

CRISIS MODE

Dealing with international emergencies has become “business as usual” at DFAIT, which leads a whole-of-government effort that’s been tested by some 50 crises in 15 months. Benefiting from lessons learned and equipped with new tools, including a brand new Operations Centre, our capacity to prepare for and respond to a range of emergencies—and help Canadians abroad—is growing.

The email alert from the U.S. Geological Survey came at 1:26 a.m. on Friday, March 11, 2011. A severe earthquake had struck 40 minutes earlier off the northeastern coast of Japan, triggering a massive tsunami.

In DFAIT’s Emergency Watch and Response Centre (EWRC), where the notice was received by operations officer Cédric Beaumier-Picotin, and the Foreign Policy Communications Bureau, where media monitor Andy Best took in the first news report, the disaster set off its own waves of activity.

Given the magnitude 8.8 earthquake, (later upgraded to 9.0), Beaumier-Picotin immediately called the home of Frédéric Miville-Deschênes, the on-call policy officer in the Natural Disaster Unit of the Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Response Group (IRH). Miville-Deschênes and his colleague Stephen Burrige scrutinized reports of the disaster and called other members of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START), who assembled at headquarters by 4 a.m. There, they contacted the mission in Japan for an assessment of the impact of the earthquake, issued a situation report on the disaster, notified government partners and called them to join a task force that convened at 8:30 that morning, the first of 23 such meetings on the Japan emergency, involving as many as 16 departments and agencies.

Andy Best, meanwhile, had emailed the first Associated Press story on the earthquake to Beaumier-Picotin and key DFAIT staff just before 2 a.m., then called Emmanuelle Lamoureux, the after-hours spokesperson in the Media Relations Office. Throughout the wee hours of the morning, Lamoureux studied the news wires, distributed media lines for approval and began receiving calls from Canadian journalists.

Back in the EWRC, known as the Ops Centre, Beaumier-Picotin called the Tokyo mission to find out if it had sustained damage and to ensure that all staff were safe. Crisis telephone lines lit up with

queries from concerned Canadians. By 6 a.m. some 55 calls had been received; a whopping 4,984 more came in the next 12 hours and were dealt with by a cadre of 53 volunteers from across the department.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

It was a familiar scenario. Since the beginning of the year, DFAIT had been in a constant state of readiness and response to one emergency after another: civil unrest in Côte d’Ivoire, Tunisia and Egypt; an earthquake in Christchurch, New Zealand; the uprising and NATO mission in Libya. Indeed, the Japan earthquake, tsunami and nuclear emergency capped a 15-month period, starting with the Haiti earthquake in January 2010, in which DFAIT had responded to some 50 crises—many of them back-to-back or overlapping—in 36 countries around the world.

“It was a shock to see such a large earthquake after all we’d been dealing with,” recalls Beaumier-Picotin, who has been an ops officer for two years and has worked on every recent major emergency, often in 18- to 20-hour shifts. “We were all exhausted—but that was pretty normal.”

Robin Dubeau, Director General of the Emergency Management Bureau (CED), says that many factors account for the heightened demand for consular and emergency management services, among them the increasing frequency of extreme weather events, the threat of terrorism, political instability in many regions and public health threats. Meanwhile, the growing mobility of Canadians, increased media coverage of consular cases and widespread use of social media, as well as rising public expectations and political focus have added to the complexity.

“People expect us to respond faster and to get closer to the action, and that we do it in bigger numbers,” says Dubeau, who worked as a management consular officer in Côte d’Ivoire during a coup d’état in 1999 and was Canada’s consul general in Mexico for the 2009 H1N1 outbreak.