

Letters from Your Colleagues

• HAITI 1991: THE CRISIS •

Dear Colleagues

As you all know, on September 29, 1991, Port-au-Prince was the scene of the coup d'état that ousted Father Aristide as president of Haiti. Bernard Dussault was ambassador at the time. He and his team experienced this crisis first-hand. Mr. Dussault shared this extraordinary experience with us, along with Nicole Goulet, Lise Joubarne and Daniel Jean.

On Thursday, February 10, 1994, about twenty-five officers, mostly young recruits, accepted Stéphanie Allard's invitation for a pleasant combination of wine, cheese and a chat. The friendly and informal tone that prevailed from the beginning of the get-together itself revealed the close ties among the team members. Each told the story from a very personal perspective, and we all appreciated the fact that they emphasized the human dimension of the experience.

All four initially went to Haiti expecting to live and work there with little stress. The coup d'état, along with a hostage taking at the embassy, embarked its entire staff on an unforgettable adventure where adrenaline was part of their daily diet. After narrowly escaping the hostage taking, in which 19 Haitians were involved, the ambassador and his team were forced to improvise an emergency embassy at his home. Try to imagine the dynamics of the house where twenty people lived and worked around the clock with wartime water and food rations. Special qualities are clearly needed to survive such an experience. Mr. Dussault and his colleagues illustrated some of these qualities.

Enthusiasm is definitely a prerequisite to survive such an experience. Everyone must contribute as much as possible to the team effort and

maintain a positive attitude. Judgment and sound instincts are also required. Decisions must be made quickly; one is never fully prepared for a crisis situation. Communication at all levels, however, is definitely the key to surviving in a crisis. Communication networks are subjected to intense pressure at such a time. Under such conditions, it is more vital than ever to have and to use solid

contacts with authorities and other local stakeholders. Information is gold at such times. The crisis in Haiti also sorely tested the communication network among members of the local Canadian community, who must remain alert and well informed, and are also an important

source of information.

Above all, communication within the embassy enabled the team to face the events with assurance. The ambassador shared the information at his disposal with his entire team at all times. This had the effect of recharging everyone's batteries. That way, everyone clearly understood his or her role and considered the consequences of his or her actions.

Listening to Mr. Dussault and his colleagues as they described the events in Haiti in 1991, I got the definite impression that they were able to overcome the most difficult situations by means of enthusiasm, team spirit, communication and the sharing of information alone. *Why should we wait for a crisis to use these valuable tools?*

Francis Normandin

Bernard Dussault joined the Trade Commissioner Service in 1967 and in addition to Port-au-Prince, he has served in Accra, Buffalo, Paris, Berne, and Libreville.