Risks

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Threat assessment: The risk of aviation or maritime rescue incidents in Estonia's search and rescue region is considered unlikely. The probability of a maritime accident is increased by the relatively narrow shipping lane of the Gulf of Finland, intersecting vessel traffic, and the presence of ice during the winter navigation season. Compared with the previous assessment, the risk level has been raised from very unlikely to unlikely.

Incidents in which a large number of people involved in an aviation or maritime accident require immediate rescue are rare, but they have a significant impact on people, property, and the environment. Responding to such an incident through a large-scale maritime rescue operation requires coordinated cooperation between several countries, different rescue units, and technical resources, with the objectives of saving lives, minimising environmental damage, and ensuring the rapid resolution of the accident. Maritime rescue operations are complicated by the region's dense vessel traffic, severe weather conditions–especially during the winter navigation season–and the need to search for and rescue a large number of people.

In 2024, the Aeronautical and Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre handled 361 rescue incidents, of which 268 took place at sea, 40 on land, and 53 on transboundary water bodies. In recent years, there have been no maritime accidents in Estonian waters requiring assistance for large numbers of people.

CAUSES

- Human factors: fatigue, stress, carelessness, navigational errors, inadequate training, and errors in leadership or decision-making in stressful situations.
- Machinery, systems, or equipment failures, including hull damage.
- Weather conditions: fog, strong winds and waves, and winter ice.

THREATS

- The exact number of pleasure craft sailing in the Baltic Sea is unknown due to the free movement between EU Member States.
- The Gulf of Finland is one of the busiest waterways in the world. The probability of a maritime accident is increased by east–west cargo transport intersecting with the dense ferry traffic between Helsinki and Tallinn.
- Every year, incidents occur involving large groups of fishermen venturing onto the ice (mainly on Lake Peipus, Lake Pskov, Lake Lämmijärv, and Pärnu Bay) in defiance of ice bans and despite adverse weather conditions. The main risk group consists of recreational fishermen, who generally neither recognise nor understand the dangers they face while on the ice. In most cases, those in need of assistance are recreational fishermen and amateur seafarers.
- The accumulation of vessels awaiting access to port in a confined area near the fairway.
- The rapid growth of the maritime economy, including the construction of offshore wind farms.
- The activities of the Russian Federation.

ACTIONS

- The large-scale maritime rescue operation plan creates the conditions for better-prepared cooperation, smoother coordination, and the effective deployment of international assistance.
- The use of drones is developing rapidly for a variety of tasks, including aviation and maritime rescue. Rescue drones can help to quickly identify accident locations, deliver rescue equipment, and monitor the situation on-site in real time.
- The development of smart buoys makes it possible to obtain accurate real-time information on wind conditions, wave height, currents, and water temperature in a given area. This supports aviation and maritime rescue operations and provides increasingly precise data on weather conditions, helping to prevent accidents. The adoption of new technologies also brings with it the need to further develop the knowledge and competencies of specialists working in the field of maritime and aviation rescue.

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