



IRO Mission September 1999 Earthquake in Taiwan

First notifications of an earthquake in Taiwan were received at 9:00 pm on 20 Sep 1999, but due to the long distance involved, an initial reaction from the IRO was not immediately planned.

Reports of the earthquake became more detailed the following morning and an Offer of Assistance became more likely: Sky-News reported that the earthquake was between magnitude 7.3 and 8.1 and that more than 800 aftershocks had been registered as well as fears of a possible tsunami. There were an estimated 1,000 deaths and approx. 3,500 trapped victims.

On the same day, efforts were coordinated with the AFDRU – which had requested 6 to 7 dogs – and a contingent of AFDRU certified dog handlers from the ÖRHB and the SKV-KHD Vienna was composed. In addition, the IRO was to assemble an international mission squad of approximately 20 dog handlers from its NRO's in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, Italy, and the Czech Republic. An Official IRO Offer of Assistance was extended to the appropriate authorities, however not accepted for a long time. It was determined after some time that the AFDRU in cooperation with the THW (Germany) would fly with the SKH (Switzerland) and that the AFDRU dogs could not be taken along as Austria had decided to send only rescue specialists. The AFDRU dogs that belonged to the IRO were therefore transferred to the mission-ready IRO contingent.

Reports of yet another serious aftershock of magnitude 6.8 in the same region of Taiwan were received on 22 September. Status until this point: more than 2,000 aftershocks, 1,700 deaths, 4,500 injured, thousands still trapped with international relief efforts underway. Although no official acceptance of the Offer of Assistance had been received, efforts were nonetheless made to arrange for a flight. This was ultimately successful with the assistance of the Taiwanese Representatives in Austria. Official acceptance of the Offer of Assistance was finally received. It is interesting to note that the IRO was the only private organisation to receive permission to enter the country.

Finally, on Sep 23 at 2:10 pm, an aircraft of EVA Air took off for Taiwan with a contingent of Austrian and Slovenian dog handlers and one medic under the direction of President Wolfgang Zörner. Upon arrival in Taipei, it became clear that combining the contingents of Germany, Switzerland and Austria was not advisable and the IRO contingent was therefore used to search collapsed high-rise buildings near Taipei. Unfortunately, it was not possible to transport the baggage, which was loaded onto another car, with the contingent. Once at the scene, the teams worked without a break until 3:00 am (= 40 hours) when they were finally able to sleep a few hours

outside in a park. They were additionally in the area of Nantou in a small village, among others, where the rubble fields were up to 200 meters high.

The mission of the IRO contingent was officially ended by Mission Control in Taipei on 25 Sep as there was no longer any chance of rescuing living victims. By order of the local authorities, the last night was spent in a hotel in Taipei where the team personally experienced an earthquake inside a building: Taipei was struck by a strong 30 second quake that night.

The contingent arrived back in Vienna, via Paris, safe and sound on 27 September.

IRO Dog Handlers in Taiwan:

Head of Contingent: Dr. Wolfgang ZÖRNER (A)

SKV-KHD Vienna, A Dog Handlers: Peter SCHÜLER, Magdalena KOCZERA, Michaela MARSCHALL, Maria MOSGAN and Evelyn BRUNNER. Medic: Herbert JOHN

ÖRHB, A Dog Handlers: Michael SALOMON, Harald WINKLER, Birgit FRISCH, Andreas THÜRRIEDL and Rudolf KLEIN. Assistant: Alois REISCHL. ÖRHB Mission Leader: Herbert FRAGNER