

The Impact of Crises:

Marx once said, "prediction is difficult - especially the future." Although it is not clear whether it was Karl or Groucho who said this, the observation is particularly relevant to our department and its use of resources. The essence of rational planning is to match resources to priorities. Although we can't predict the future, we do know that crises *will* occur, and that they can and will have a tremendous impact on our daily work, regardless of current plans. The attacks of September 11 are the best illustration of how unforeseen events can suddenly and radically alter the course of international events and government priorities.

We live in a turbulent world. Increasingly, managing this turbulence and the crises that are generated is becoming the greatest on-going pressure on geographic divisions. This is especially the case for those geographics dealing with the developing world and zones of conflict. The growing number of failed states, terrorist incidents, and regional conflicts have all put a heavy burden on the geographics. *For many geographics, "crisis management" is not an occasional, one-off event, but a constant operational concern.*

The management of crises - wars, terrorist threats, health crisis, and other cataclysms - places tremendous burdens on geographics. Successful crisis management calls for the employment of unique managerial skills and judgement. There is no template or manual for these skills, yet their successful application is critical. Judgements and decisions must be made quickly, and often with incomplete information. Time is of the essence; information gathering, analysis, and communications must all be undertaken within time frames of hours, and in some cases, minutes. In the cases of evacuations of Canadians, and increasingly common terrorist threats, lives are at stake.

Whatever its scope, it is up to the geographic to coordinate with other concerned divisions, and frequently with other government departments, to prepare the "response" to the crisis. The time allowed for this preparation time can be as short as a few hours, and involves hectic consultations at the working level. The response to the crisis is often articulated in the form of a "Q & A". The importance and impact of Q & A's in the response process cannot be emphasized enough. They represent what will become the Minister's announced views, and therefore government policy.

Managing crises consumes time and personnel resources. Accordingly, they have a devastating effect on rational time and resource management. Officers in geographic divisions are aware of time-management principles, but the reality is that when crises occur, especially given extremely tight deadlines, all other priorities take a back seat. Whatever medium to long-term goals a geographic division may have, they can soon evaporate under a sudden host of micro-deadlines for Q & A's, briefs for senior management and ministers, and urgent media deadlines. The urgent crisis invariably has the power to undermine the priorities that have been set out.