



Coming to the Rescue in Chile By Campbell Morrison

In October 2010, when 33 miners were rescued after spending a record 69 days underground at the San José copper and gold mine in Copiapó, Chile, Prime Minister Harper praised Canadian companies that came to help with their expertise and equipment.

“Canadians can be proud that Canadian companies participated in the rescue efforts by drilling two backup rescue shafts, as well as providing airlift, drilling expertise, generators, temporary housing modules and initial on-site satellite communications,” said the Prime Minister.

Among the unsung heroes were the Canadian trade commissioners in Chile whose behind-the-scenes work helped connect Canadian companies with the rescue effort.

Within days of the August 5 cave-in that trapped the miners 700 metres below the surface, Canada’s ambassador to Chile, Sarah Fountain Smith, was called to a meeting with Chile’s undersecretary of foreign affairs, Fernando Schmidt. The Deputy Minister was reaching out for help from countries with strong mining expertise.

Anticipating this request and rushing against time, Gonzalo Muñoz, a trade commissioner with expertise in mining, and his colleagues Peter Furesz, a commercial counsellor, and Brooke Grantham, a trade commissioner, had begun compiling a list of Canadian companies that had the specific expertise needed for the situation. Ambassador Fountain Smith delivered this list in her meeting with Deputy Minister Schmidt.

“We started contacting the companies right after the mine collapse,” said Muñoz. “We were very happy that we could help connect those companies who wanted to contribute to the rescue operation.”

Many Canadian companies were engaged in the operation, from Precision Drilling Corp. and Barrick Gold Corp. to lesser-known companies such as Atco Structures & Logistics Ltd. and Cementation Canada Inc.

“Canadian companies were extremely generous in their offers of help, and we saw our role as one of facilitator in matching offers to requirements,” said Furesz. “We worked very closely with our Chilean counterparts and the Canadian companies to ensure that the right kind of help got where it

was needed, when it was needed. We were part of a very large operation that involved, literally, thousands of people.”

The chief of staff for the Chilean minister of mining recognized the embassy’s efforts early on in an August letter that said the international response was “moving and encouraging.”

Also appreciative of the embassy’s efforts was Precision Drilling Corp. of Calgary, which built a back-up shaft—known as “Plan C”—for the rescue operation. The embassy played a key supporting role for the company, assisting in communications with local authorities. On October 13, a day after the miners emerged, Precision Vice President Joanne Alexander sent a note to Brooke Grantham in which she thanked him “for your support throughout this process,” adding that it was “very helpful to know support was on the ground.”

As the miners emerged one by one, brought to the surface in a bullet-shaped capsule called Fenix II—itsself a result of international collaboration—and with an estimated billion people watching on television, Canada’s role was illustrated by a prominent Canadian flag.

To express his country’s gratitude for the international community’s help, Laurence Golborne, Chile’s minister of mining, in March brought Fenix I (used to transport materials to and from the miners) to Toronto, where it was displayed at the Prospectors & Developers Association of Canada’s (PDAC) annual trade show. The PDAC itself paid tribute to the team responsible for the remarkable rescue by presenting Minister Golborne with a special achievement award.