

# An Ounce of Preparation...

While it's impossible to predict every emergency DFAIT employees may face, there's a broad range of training courses, exercises and planning approaches available that will ensure the best preparation for the department and its staff.

Desks in the mission began to shift—barely noticeably at first, but within seconds the shaking had become violent. Binders and supplies toppled off shelves, lights went out and ceiling tiles came crashing down. Adrenaline gripped some staff, prompting a rush outdoors. Others took cover under desks or lunchroom tables.

When the shaking subsided, co-workers and friends searched for one another, but many remained unaccounted for. A quick glance outside the embassy gates made it clear that thousands of lives had just been devastated by a strong earthquake.

Thankfully, this story is fiction, a scenario set out on paper for staff to follow at QuakeEx 2011, a one-day exercise at Canada's embassy in Beijing, organized in May by the Emergency Management Bureau.

Reading the scenario might prompt you to wonder: "What would I do in this situation?" or "Who is in charge?" and "What plan would I follow?" These are the types of issues that exercises like QuakeEx are designed to address. "They provide opportunities to test, improve and refine emergency plans and procedures," says Ed Czank, Training Program Manager for the Policy, Emergency Planning and Training Division.

As emergencies can occur anywhere, at any time, making sure that DFAIT staff are prepared for any eventuality is critical, says Jennie Phillips, a former instructor for the Emergency Management at Mission course. "Often we hear that during an emergency, the plan gets thrown out the window," Phillips explains, but she stresses that training helps employees bring order to the chaos that often accompanies emergencies. "Planning is not about the plan, it's about the process."

DFAIT has instituted comprehensive emergency training and exercise programs, both at headquarters and abroad. This past summer, for example, the Emergency Management Bureau offered 12 sessions of the two-day Emergency Management at Mission course to 134 employees heading overseas.

The classes provide an overview of emergency management principles, as well as instruction on the Incident Command System (ICS) and the Mission Emergency Plan, both critical tools in any emergency response.

The Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) also regularly conducts and participates in exercises with Canadian missions abroad, key other government departments, and even international partners to develop and maintain preparedness strategies for responding to large-scale natural disasters. Earlier this year, a week-long joint readiness exercise was held in



(left) Hands-on practice: Participants in the Emergency Management at Mission course apply their knowledge of the Incident Command System during a simulated emergency.  
(middle and right) Casualty simulations at Canada's embassy in Beijing

Trinidad and Tobago and included participation by our mission in Port of Spain, DFAIT's Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Response Division, CIDA, DND and various representatives of U.S. organizations.

Real benefits of emergency training and planning are already being seen in the field. For example, a few months after participating in a tabletop exercise led by the Regional Emergency Management Office, personnel from Canada's embassy in Cairo flew to Libya to help with evacuations. Their work showed strong evidence of the ICS structure, which is used to manage emergencies by creating a clear framework for decision making, procedures and resource allocation.

"The skills taught don't apply only to an emergency, but can be used for any extraordinary event," says Tom Cumming, who recently finished a course in emergency management and will soon be posted to Taipei.

Given the wide range of potential crisis situations around the world, all training and planning approaches are crucial. Throughout DFAIT and numerous other federal departments, significant efforts are being made daily to ensure that everyone knows what to do when an emergency strikes—a vital skill when every minute counts.