



SHAKEN TO THE CORE

After five years in China, it took a lot to shake Senior Trade Commissioner and Consul, Shawn Steil. But a recent earthquake in the Sichuan province that left nearly 88,000 dead or missing and up to five million homeless has ensured that he will never again be the same.

With one mighty shudder of the earth, I learned how quickly everything can change. Plans, priorities, and even terra firma, can be turned on their heads. The Sichuan earthquake altered not only geography, but also Canada's engagement in southwest China and, possibly, the course of that country's development.

Just before 2:30 p.m. on May 12, I took a step out of my office. But my foot didn't fall quite where it should, and I staggered. Chongqing sits 350 km from the fault line, but its tall towers are pinned to the bedrock, amplifying the vibrations of earthquakes. The building began a sickening sway. It seemed to stop for a moment, but then began again, stronger this time and more intense. I remember thinking that the office

building couldn't withstand so much movement, and that, if the swaying continued, it would surely fall. I later learned that a chandelier in my 35th floor apartment swung so violently it dented the ceiling.

There was controlled panic as people evacuated. Mobile networks were already jammed, but in the stairwell only moments after the quake, I sent a message on my BlackBerry launching Canada's consular response. Details about the tragic magnitude of the earthquake emerged only gradually. That night, I reached a missing Canadian in Dujiangyan by phone. She was among survivors sharing a square with laid-out bodies. Over the next few days the story got much worse, and the number of Canadians needing our assistance grew.

Continuing aftershocks, fear of toxic spills, landslides and flooding



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