

HISTORICAL NOTES

Twenty years of the Emergency Military Unit (UME): “Serving to save”

Veinte años de la Unidad Militar de Emergencias (UME): “Servir para salvar”

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The Military Emergency Unit (UME) is now one of the fundamental pillars of civil protection in Spain, but its path from its creation to its consolidation as an “elite military unit” for disaster response has been intense and transformative. The UME was established to improve the State’s response to natural disasters and situations involving serious risk.¹ With bases distributed throughout Spain and reporting directly to the Minister of Defence, the UME has become an elite corps that responds to forest fires, floods, heavy snowfall, and earthquakes, standing out for its rapid deployment, organization, and high level of specialization.

Origins: a new approach to defence

The UME was created on October 7th, 2005, by agreement of the Spanish Council of Ministers under the presidency of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero. Its purpose was to establish a permanent, specialized military unit capable of responding rapidly to major emergencies. Its creation took place in a historical context marked by emergencies that had a major impact in Spain, such as the Guadalajara forest fire in 2005, in which 11 firefighters died,² among other events that highlighted the need to improve response and coordination capabilities. Its establishment drew on the experience of civil-protection and military units in Europe, particularly those in France.

The UME was conceived not only for national defence, but also to place the technology and discipline of the Armed Forces directly at the service of the public. Initially, there was debate regarding the scope of its functions, with questions raised as to whether the Armed Forces should undertake civil-protection duties. However, the need for a coordinated and rapid response following major fires and floods accelerated its implementation, and its effectiveness in the field demonstrated the need for such a unit. The UME reports organizationally to the Minister of Defence, who appoints the Head of the UME, and operationally to the Chief of the Defence Staff.³

In 2006, the unit’s structure was established, comprising a Headquarters in Madrid, 5 Emergency Intervention Battalions (BIEM), 1 Emergency Support and Intervention Regiment (RAIEM), plus 1 Signals Battalion.^{1,3} The Headquarters comprises the bodies responsible for providing the human and material resources required to assist the Head of the UME in exercising command over the unit. The UME is structured into an Economic Affairs Section, Legal Advisory Office, Medical Service Headquarters, and Public Communication Office. The Medical Service Headquarters is responsible for the management and coordination of healthcare resources and all activities related to medical support.¹ In addition to military training, the UME places considerable emphasis on emergency-response education. For this purpose, it has the Military Emergency School, located at Torrejón de Ardoz Air Base (Madrid, Spain). This is an advanced military training center responsible for providing instruction related to situations involving serious risk, disasters, calamities, or other public needs. Its superior authority for military education is the Directorate-General for Recruitment and Military Education, with which it maintains a functional relationship.³ A good example is the Basic Emergency Course, which constitutes the first level of training for UME personnel. In addition to first aid and rescue techniques, training includes communications, forest-fire response, operations during heavy snowfall and flooding, and mountain and urban rescue.⁴

Since its creation in 2005, updates to its legal framework have been necessary. The entry into force of the Civil Protection Act in 2015 recognized the UME as a public emergency intervention and assistance service.³ It can be regarded as the principal structure through which the Armed Forces collaborate with public administrations in the field of civil protection.^{3,5} The UME always acts at the request of the civil-protection authorities. Such requests may come directly from the Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Emergencies (Ministry of the Interior, Article 37.3) or through the civil-protection authorities of any autonomous community.^{6,7} In an emergency, the corresponding civil-protection authority must establish an Integrated Operational

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Coordination Center (CECOPI) for the direction and coordination of the tasks and duties to be carried out. Military responsibility within the CECOPI always lies with the UME. In the hypothetical event that a level 3 emergency of national interest is declared, a decision that falls to the State, operational command of the civil-protection response would correspond to the UME (Article 37.4).^{7,8}

Since its establishment, the UME has evolved from an ambitious project into an operational reality with approximately 3,500 military personnel.² Its structure was designed to cover the entire national territory through 5 strategically located BIEM units in Torrejón de Ardoz (Madrid, Spain), Morón de la Frontera (Seville, Spain), Bétera (Valencia, Spain), Zaragoza (Spain), and León (Spain), plus with 2 intervention units in San Cristóbal de La Laguna and Gran Canaria (Canary Islands, Spain).

The UME has evolved from a unit initially focused on firefighting into a versatile first-response force. Throughout its history, it has carried out nearly 800 interventions in situations involving serious risk, disasters, and public emergencies.

Operational milestones: 20 years of history

Over 2 decades, the UME has participated in more than 780 missions. Its public profile and consolidation in the eyes of society were shaped by critical interventions such as:

- Forest fires: these account for the largest share of its activity, with more than 560 interventions, providing essential support to the autonomous communities.
- Operation Balmis (2020): a historic deployment during the COVID-19 pandemic involving disinfection of critical infrastructure and logistical support.
- Storm Filomena (2021): rescue of thousands of citizens stranded by snow in central Spain.
- La Palma volcano (2021): surveillance and evacuation support during the volcanic eruption in the Canary Islands.
- Valencia DANA (2024): the mission lasted 150 days and formally concluded in March 2025, after more than 12,500 interventions.
- Adamuz railway accident (2026): specialized teams using dogs and drones conducted search-and-rescue operations in the affected area and collaborated with emergency services in assisting those affected by the derailment.
- International missions: assistance has been provided following earthquakes in Haiti, Nepal, Türkiye, and Morocco and during forest fires abroad, including recent deployments in Portugal.^{6,7}

Currently, with approximately 3,500 personnel, the UME retains the capability to deploy an initial contingent in less than one hour for urgent domestic interventions, in keeping with its commitment to uninterrupted service in the most adverse circumstances.⁸

The medical dimension of the UME

The medical dimension of the UME is a fundamental pillar of its capacity to respond to disasters and public-health crises. Its healthcare structure is designed to operate autonomously while remaining coordinated with civilian health systems.

