

Go fetch! Drones help Swiss rescue dogs find the missing

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Golden retriever Capo sits next to a drone. Together they provide 'an eye in the air and a nose on the ground' for Swiss search and rescue operations

Capo, a golden retriever wearing a bright orange rescue harness, runs with his handler in tow towards a body sprawled in the high grass as a giant drone whirrs overhead.

The scene was part of a simulated dog rescue operation this week aimed at highlighting the rapidly growing use of drones to help speed up and expand such searches in Switzerland.

The exercise took place on Wednesday, the same day as a massive landslide on the Piz Cengalo mountain in the Swiss Alps that left eight people missing and triggered a search-and-rescue mission where dogs and drones were deployed.

"The main benefit is to gain more time, to be more efficient and to be faster to find the missing person," Dominique Peter, a pilot with the Swiss Federation of Civil Drones, told AFP.

The federation has for nearly a year been working with the Swiss Association for Search and Rescue

Dogs (Redog), providing drone teams to help with search-and-rescue.

Since then they have assisted with 12 out of 22 Redog missions.

Nose on the ground

"This allows us to have an eye in the air and a nose on the ground," Redog president Romaine Kuonen told AFP.

Her colleague Christa Koller said the goal is to have drones on all missions.



A drone flies by as a dog and handler from the Swiss disaster dog association Redog take part in a simulation rescue exercise

She pointed out that the drones are particularly useful for searches around cliffs and other areas in the Swiss Alps that are too dangerous for dogs and their handlers to access.

The drones, with their mounted high-definition and infrared cameras, can also quickly survey flat, open

areas, leaving the dogs to search in wooded terrain where the drones cannot fly.

Wearing a bright orange and yellow emergency worker jumpsuit, Peter expertly steered the Matrice 600, a large, professional-level drone made by the world-leading civilian drone maker DJI, over a vast field.

An accompanying search specialist surveys the footage and communicates by mobile phone with Capo's Redog handler Marie Sarah Beuchat to let her know which direction to send the dog.

Many high-end drones like the Matrice 600 can fly up to 100 kilometres per hour and five kilometres distant from their controllers, allowing them to quickly cover large areas.

"This can save lives," Peter said.

And while the drones used by the rescue teams can cost up to 30,000 euros (\$35,000) each, Kuonen insisted that using them saves money because they speed up searches and can often be deployed instead of costly helicopters.

Peter stressed though that the drones are meant to complement the work of the dogs, not to replace them.

A dog is a "very well-engineered tool for search and rescue," he said, voicing scepticism that researchers will be able to develop an artificial nose that can measure up to that of a canine.

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