



### Who are first responders?

- > One of the first people to arrive to deal with an emergency and to provide assistance.
- > Emergencies include vehicular accidents, security-related incidences, humanitarian crises, industrial disasters, natural disasters and search & rescue missions.
- > First responders include emergency medical services, security personnel, firefighters, humanitarian aid workers, divers and rescuers.



the department's staff and members of the public before, during and after operations. "Another big incident we experienced was the Ranau Earthquake of 2015. But the situation was different from Ops Daulat. This time, there were no bouts of depression from the APM members but there was fear. There were those who had physical reactions such as sweating and shaking," says Mulliadi, who notes that the after-effects of Ranau did not last long compared to Lahad Datu – affected staff recovered after two months.

However, he emphasises that not everyone would react the same way and different circumstances affect people differently. "After these incidents, we saw that there was a need for psychological support so that recovery can be hastened. Our duties do not stop after just one operation, we have to move on to the next case where our help is needed.

"Many believe that we have a special kind of immunity due to the uniforms we wear. However, we are still humans. It is just that we are trained to help and save people."

APM is in the midst of developing a new training course on early psychological treatment which will be implemented nationwide, tentatively by this year. It is working in cooperation with the Health Ministry, Welfare Department and humanitarian aid organisation Mercy Malaysia to provide psychological and mental health assistance to APM officers taking part in operations.

"There needs to be a team consisting of officers who have skills in psychological and mental health treatment. This would be a good addition to improve the psycho-social support for our first responders," adds Mulliadi.

The Health Ministry is also taking a bigger interest in the mental health of its first responders.

To reflect this step, the updates to the National Guidelines and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Disasters by the ministry will emphasise the role played by first responders during disasters and how best to care for their mental wellbeing. Among the updates in the proposed amendments include mental health screenings before being sent onto the field, pre and post-deployment mental health procedures, a self-care component, and assigning medical cards to those involved in disaster relief efforts, says an officer from the ministry's Disease Control Division.

The updated guideline is in its final draft stages and is expected to be implemented early next year says Mental Health, Substance Abuse & Violent Injury, and Prevention Sector Head Dr Nurashikin Ibrahim.



**Emotionally draining:** After a harrowing operation, a firefighter might feel reluctant to engage in similar cases.

It has received input from various ministries and agencies including the Women, Family and Community Development Ministry, IMAM Response and Relief Team (Imaret), armed forces, National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA), Civil Defence Force (APM) and others.

"Whoever contributes to this guideline is able to access and use it," says Dr Nurashikin, who refers to the guideline as a "joint-venture."

The ministry is also assisting some NGOs by providing training for their first responders. However, there is still much more to do, particularly when addressing the mental health of first responders not involved in crisis areas, she says.

"When we talk about mental health and support systems, I think the way forward is to encourage all agencies to provide that support system within their own organisation. It is already being done, but priority needs to be put there. Ministries have their own psychology unit, perhaps they need to expand and have a team (of psychologists) each."

A difficulty faced is limitations in terms of human resources. Currently, there are about 200 counsellors and psychology officers in the Health Ministry. While ministries such as the Women, Family and Community Development, and Health ministries have many counsellors under their purview, others are required to have a minimum of one psychology officer per ministry.