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BIG INTERVIEW

Managing disaster in the air, on land and at sea

The terrorist attack on oil installations in Algeria last year brought home the importance of having an emergency response plan in place when operating in foreign locations



Rasaad Jamie
Global markets editor

Robert Jensen is a long-standing and outspoken campaigner for better disaster management response planning in both the private and public sectors, and he thinks things are getting better.

This is no small admission from a man who, less than three years ago, not only described his relationship with the insurance industry as “love-hate”, but who has been openly critical of underwriters who put policy limits on the cost of the assistance airlines provide to victims’ families in the aftermath of an air crash.

Jensen is the chief executive of Kenyon International Emergency Services, a company that provides disaster management, crisis response training and communication consultancy services to companies and government entities.

Jensen has also been critical of the international insurance market for not making the same resources and services available when a plane belonging to a local or so-called “third-tier” airline crashes in Asia, Latin America or Africa as it does when an aviation disaster occurs in Europe or the US.

He has been equally critical of the attitudes of some Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) governments during natural disasters in the developing world. For example, when Kenyon responded to the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, Jensen criticised the US and a number of European governments of only

Jensen on...

Cruise industry response

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Algeria oil installation attack

“It makes you realise how quickly things can go so terribly wrong. For foreign companies, the message was if things like that can happen in Algeria, what about our other operations in other regions of the world?”

Emergency response plans

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African airlines

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being interested in the recovery and repatriation of the remains of their own citizens.

Jensen began his career as a ground mortuary manager in the US army and was part of the military team that responded in the aftermath of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995.

He joined Kenyon, which was then owned by Service Corporation International (SCI), the largest funeral and cemetery organisation in the US, in 1998 and was appointed president and chief executive in 2003. Jensen acquired a majority stake in the company in 2007 and took it private.

Although Kenyon is best known for providing emergency response services in the wake of aviation disasters, the company also responds to other mass fatality events such as floods, earthquakes, terrorist attacks and rail and maritime accidents.

This typically requires Kenyon very quickly to set up an international call centre facility of up to 200 toll-free phone lines and staffed by up to 400 Kenyon trained employees to provide assistance and information to the relatives of victims.

A critical part of Kenyon’s response to such events is the recovery, identification and repatriation of victims’ remains and personal effects.

Cruise industry

When the cruise ship *Costa Concordia* was grounded and sank off the coast of Italy in January 2012, Jensen, was one of the first authoritative voices to comment in the press and on television about the way Costa Cruises mishandled the



Robert Jensen CV

Robert A. Jensen has been with Kenyon since 1998, serving as chief executive since May 2003. On October 1, 2007, he acquired Kenyon, at which time it became a private company.

He serves as an international adviser to both government officials and members of the private sector on disaster management issues and is a member of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences.

Before joining Kenyon, Jensen was a commissioned officer in the US military. He supervised on ground military mortuary operations in Haiti, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Croatia.

While in the military, Jensen was instrumental in developing the first and only joint publication on mortuary affairs, which includes protocols for responding to incidents involving the contaminated deceased.

He earned a bachelor of science in criminology and law enforcement from California State University, Fresno.

crisis, singling out the apparent lack of disaster response management planning.

At the time, none of the cruise companies were clients of Kenyon. Jensen says the aviation sector, where the single largest plane carries 500 people, had learned years ago that, while safety has improved, accidents still happened and, as a consequence, it had put resources and measures in place to respond to disasters.

Yet the cruise and ferry industries, with vessels that carry more than 5,000 people, still needed to learn that lesson, Jensen says. In terms of crisis management capability, the cruise industry was where the aviation industry was 20 years earlier, he adds.

When Jensen talks about things getting better, he is in part referring to the fact that towards the end of 2012, some of the major groups in the cruise and ferry industries approached Kenyon for help. The sinking of the *Costa Concordia*, he says, was a wake-up call for the sector and Kenyon has subsequently signed up one of the major cruise companies as a client.

Jensen himself is currently engaged in running a number of disaster response and crisis management workshops and seminars companies in the cruise and ferry industries.

