

Equipped for Anything

When an emergency strikes anywhere in the world, DFAIT must keep in constant contact with and assist Canadian citizens and staff who may be affected. It's a requirement we meet through the many technologies and tools developed to deal with the growing number of international crises.

The Emergency Watch and Response Centre at headquarters can respond day and night to emergency calls from Canadians near and far. Crisis-related calls to missions can be routed to the centre simply by pushing a button on the mission's switchboard, as is done every day at the close of business to ensure that consular assistance is always available.

At the Ops Centre, as it is known, operations officers provide authoritative assistance, with the help of staff volunteers when extra hands are needed.

"During an emergency, we are the hub of what the department is doing," says Nick Firlotte, Deputy Director of the Ops Centre. "We're always available and give the most current and essential advice."

When several emergencies happen at once, a separate crisis line is set up for each. This past spring, four such lines were created to handle simultaneous crises in Libya, Japan, Côte d'Ivoire and Syria. Firlotte says another four lines are being added. Canadians can also email the department at the SOS mailbox (SOS@international.gc.ca), which operations officers monitor day and night.



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Citizens registered with the Registration of Canadians Abroad system or who require follow-up after emergency calls can be reached by the Ops Centre by phone or email. Staff in other missions around the world can seamlessly be enlisted to make calls and answer SOS emails, Firlotte says. "With the recent emergencies, we had valuable help from staff in Hong Kong, New Delhi, Beijing, Bangkok, Paris, London, Beirut, Tokyo, Manila, Rome—people everywhere wanted to help."

Firlotte and his staff are excited about the impending move to the new Emergency Watch and Response Centre, where they will have new equipment, including a video wall providing the latest news feeds, and additional work stations to ramp up and meet the challenges of emergencies.

Emergency communications kits have been developed to ensure that teams deployed to assist directly in emergencies can stay in touch. Wayne Vandermeer, Service Manager of Information Technology Client Support, says that the kits, which fit in two suitcases, are a fly-away version of the equipment built up in recent years by Emergency IT Services (EITIS), part of the Information Technology Client Support Division. They include Signet laptops, a router, a satellite receiver, satellite phones, two-way radios, BlackBerrys, an iPad and a small printer, as well as solar panels and rechargeable battery packs for power.

photo: Charles Enman/DFAIT



Foreign Service Information Technologist Eric Lefebvre with a rapid response communication kit

"You don't have to be a technical expert to use this equipment," says Vandermeer, who helped put together the kits with advice from EITS and the department's Rapid Response Network. "Just grab the suitcases, get on a plane—and you can have full communications at a distant hotspot."

BASED ON LESSONS LEARNED from recent emergencies and with input from the Rapid Response Network, two new kits for rapidly deployed staff have been developed. The personal emergency deployment kit includes ration packs, a tent, a survival blanket, a sleeping bag, sunscreen and other items, all in a wheeled packsack. The evacuation kit, which is ready to ship in a watertight protective case, contains a megaphone, identification tags, writing supplies, a digital camera and other items used to process evacuees.