

DFAIT on Deadline

When an emergency strikes and all efforts in the department are focused on saving the lives or preserving the safety of Canadians, DFAIT communications take on crucial importance.

“That importance is felt right down in the marrow of the Foreign Policy Communications Bureau (BCD),” says Director General Debora Brown. “We know the stakes are high: the minute we get an alert that a crisis has erupted and an emergency task force is being struck, the whole bureau mobilizes.”

BCD shapes the public narrative of everything the government does when faced with an emergency anywhere in the world. “Our minister and the government as a whole depend on us to craft information for public release that is accurate, authoritative and timely—and we move mountains to make sure we do just that,” Brown explains.

The bureau monitors and analyzes the public environment minute-to-minute, prepares statements for public dissemination by spokespersons and pumps these out through an ever-increasing variety of channels. Spokespersons in the department typically deal with a flood of media questions within minutes of a crisis and are called upon to organize media events for the Minister in short order. Information on departmental websites also must be continually updated as developments on the ground warrant.

The bureau’s Foreign Policy and Corporate Communications Division (BCF) ramps up its work during emergencies, preparing news releases and statements for the prime minister, the department’s ministers and other officials. Marie-Jo Proulx, a BCF communications strategist, experienced the frantic pace earlier this year, when events in Tunisia triggered the Arab Spring.

“As the situation on the ground unfolded, a wide range of information had to be pulled together, double- and triple-checked, and collated in a way that would make sense to both a domestic audience and Canadian citizens in Tunisia who were in need of assistance,” says Proulx. “When you know that your work contributes to helping those in distress, it makes all the difference in the world.”

A flood of media calls is handled around the clock by spokespeople in the bureau’s Media Relations Division (BCM) who are equipped with up-to-date information from colleagues in the Consular and Geographic branches. At the peak of any given

crisis, it would not be uncommon for the division to handle several hundred calls from international and Canadian media in a day.

“We work longer during emergencies, but we’re conscious that we’re serving important needs,” says former deputy director Emmanuelle Lamoureux. “There’s no more important goal than keeping Canadians informed and safe.”

The use of online media to convey late-breaking information is ever more critical. In addition to messages delivered through the mainstream media and contained on departmental websites, the bureau uses social media channels such as Twitter (@DFAIT_MAECI), Flickr and YouTube to bring Canadians the latest news, images, departmental statements and advice. In the case of Twitter, over the past several months, the DFAIT following has grown exponentially with every crisis to upwards of 4,000 today.

“During a crisis, you want information out five minutes ago,” says Charles Brisebois, Deputy Director of E-communications. “By offering an integrated, overarching web presence, we manage to be pretty fast.”

Brisebois says sifting through information about an emergency is a huge task. With the Japan earthquake and tsunami “the flow of information was off the charts—but we met the challenge of finding the essential facts that Canadians needed.”

The demands on BCI’s editing team are often so great that on-call editors, who normally work nights and weekends, are brought in for daytime shifts. “Every statement and press release needs the eye of an editor—often through several versions,” says Marlène Jacques, Deputy Director of Editorial Services. “Editors are key to getting emergency messages out.”

During the acute phase of an emergency, Brown convenes her troops several times a day to ensure that everyone is aware of the most recent developments and acting in unison to deliver their part of the bureau’s mandate.

The doors are wide open between BCD, the “packager” of information, and the bureaus and divisions that provide it. “Being ready to pass on timely and accurate reports to a spokesperson or a strategist preparing a ministerial statement is a central part of my job,” says Jade Puddington, a communications officer for the Policy, Emergency Planning and Training Division, which focuses on emergencies involving civil unrest. She also watches to ensure that travel reports and crisis information on mission websites are up-to-date and consistent.

Keeping emergency information on each mission’s website current is the task of the Geographics Branch’s Planning, Advocacy and Innovation division (GLB). “When the department warns against unnecessary travel to a country, GLB ensures that all associated websites have clear and prominent messages and links that provide crucial information to people on the ground,” explains Martha McLean, Deputy Director of GLB.