“The cruise industry learned very quickly. We were very surprised when they came to us. I am happy they did because they are a

very good group of people," he says.

"Nobody in the cruise industry is happy with the way it went in 2012. They want things to be different. Senior management, in particular, are very supportive and involved. And it is not as if, previously, they had no disaster response programmes in place. They had, but they were not looking at the bigger, longer-term picture.

"In any industry, when there has not been a major accident for a while, it is natural for people to assume an accident is never going to happen. We hope it does not happen, but sadly, the reality for us is that it is only a matter of time. We just don't know where, when or to whom. For us – and for them – you always have to be thinking, 'If it does happen, how are we going to manage and respond to the situation?'."

"The cruise sector is now getting the resources in place and progress has been impressive. The companies to which we are speaking are very committed to improving their systems. We would not be working with them if we did not think that was the case, because our reputation is also on the line," Jensen adds.

Client subscriptions

Kenyon generates most of its revenue through an annual subscription paid by its 500 or so clients to be on call. In the case of an aviation accident, the cost of responding to a specific event is normally paid for by the airline's insurer.

Airlines constitute 70% of Kenyon's business, with the other 30% accounted for by non-aviation clients, which include governments, state governments in the US, rail companies and companies in the hospitality and natural resource industry.

Jensen reckons Kenyon, which relocated its commercial headquarters from Houston, Texas, US to Bracknell, Berkshire, UK in 2011, has around 80% of the county councils in the UK under contract.

Kenyon, which has been in business since 1906, is both the oldest and biggest disaster management services company in the world, with offices and mobile morgue facilities in Houston, London, Sydney and Beirut.

In its 108-year history, Kenyon has responded to more than 300 mass fatality events, including the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the bombings of the nightclub in Bali and the US embassy in Baghdad, the Asian tsunami, the flooding of New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, the earthquake in Haiti, the Afriqiyah Air-

ways crash in Libya and the sinking of the wooden boat in which 50 asylum seekers died off the Australian territory of Christmas Island in the Indian Ocean.

In terms of more recent events, in January 2013, Jensen was in Algeria leading a Kenyon team called in by two major energy companies to set up a family assistance centre and recover, identify and

repatriate the bodies of victims in aftermath of the terrorist attack on an oil and gas installation, in which close to 50 people died. At the end of 2013, Kenyon responded to aviation accidents in the UK, Alaska and Northern Namibia.

Algerian attack

Jensen says the terrorist attack on the oil installations in the desert in

Algeria at the beginning of last year really brought home the importance of having an emergency response plan in place to multinational corporations.

This was particularly the case for those corporations with people based in other countries, especially countries where, up until recently, they did not have a presence.

Smaller corporations, which do

not have the resources of the larger ones, were even more open to the virtues of forward planning. This sense of corporate unease was further reinforced later on in the year with the terrorist attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya.

"In Algeria, you had a government that was perceived to be firmly in control of the situation and it was an oil facility that was run in partnership with the government and a number of Norwegian companies.

"And Norway is the last country you would think of as a top target of the list of a terrorist organisation. Everybody loves the Norwegians. And the oil facility was protected by an army unit.

"It makes you realise how quickly things can go so terribly wrong. For foreign companies, the message was if things like that can happen in Algeria, what about our other operations in other regions of the world?"

Foreign corporations, Jensen says, did not leave Algeria, "which is good. They went back, but they went back differently. They were not taking anything for granted," he says.

"This is not always the case; The challenge for companies – and one that we come across again and again – is as soon as things go quiet, emergency response planning gets put on the back shelf," Jensen adds.

In this regard, he notes Kenyon has received inquiries from hotel operators, energy and other resource companies, as well as government agencies concerned about their staff based in foreign regions.

Increasingly, Kenyon has staff based at corporations for an extended period of time to help these corporations manage and resource their emergency response plans.

"The important thing is not just to draw up a plan and then forget about it. Increasingly, our approach is to help companies draw up the plan but also to help them train the plan and then to test the plan which is probably the most important part of the exercise," Jensen says.

