



photos: DFAIT

Ready to swing into action: Serge Paquette, Director of the Emergency Watch and Response Centre, ceremonially begins construction of the new Ops Centre.



Computer-generated graphics illustrate what a secure meeting room (top) and the Response Room in the new Ops Centre will look like.

A NEW OPS CENTRE

DFAIT's partners will all have a place in the new Emergency Watch and Response Centre, which officially opens this fall on the ground floor of the Lester B. Pearson Building. The enlarged facility will include 25 "hotelling" work stations for OGDs to use and a video wall displaying the latest data and news feeds. There are also two call centres that can house up to 35 call agents, a large conference room, two meeting rooms and more.

"This is really the pinnacle of operation centres," says Ops Centre Director Serge Paquette. Since he came to the job in 1998, Paquette has seen the facility expand twice, staff triple and caseloads explode. There's been the 9/11 crisis, the Asian tsunami, the Lebanon evacuation, the Haiti earthquake and the overlapping emergencies of this past spring, which he calls "one of the most trying times I've witnessed here. It was difficult to keep track of which crisis we were working on."

Paquette is moving this fall to become director of the Centre for Corporate Services Learning, which includes emergency management in its curriculum. While responding to emergencies is important, it's also critical to develop better reporting, improve analytical capacities, refine policies and procedures and be more forward-looking, he says, although this can be challenging when there's one crisis after another. "It's hard to build a boat and row at the same time."

A NEW NORMAL

With some 2.8 million Canadians living outside the country and more than 50 million trips abroad by Canadians each year to ever-more exotic—and potentially troublesome—spots, surges in cases "have become the new normal," says Patricia Fortier, former Director General of the Consular Operations Bureau.

The Ops Centre took in more than 160,000 calls in 2010; 215,000 consular cases were opened, among them 1,900 involving arrest and detention, 800 involving requests for medical assistance and 406 involving children.

"The numbers are going up arithmetically, while the complexity is going up geometrically," Fortier explains, adding that cases involving children and families, for example, "are a pressure-cooker, with extraordinary levels of difficulty."