

DISPATCHES

Setting up an embassy in the Afghan capital has had its challenges, new Consul Peter Marshall reports.

When the Government of Canada announced earlier this year that it would establish an embassy in Kabul, the new mission became the focus of my life. As the Consular Program Manager, I was responsible for getting it up and running.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade decided to set up its embassy in a guesthouse being vacated by the Canadian International Development Agency, although the building required a major upgrade to address security, electrical and operational needs. The international engineering company we initially worked with was not able to get the project in gear in time for the scheduled opening in July 2003, so I got the go-ahead to manage it locally. I hired a couple of local contractors with good reputations and started them off with smaller projects, like installing security grills and a flagpole. We quickly moved on to more substantial jobs, such as raising perimeter security walls, installing secure rooms and safe

Work in progress: Consul Peter Marshall with local contractors and security at the Canadian embassy.

havens, and building a guard hut. As there was little local expertise in electrical matters, the High Commission in Islamabad volunteered its electrical experts to rewire the building and install heating and cooling units and a generator. The house's garden, once lush with grapevines, roses and a mulberry tree, soon resembled a construction site.

Bureaucracy proved not to be a problem; city codes and building permits are non-existent here. Without any commercial banks, financing the project required a creative approach—including trips to Islamabad to bring back funds. We used cellphones for communication, but often could not get through for hours on the oversubscribed system. For the Internet, initially we waited in line at Kabul's first Internet cafés and then purchased our own satellite dish. Unfortunately, everyone else did the same, and the satellite quickly became overburdened and slow—not to mention susceptible to sunspot activity in the afternoon.

There was originally no central heating in the house, and in the early days we would huddle around space heaters in the hope that the creaky old generator would not die during the night. City power was rare, and we did not want to risk the flames and fumes of the kerosene heaters that were standard around town. Now we use city power whenever possible, thanks to a cable we ran to the nearest transformer—earning us the goodwill of our neighbours by improving their electricity supply as well.

I was the only Canadian continuously on site until the welcome arrival of seven Military Security Guards in July. They adapted quickly and helped with many of the tasks. On August 9, after e-mailing pictures of our progress back to Ottawa, we were given the OK to raise the Canadian flag. Much more fine-tuning was required, and it was early September by the time Ambassador Christopher Alexander presented his credentials to the Afghan government, the embassy was opened by Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham—and our operations approximated anything near normal.

The embassy gardens are once more green and lush, and the building will continue to be home for some time to come. With 20-plus staff in a modest four-bedroom house, it is a little cramped, but we are making it work. 🍁