"A lot of people do these exercises for day one. They don't do them on an extended basis. For example, let us start today and say it is day five of an emergency. Let's take into account that we have been at it all week. So when is your day off and who is your replacement? And what are the different things we need to deal with and watch out for on day five versus day one?" he adds. ■

Emergency service for airlines

The number of airlines that have Kenyon on retainer have increased from around 200 in 2007 to more than 330 in 2014. The latter figure represents between 90% and 95% of world's airlines that engage the services of emergency service providers such as Kenyon.

This is despite the fact Jensen refuses, on principle, to work with certain airlines, including a large number in the US, because of their lack of investment in crisis management preparation.

Jensen says Kenyon loses on average 10 to 11 retainer clients a year and the majority of those are the result of merger and acquisition activity, particularly within the aviation sector.

"But there are companies that decide they are not going to use Kenyon any more. Maybe two or three a year. A small number, but we take note. People also need a choice. Not everyone is right for Kenyon and we are not right for everyone," he says.

"When companies say they are going to do things or put certain measures in place, we expect them to do it. Some of the things we expect companies to do are basic. It all comes back to how you want to manage an accident when it happens. If you don't have an emergency response structure in place, you can't put it in place at the time of an accident. It just does not work."

But air safety and crisis response management has improved. There is a lot more focus on training within the airlines.

Jensen has been particularly encouraged by the improvements he has seen in the aviation sector in Africa where, less than three years ago, many regional airlines found themselves on EU black lists.

"African governments and carriers have been on a significant learning curve. European or other

carriers have been encouraged to come in and set up separate airlines and to help with the development of local airlines," he says.

Late last year, Kenyon was called in to assist in the aftermath of the crash of Mozambique Airlines Flight TM470 which crashed in the Bwabwata National Park in Namibia en route to Angola, killing all 33 passengers and six crew members.

Kenyon activated its emergency management centre and its mobile mortuary and data management systems. Jensen says the response of the insurers was exemplary.

"This was a small plane. The lead insurer immediately agreed to let our forensic teams do a proper DNA identification of the victims' remains, none of which were immediately identifiable. We recovered more than 900 fragments from 33 people."

That, Jensen says, has not always been insurers' response in the past, particularly in Africa, where crash sites are often covered over and flattened by bulldozers.

"The African airlines are paying some of the highest premiums but they often don't get one-10th of the response," he says.

"But in this case, the response was no different to what it would have been in the UK or anywhere else in the US or Europe. The insurer could have said, 'You know, it is Africa, we don't need to do that'. But they have not said that.

"For me, that was a standard setting response – because for the families of the victims, it is not over by any means. They have lost a loved one. But at least they were not a getting a box containing the remains of anyone or anything," he adds.

Another positive development for Jensen is government agencies in the US now seem more prepared to act against those airlines

deemed to have failed in their family assistance responsibilities in the wake of an air crash.

In this regard, a notable event was the \$500,000 fine of Asiana Airlines by the US Department of Transportation (DOT) in February this year for the poor support they offered to the victims' families as a result of the crash of Flight 214 at San Francisco International Airport in July 2013, which killed three people and injured 181 others. This was the very first time a fine was imposed under legislation that came into force in 1997.

According to Jensen, Kenyon is also making greater efforts to reach out to the aviation insurance industry. This includes making presentation to brokers as Kenyon did in February to Willis at its offices in Ipswich, UK.

Its also includes the appointment at the end of last year of Sean Gates, one of the best-known aviation lawyers in the London market, as senior vice-president of legal services at Kenyon. In addition to helping Kenyon manage its relationship with the insurance sector, Gates also helps in terms of making the company's airline clients understand some of the challenges, says Jensen.

"One of the things we are trying in our work with clients is to make sure they understand what policies cover and do not cover. It is unfair for someone to expect their insurer to cover services that were not insured," he says.

"Similarly, [we are] helping them understand they can't just hand the crash to the insurer. The insurer manages the claims, the airline manages the accident. We still have our issues with insurers and they have their issues with us. But we are really trying to work more closely with them, because most of the airlines that have an emergency services partner, have Kenyon."