

CHANGING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

BY MYLÈNE LATOUR

"I haven't seen them (Canadian officials) do much of anything' to assist Martin. I have no hope that this government would lift a finger to help her." (Ottawa Sun, January 2008)

"One Canadian MP calls Canada's passivity 'unacceptable.'" (Kingston Whig-Standard, Ottawa Sun, January 2008)

The case of Brenda Martin is but one example of Canadian consular services coming under fire.

Existing preconceptions about consular work often feed these negative reactions. There is a belief, for example, that the Government of Canada has some degree of control over another country's judiciary processes. There is also a notion that appealing to the media will somehow lead to a quicker or more satisfactory resolution.

It goes without saying that the public's perception of consular services has a direct impact on the department as a whole and, by extension, on the government and on Canadian interests in general.

"Just like the governments of other countries, the Government of Canada needs to adapt to a work environment that has become more politicized, while also contending with the media's growing interest in consular issues. The demand for all of our consular services has tripled since 1997 and will continue to increase. We must now manage a greater number of consular cases, some of them extremely complex," notes Bill Crosbie, Assistant Deputy Minister of the new Consular Services and Emergency Management Branch.

The creation of the Branch, which will oversee three bureaus, will improve the overall visibility of consular services. It will also create new resources for case management and develop strategies to better respond to

emergencies.

According to Lillian Thomsen, Director General of the Consular Policy and Advocacy Bureau, the Bureau must also continue to inform Canadians about various concerns around the world. It will therefore focus on improving and promoting its Travel Information Program as well as increasing its number of consular publications. A major advertising campaign has already been announced to that end.

Currently, there are not enough case management officers either in Ottawa or abroad to effectively address the ever-growing number of consular cases. The Consular Operations Bureau, under Director General Michael Welsh, will therefore concentrate on issues such as creating new resources.

Recent events in Pakistan and Kenya have clearly shown that contingency plans, which include key information on Canadians abroad, available means of communications and transportation, and locations that could serve as pre-evacuation meeting points, have a direct impact on a mission's ability to help Canadians in emergencies.

In the future, emergency planning will have to be conducted within a larger framework. The new Emergency Management Bureau will provide a focal point and a common services platform to assist lead branches and partner departments such as Public Safety Canada to ensure a more collaborative response.

Bill Crosbie's team is already designing a new Global Watch and Emergency Response Centre, which will expand on the department's existing emergency operations centre. Efforts are also being made to build on current departmental capacity for rapid response teams and to create regional intervention centres (hubs), located abroad, along with a new full range of policies and programs.

Mylène Latour is an officer for the Travel Information Program in the new Consular Services and Emergency Management Branch.

CANADIAN EVACUATION FROM LEBANON: Operations Centre in Turkey, Summer 2006

