

complicated rescue and relief. Repeated evacuations of our office added challenges to the consulate's new mandate. Though the office was affected by the disaster itself, and safety was a concern, I still hated evacuating because it detracted from the focus we needed to keep on those who were much worse off. But remarkable support from every mission in China ensured that consular operations were never interrupted. Coordination with British, American and other colleagues ensured that a wide net was cast and all leads were followed to find missing expatriates. Also, a field team was mobilized almost immediately to assist Canadians and assess conditions. As we travelled west from the large cities on the plains into the mountains and closer to the fault line, the devastation became progressively worse, and I could almost measure our distance from the epicentre by the number of buildings still standing.

West of Deyang, in the county-level city of Mianzhu, a Canadian teacher was struggling to gather what she could and return home. She had been there for five years, but there was no more school and no safe place for her to

"It was heartwarming to see the efforts of international and Canadian volunteers, many of whom rushed to the earthquake-struck areas to help, supplementing the Chinese relief efforts," she said. "After witnessing the prompt, efficient and effective relief work, I do share the opinion of others that this will be a significant turning point for China. People understand more about the value of life, of love and of help, and society is becoming more open."

Peter Liao was one of our first team members on the ground. "The earthquake my fellow Sichuanese and I experienced was indeed a nightmare," he began. "I was deeply shocked when I saw its devastating impact. The donations from both home and abroad will help make a difference as the affected population rebuilds their communities, lives and hopes for tomorrow. I am very impressed with Canada's effective consular and humanitarian response to this unprecedented tragedy. Canadians' condolences, goodwill, care and humanitarianism will be remembered forever by the Chinese people."



stay. Further west, only fragments remained of the once picturesque town of Hanwang at the foot of crumbled mountains. After two weeks, dust still clung in the air, and soldiers sprayed the mounds of rubble with disinfectant. Brave survivors picked their way through the debris looking for what memories they could salvage.

The response was almost as overwhelming as was the tragedy. I met paratroopers from Henan who represented the massive official effort and young civilian volunteers from Guangzhou who embodied a new grassroots relief movement. Survivors seemed to welcome the influx; they were living in difficult conditions, but they were living. In a camp in Dujiangyan, locals invited me to share part of their rations, expressing gratitude for the attention from Canada. Rebuilding will be a long road, better not travelled alone.

For locally engaged staff supporting Canada's efforts in the affected areas, there is added urgency to seeing Canada's contributions on the ground. Dorothy Hu witnessed the devastation in hard-hit areas like Hanwang.

Canada and Canadians have responded through every phase, and I now have the rare opportunity to support tangible Canadian efforts to help rebuild. Many have expressed frustration about being unable to do more. For me, that frustration is tempered by the privilege of having a role to play and of standing as a Canadian side by side with people struggling through unimaginable loss to find a new start.

After almost five years in China, it is easy to be numb to the frequent sight of demolished buildings—the clearing of the old to make way for the new in China's inexorable march toward development. The once daily feeling of phantom aftershocks is fading now, but I will never again pass by a mound of rubble without feeling a deeply buried sorrow for what's been lost and can never be rebuilt.

*Shawn Steil is currently Consul and Senior Trade Commissioner at the Canadian Consulate in Chongqing, which quietly marked its official 10th anniversary in a temporary office on May 23.*