliable assessment; this way the deteriorating condition of structures may remain hidden, which can even lead to the bursting of a dam.

Under the given circumstances the flood safety in the Tisza valley was controversial. Although the dike fillings and flood prevention investments carried

out on the basis of the traditional flood prevention concepts increased the safety of the settlements, almost one third of the ramparts still does not comply with the requirements of the standard flood level. Dike construction has also slowed down in recent years while the achieved safety was questioned by the new flood phenomena, which can be associated with the changed riverbed conditions, extreme climate phenomena and human intervention in the environment.

In the framework of the VTT for the first time in Hungary programs aiming at the partial reactivation of relieved flood plains – by regulated water drainage – were commenced. This would at the same time prepare a new type of farming, the change of landscape, land and water usage. At the launch of the program the audit qualified the lack of harmonization between effective operative control and the technical and financial scheduling as a risk factor fundamentally influencing effectiveness. Establishment of the improved conditions of program implementation was started from this year by reconditioning co-ordination.

The Ukrainian-Hungarian parallel audit on the flood prevention situation of the Upper Tisza region was included in a joint report. The Hungarian side of the audit made the basic conclusion that during the bilateral – in fact five-sided – co-operation the principle that the effectiveness of flood safety management is independent of country limits should be increasingly enforced. We made recommendations to the concerned Hungarian authorities with this view.