



Namibia's Walvis Bay Fire Brigade



The main station has been operational at its current location since 2005

Walvis Bay Fire Brigade was established in 1962 and is situated on the coast of Namibia in Walvis Bay, a city that carries the name of the bay on which it lies. The town has 95 000 inhabitants and has a total area of 29 square kilometres of land. However, the fire brigade's jurisdiction stretches another 150 kilometres inland ie east into the Namib Desert to allow for incidents caused by tourism. It also services the main road from the Walvis Bay Airport up to the bridge

where Swakopmund's jurisdiction begins in the north and 50 kilometres south along the coastline.

Walvis Bay is also resident to Namibia's main port and is known as the jewel of the Namib Desert. The town is located on the southwest coast of Africa or central coast of Namibia, along the Atlantic Ocean, surrounded by the golden dunes of the Namib Desert. Walvis Bay is often referred to as little Dubai. With its strategic location as gateway for imports and exports, Walvis Bay is also a growth hub with great potential for expansion and investments.

The Authority was headed by two chief executive officers, Nangolo Mbumba, then Secretary to the Namibian Cabinet and Carl von Hirschberg, former South African Ambassador to the United Nations.

In August 1993, prior to the end of apartheid, the Multiparty Negotiating Forum in South Africa passed a resolution calling for 'the incorporation-reintegration of Walvis Bay and the Off-Shore Islands into Namibia'. The Transfer of Walvis Bay to Namibia Act was passed by the Parliament of South Africa that year. Following the signing of a treaty between the two countries, South Africa formally transferred sovereignty of Walvis Bay and the Penguin Islands to Namibia on 1 March 1994.

Fire brigade

Although the service was established in 1962, a fire chief was only appointed in 1984 when the disaster control officer Willie van Zyl was appointed as the fire chief. He retired in 2014 after 30 years' service.

The Walvis Bay Fire Brigade comprises of a chief of protection services and three fire officers. Dennis Basson was appointed as the acting chief fire officer after the retirement of Willie van Zyl in 2014. Chief Basson is responsible for the following functions:

The Municipality of Walvis Bay is categorised as a Class 1 Local Authority. This means that Walvis Bay is considered a city and therefore the local authority has much more autonomy and decision-making power over the development of Walvis Bay.

History

In 1990, South-West Africa gained independence as Namibia but Walvis Bay remained under South African sovereignty, with South Africa increasing the number of troops. However, in 1992, the two countries agreed to establish a transitional Joint Administrative Authority for Walvis Bay and the Offshore Islands.



Chief Dennis Basson

- Fire protection
- Occupational health and safety
- Security
- Disaster risk management
- Life guarding

As Walvis Bay Fire Brigade is a small service with an annual budget of N\$9 million, serving a relatively small community, the deputy chief and three fire officers manage all operations, fire prevention, training, logistics and also assist with security and life guarding with the assistance of 23 volunteer fire fighters.

The main station has been operational at its current location since 2005, prior to which the fire service was managed out of parking garages at the Walvis Bay Civic Centre since its establishment.



Snr fireman David Ndjuluwa, snr fireman Werner Namiseb and Chief Basson

Risk profile

Walvis Bay is unique in the sense that almost all aspects of fire fighting have to be catered for by the fire brigade. Although Namport has recently launched an independent fire service as part of its expansion programme, Walvis Bay Fire Brigade still provides a backup service for the port and as such responds to vessel fires, industrial fuel fires, fishing factories, the formal buildings in the town as well as informal settlements and airport fire and rescue services.

The majority of callouts are to tend to fires in the informal areas where backyard shacks are most commonly built with combustibles like wood, plastics, etc.

The most dangerous fires occur in the vessel repair yard where engineering companies perform hotworks, like cutting, grinding and welding. Operations during these calls mostly entail confined space operations and fire fighting.

This resulted in the current fire station being built in 2005 after 43 years of existence. More fire fighting equipment and trucks have been acquired, although 90 percent of the equipment (vehicles) was donated by the Namibian Government, BP and the South African Government.

Staff

Walvis Bay Fire Brigade employs four

permanent staff members and 23 volunteers; 27 members are trained in fire fighting, 15 in rescue and six in hazardous materials (hazmat). “The volunteers have 25 years’ experience, which is what makes us so successful,” said Chief Basson.

The recruitment policy states that all applicants are required to have a grade 12 secondary school qualification with 23 points. Subjects such as biology and mathematics are an advantage. Applicants also need a Fire Fighter One Certificate obtained through a certified and accredited institution, must be a Namibian citizen and have a valid Code B licence.

Candidates have to pass an aerobic fitness test as well as a phobia and height test.

We asked Chief Basson whether the brigade has enough competent staff for the incidents at hand, “No, the service depends basically on voluntary fire fighters and the permanent staff is not enough to maintain a full time 24 hour at the fire station.”