1. Medical structures and capabilities

The UME deploys modular infrastructure adaptable to the scale of the emergency:

- Advanced medical post (AMP): the basic deployable medical unit in the impact area. It can simultaneously manage approximately 25–30 severely injured and 60 mildly injured patients. Its main function is stabilization and preparation for evacuation.

- Mobile intensive care units (MICU) (Class C ambulances): advanced life-support vehicles staffed by a physician, nurse, and emergency medical technician (EMT). They are equipped for vital-sign monitoring, mechanical ventilation, and administration of critical medications.

- Stabilization cell: an intermediate structure that enables critically ill patients to be maintained before hospital referral.

The UME has its own staff of approximately 7 physicians, 31 nurses, and around 50 health care technicians. Medical personnel, particularly officers (physicians and nurses), come from the Military Health Corps and are required to undergo specific training at the Central Defence Academy and complete the emergency course at the Military Health School. Military personnel with prior operational experience, generally at least 5 years in operational units, are given priority for membership in this elite force.

2. Triage protocols and models

The UME uses standardized classification systems to prioritize care according to severity. The Spanish Triage System (SET) or the Manchester Triage System (MTS), both based on 5 color-coded priority levels, are generally used. Its clinical protocols include guidelines for the management of severe trauma, CBRN incidents (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear), and advanced life support.⁸

3. Logistics, transport, and referral

- Medical logistics: management of medical supplies, oxygen, and wound-care materials through supply chains specifically designed for disaster areas.

- Transport: carried out using UME ambulances or in coordination with regional emergency services.

- Hospital referral: the AMP acts as a regulating hub, coordinating with the Emergency Coordination Center (112) to determine the most appropriate destination hospital according to the patient's condition.

4. Support services and crisis management

– Psychological support: specialized teams provide care to victims and relatives as well as to unit personnel, under the leadership of a lieutenant colonel psychologist.

– Forensic services: in major disasters, victim-identification protocols are coordinated. The use of drones for damage assessment through the UDRUME unit, together with certification in water rescue and technical search operations, has positioned the UME as a European benchmark.

– Public health: in epidemics or biological-risk situations, the UME implements disinfection and outbreak-control protocols, as it did during Operation Balmis.

The UME has nearly 1,000 specialized disaster-response vehicles. Its fleet is continuously reinforced, adding transport, firefighting, and drone capabilities. Although belonging to the Air and Space Force, the UME operates with 17 firefighting aircraft (Canadair CL-215T and Bombardier CL-415) and 10 helicopters (EC-135, Super Puma, and Cougar).

In October 2025, coinciding with its 20th anniversary, the Spanish Council of Ministers approved an institutional declaration recognizing the response provided by the UME to emergencies, describing it as an exemplary institution in the service of the Spanish people and as a model with international export potential for other armed forces.

Other considerations regarding the UME

The UME has assigned volunteer reservists who are activated mainly during high-risk campaigns, such as forest-fire seasons, with historical activation figures exceeding 170 personnel during the summer period. Although there is no fixed daily number, reservists are functionally integrated into its units to provide technical and operational support. The total number of volunteer reservists in Spain is approximately 3,000, a proportion of whom are specialized and assigned to the UME. They are activated according to the needs of forest-fire campaigns or other emergencies. They receive specific training for service within the UME and are well regarded for their experience.

The UME has served as a reference model for other countries because of its effectiveness and procedures. In this regard, it collaborates with the Conference of Central American Armed Forces (CFAC) and forms part of the United Nations global rapid-response network.

The UME is an international benchmark in disaster management and has generated interest among countries seeking to organize their own first-response units and establish collaborative links with other countries, including France (UIISC), Germany (THW), the United States (National Guard), Chile (SINAPRED), Colombia, and Russia, all of which have military or militarized units specializing in search and rescue and response to natural disasters.

The UME was a pioneer in obtaining United Nations INSARAG certification for urban search-and-rescue teams in 2011. This recognition followed the unit's participation in the 2010 Haiti earthquake response.^{6,8} Following the disaster in the poorest country in the Americas, the Spanish Government authorized deployment of its emergency military personnel outside Spain, consolidating the UME as an example and a front-line unit internationally.¹⁰

Modern society increasingly expects the State to act as the curator of comprehensive security. This expectation extends beyond everyday needs and encompasses new demands in the field of emergency response. Through the creation of the UME, the aim is to ensure a rapid-response capability, with full availability, a presence throughout the national territory, and the ability to respond swiftly and effectively to the needs of Spanish society when disasters or emergencies place citizens' safety at risk.¹¹

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