

DFAIT is meeting the challenge with new institutions such as the Family Liaison Assistance Group, which started after the 2004 Asian tsunami and was active following the Haiti earthquake and with the Arab Spring evacuations. The government itself has underlined the importance of consular issues with the appointment of Diane Ablonczy as Minister of State of Foreign Affairs (Americas and Consular Affairs) this past January.

"There's a focal point for consular case management at the highest level," Fortier explains.

A NEW SCIENCE

Tools, processes and plans to respond to emergencies are also evolving, with a strong emphasis on preparedness and training, Dubeau says. "Emergency management is a relatively new science."

At ground level, Canada has 2,000 wardens, situated in 118 countries around the world, who each volunteer to keep in touch with and assist between 15 and 25 Canadian families in their districts in case of emergency situations or for consular purposes. Emergency Planning Officer Shelley Brown says the wardens, who are everywhere Canada is represented except the United States and some European countries, provide an up-to-date point of contact and allow missions to extend their reach. "We don't have the means to put offices everywhere or send people out to find out what's going on," Brown explains.

The Registration of Canadians Abroad system, which dates back as far as the 1960s but has been updated with an online component, equally helps locate and respond to citizens in times of crisis. Some 110,000 Canadians travelling or living abroad are registered, Brown says. That number rises with increased awareness following significant emergencies such as the Japan earthquake, when more than 100 Canadians a day were registering.

To better respond to emergencies, regional emergency management offices have been set up in strategic locations around the world. This past spring saw the rapid deployment of some 100 staff, from Ottawa and other missions, mobilized to "hot zones."

START itself is a significant player in responding to disaster- and crisis-affected countries, says Elissa Golberg, its former director general. Golberg has been involved in disaster response over the last 15 years. "START has institutionalized an effective, government-wide response that meets the needs of Canadians, as well as supporting affected countries," she says, adding that improvements have come with each new disaster. "We have the mechanics in place so you're not reinventing the wheel every time."

DFAIT also recently unveiled the Emergency Response Community, a new way that volunteers can be enlisted, trained and tracked to be deployed abroad or work in the Ops Centre. Some 350 staff stepped forward to help Canadians in distress, Dubeau explains, despite the long hours and stressful, emotional work. "You're often talking to people on the worst days of their lives, and they let you know it."

A SUPPORTING ROLE AT HOME

DFAIT also has a role to play when there are emergencies in Canada. With Public Safety Canada taking a leading role in domestic emergencies under the Federal Emergency Response Plan, DFAIT gets involved if there are foreign nationals affected or if Canada receives offers of assistance from other governments.

The example of Japan asking Canada for materials following the earthquake is helpful to study in this regard, Patrick Hébert says, because we could require assistance of a similar nature in the future.

LOOKING BACK—AND AHEAD

Indeed, the March 11 natural disaster in Japan continues to be the subject of follow-up on many levels—and is now a learning opportunity. "We take a step back, after the emergency phase, to look at the lessons it has taught us," adds Hébert, whose team in IRH is now in the throes of the hurricane season.

Robin Dubeau's bureau also continues to respond to emergencies, while focusing on emergency planning and training. The goal is to be in a state of "enhanced preparedness" for whatever's ahead, he explains. "We have to expect the unexpected."