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Andrew Stark: Having well trained volunteers and using their power and participation will bring many benefits

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During a ceremony to present donation to National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) Mr.Armando Torres, CEO of Oyu Tolgoi LLC, met with the management of NEMA and discussed about an opportunity to organize experience sharing visit of Australian Fire Agency specialist.

Thus, with support from Mr.John Langtry, Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary Ambassador from Australia to Mongolia, the company funded the trip of Mr.Andrew Stark, Deputy Director of South Australian Fire Agency, and organized the experience sharing visit.

South Australian Fire Agency's Deputy Director Andrew Stark worked for a week period at the National Emergency Management Agency. During his visit he visited Fire Department, Disaster Risk Management Department, Special Rescue Team under the NEMA and the Fire Department of Ulaanbaatar City and worked at the fire site in Batsumber soum, Tuv aimag. Below is the interview with Mr.Stark during his visit.

- During a week period you've visited our National Emergency Agency and worked at a fire site. Please share with us your impression?

- I work at the South Australian Fire Agency. Our agency has 30.000 volunteers. We have 188 officers who supervise these volunteers. Our officers are just like you, they extinguish forest and steppe wild fires and are engaged in all types of rescue missions.

However, the fire extinguishing process is conducted by the volunteers. We supervise these people.

I found many similarities between the two organizations. The difference is that our staff is equipped with more quality tools and equipment.

For example: we have off road automobiles with capacity to carry 3-4 tons of water. We also use heavy machineries such as Bulldozers. Also we are fully equipped to provide air aid. This means that we spray water by plane and helicopter to help fire extinguishing. This will not fully extinguish the fire, but it helps the work a lot.

Another observation is that your organization's back office is very capable. Australian fire fighters eat ready-made food such as sandwiches or pastry products while working at fire site, whereas Mongolian fire fighters are served by hot food.

- Obviously, there are many differences between us in terms of technology and equipment. What are your observations in terms of firefighting process?

- Methods and processes are very much the same. Depending on the size of the fire we use many different firefighting tactics. If the fire is small, our officers work themselves. If the fire has spread out and covers big territory we use counter-fire tactic. This is a very dangerous method. Because we are setting fire ourselves.

If the fire gets out of control, covers big territory and got close to residential areas we prioritize protecting the residential area rather than extinguishing the fire.

Also when we are working at fire site our officers work for 5 days and rest for 2 days. If the fire is spread out we change the shift to 3 days' of work and 1 day of rest.

- I understood that in Australia the forest and steppe wild firefighting operation in completed not by the officers of National Emergency Agency, but the volunteers. How do you prepare these volunteers?

- Yes, indeed. We provide supervision to our volunteers and the volunteers conduct the firefighting operation. They are prepared just like the agency officers. They are enrolled in trainings and are provided with all necessary equipment.

The way our citizens' think is that they will help their society, if not them who else. Therefore, we have many volunteers. Also there are career advancement opportunities for individuals who are enrolled in the trainings and seminars organized by the Fire Agency.

We also organize number of trainings and provide information to general public on disaster prevention. Many of such activities are specifically targeted to women because majority of the Volunteers are men and it's highly possible that men will not be home when disaster happens, they will be working at the disaster site. So we organize more training for women about how to protect their homes, children and themselves and how to take disaster prevention actions. We also conduct trainings at schools. Children gain knowledge from school and information is sufficient to teach their parents at home.

- When there is a call about fire how do the volunteers receive the information and how they get organized?

- When there is a call about disaster we inform our volunteers through pagers. Volunteers who received the information leave whatever they are doing at home or at work, come to the Fire Department, take the clothes and the tools and go to the fire site.

- Does this mean that all your government, non-government organizations and business entities allow the volunteers to leave all they were doing and go to the fire or disaster site or is it mandated by law?

- Of course, not all companies agree with this, but majority do. In terms of age, everyone between 18 and 70 can volunteer the firefighting. I know a person who participated in firefighting mission for 60 years. For the people between 16 and 18, we require parents' permission for firefighting mission.

- Who rewards the volunteers engaged in firefighting? Is there any additional pay or benefit?

- For a government organization employee participated in firefighting mission we pay the salary in full. This is same with the corporate organizations.

The main support from the government is that we regulated by law not to dismiss any staff who are engaged in firefighting operation for many days. The government also provides financial support to the Fire Department. The support is spent for trainings to prepare volunteers. Of course we grant medals to our volunteers who served well in the operation and for many years.

- Unless it's confidential please share with us the salary information of your Fire Department staff, the professional firefighters? What kind of social benefit they have?

- Average annual salary of our firefighters is 70 thousand Australian Dollars and they take more days off than regular officers.

- Is this salary sufficient for them? Isn't there any other additional allowances?

- No, there are no other additional allowances. In terms of salary, I'm happy about my salary. We receive 4000 applications for 25 vacancy announcements. This shows how firefighting job is valued.

- In Mongolia 70-80% of the fires are caused by human misconduct.

- In my country the fires are caused also mainly from human misconduct. Also the fires are caused by natural factors such as lightening. In the countryside it's common to find fires caused by falling off of power line.

- Australia is rich with forest, so you have rich experience in fighting forest wild fires. In addition, you have worked at a fire site in Mongolia. What advices do have for us?

- I didn't see much difference in our methods in fighting fires. We also limit the spread of the fire first and then go in-depth to the fire.

I thought Mongolian National Emergency Management Agency officers are better than us in working together as a team. I saw them working like one person. We need a little improvement in our coordination. I will share my experience with my colleagues when I get back.

Leaders of the Mongolian National Emergency Management Agency also agreed that they need to increase the participation of the volunteers. We expressed our willingness to support on such efforts. The key to firefighting is people.

So in order to increase the manpower it's essential to increase the participation of the volunteers. Of course this will not be easy. But having well trained volunteers and using their power and participation will bring many benefits.

In other words, you will not be limited to your hundreds of staff members but will have thousands of officers. This will also increase the public awareness and knowledge.