

Director General and head of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START), an initiative of Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC) to gauge the extent of international crises and consolidate the government's response to them.

START brings together capabilities and resources to respond quickly when crises arise and provide leadership in coordinating Canada's efforts with international counterparts. Located in FAC, with staff and an advisory board drawn from across government, the task force brings new

tools and resources to promote faster, more efficient responses to complex emergencies as they occur.

"We are talking about providing the institutional memory, analytical capacity, forward-planning capability and coordinating function to make Canadian responses to crises more timely, more coherent and ultimately more effective in achieving our objectives," Hynes says.

Although it is not new, the incidence of state failure has been on the rise since the end of the Cold War. As the superpowers withdrew support from a number of

Standard operating procedures for crises

When disaster strikes somewhere in the world, a team of officers at Foreign Affairs Canada in Ottawa is among the first to know about it.

The Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Response Group is responsible for developing, monitoring and coordinating—along with other government departments—Canadian foreign policy on humanitarian affairs related to complex emergencies and natural disasters abroad.

The job has evolved over time, starting as a one-person portfolio set up in the late 1990s following Hurricane Mitch and a major earthquake in Turkey, becoming a three-person team in 2000 and growing to nine members this September.

"It's all about ensuring Canada's response to crises is timely and effective and that across the government we are able to draw on the right tools and have enough capacity to respond to such disasters," says Elissa Golberg, the director of the group, which is at the ready 24 hours a day. "Crises don't always happen between 9 and 5; inevitably they happen on weekends and on holidays, and they happen at night."

The frequency of such disasters, along with the resulting loss of life and severity of damage, has grown considerably, most notably in the last two years. The earthquake in Bam, Iran, on Boxing Day 2003 was followed by a series of major storms through the hurricane season of 2004, (including Hurricane Ivan and Tropical Storm Jeanne), the Indian Ocean tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, a major earthquake in Indonesia in April 2005 and a record hurricane season last year, with 26 major storms from May to December, including hurricanes Katrina, Rita, Stan and Wilma—punctuated by the devastating South Asia earthquake.

An officer from the disaster response group is always on call, and all are ready to be deployed overseas at a moment's notice. In significant disasters, FAC convenes a task force of government representatives to coordinate responses. The group works closely with key partners in other government

departments, in particular the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) International Humanitarian Assistance Division, which supports most of Canada's humanitarian aid in disasters, and the Peacekeeping Policy Unit at the Department of National Defence.

Catherine Godin, the group's deputy director, is especially familiar with the practical side of natural disasters, having worked temporarily for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Sri Lanka last year during the tsunami and its aftermath. "If you are involved in humanitarian affairs, you want to be able to observe a crisis first-hand," she says.

Canada's involvement following disasters happens in phases, beginning with up-front support to large multilateral organizations such as the UN and Red Cross, as well as needs assessments, which are critical, Godin says. "There is a desire to do something, because we see people suffering out there, but doing something also means doing the right thing, not sending tents that are not winterized to places like Pakistan, because they will need to go through winter."

In between disasters, the group, which also includes Derry McDonnell, Brenda Yates and Celine Heinbecker, works on long-range efforts, from providing training and templates for missions reporting on emergencies to incorporating the "lessons learned" in each major disaster into standard operating procedures that set out the responsibilities for departments and agencies when a complex emergency happens, Golberg says. "When you have a disaster it's not the time to figure out who should be where."

Life for members of the group is hectic but fulfilling. "You cannot say in advance that there will be an earthquake next weekend: please don't make plans," Golberg adds. "These are people who are committed to their work and feel passionate about it." ■



Damage in Banda Aceh, Indonesia, from the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami: 14 government departments in Canada responded to the disaster, while 53 consular officers were deployed to the region and 300 volunteers at headquarters in Ottawa handled more than 100,000 phone calls in two weeks.