Training

The three permanent fire fighters with the Chief Protection Services provide training inhouse as the need arise. The brigade managed to obtain a piece of land, approximately 500 square metres next to the fire station that will serve as future training centre. The plans are to establish a



One of the Volvo urban medium pumpers



- ▶ modern training facility that will stay abreast with the latest technology and training methods.

Due to the lack of internationally certified trainers and training centre, all professional training for fire fighters is currently outsourced by the Council.

The inhouse training regime is, however, regular and takes place in the stations tower and training hall.

Operations

The Walvis Bay Fire Brigade staff has been trained internationally in a number of competencies. They received training in Norway in vessel fire fighting. All fire fighters have been part of aircraft rescue and fire fighting (ARFF) teams for a period and are thus

skilled in airport fire fighting. They also received ARFF training in Singapore. The team received rescue and extrication training up to instructor's level at Rescue South Africa as well as hazmat and high angle rescue training. They also completed intensive training in structural, industrial and petrochemical fire fighting in Norway and their emergency medical training is at basic life support (BLS) level.

The most common emergency scenarios that the service responds to annually are informal settlement fires, vessel fires and vehicle rescue and extrications.

Walvis Bay Fire Brigade does not have a dedicated ambulance service and relies on services such as E-Med Rescue and St Gabriels local

ambulance companies to render ambulance services.

The city of Walvis Bay has relatively low buildings with the highest only four storeys in height. The Town Council does not have aerial appliances for rescue at height so the fire service has agreements in place with local crane companies to supply cranes that can reach up to thirty metres high to assist when needed.

Biggest incidents

As Walvis Bay Fire Brigade has to deal with a variety of incidents, their major incidents are also quite varied. One such incident was a vessel fire where a fishing trawler with the name 'Hope' caught fire. Fire fighters started slipping on the deck of the vessel while fighting the fire because of the intense heat. The trawler sank after a fierce fire fight.

Apparatus

The fire fighting and response vehicle fleet consists of:

- A 1972 Unimog off-road fire truck built by the South African Army
- Three Volvo urban medium pumpers donated by BP UK in 2006
- A water truck (pumper), which serves as a support vehicle during fires in the informal settlement where fire hydrants are sometimes damaged
- A Mercedes Benz road rescue truck acquired in 2013; donated by the Namibian Government
- A Mercedes Benz urban rescue pumper acquired in 2013; donated by the Namibian Government

The total mileage of the vehicles is 410 000 kilometres.

We asked Chief Basson what operational equipment shortfalls there are, "Walvis Bay's biggest obstacle is the shortage of funds and insufficient equipment. We do not have aerial platforms and we would like to increase our hazmat capacity. Walvis Bay is not equipped to handle petrochemical fires at the fuel storage facilities in the town. It currently relies on the fixed installation systems in the storage farms.

When asked what his ultimate apparatus would be, Chief Basson said, "It would not be wise to build an all in one vehicle for Walvis Bay as the town is confronted with a variety of



The Mercedes Benz rescue vehicle was donated by the Namibian Government



The 1972 Unimog off-road fire truck was built by the South African Army



The Walvis Bay Fire Brigade has only one station, which opened in 2005

incidents making it impossible to have all your tools in one box. I would prefer a couple of specialised vehicles. The point remains that we have a shortage in hazmat gear, petrochemical fire fighting equipment and high-rise fire fighting appliances.

Fire safety

Fire safety is the responsibility of all permanent fire fighters and is dealt with as the need arises. Amongst others, the fire service visit schools in the town on a program basis to conduct safety awareness talks as well as assisting schools in their evacuation drills.

The service distributes safety brochures as well as emergency numbers and provides safety presentations at institutions and the business community. The fire fighters also inspect premises in town to ensure compliance with the building regulations and have a close relationship with the building inspectors of the municipality.

Statistics

- Population: 95 000
- Size of area covered: 150km²
- Emergency calls: 8
- Incidents:
 - Number of MVAs: 5
 - Total number of fires: 72

- Number of structural fires (formal): 3
- Number of structural fires (informal): 17
- Number of industrial fires: 4
- Number of vehicle fires: 14
- Number of other fires: 24
- Number of hazmat incidents: 6
- Number of structural collapse: 1

Challenges

The biggest challenge faces by Walvis Bay Fire Brigade is the shortage of

fire fighting staff, apparatus and specialised equipment. Walvis Bay is one the fastest developing towns in Africa and that makes it very difficult for the service to cope with the demand.

The city of Walvis Bay, the Port of Walvis Bay and industries are far outgrowing the development of the fire brigade, resulting in a major challenge for the fire service to deal with incidents.



The self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) truck is fitted with a compressor for onsite refilling