

Serving in Risky Places

The life of Canadian diplomats in Algiers



photo: Réda Bouskri

Canadian Embassy personnel. Front row, left to right: Corporal Daniel Juteau, CIDA Officer Norman Boukhalife, Ambassador Franco D. Pillarella, Mission Administrative Officer Carolynne Smith, Corporal Ricardo Carr-Ribeiro. Second row, left to right: Political Officer Rick Savone, Ambassador's Secretary Claudette Vachon, Trade Commissioner Gilles Poirier, Warrant Officer Richard Day, Corporal Geoffroy Ethier, Master Corporal Robert Gallant. Missing from the photo: Corporal Pierre Murray.

According to the stereotyped view, diplomats go to cocktail parties and have a good time abroad. Nowhere can this image be further from the truth than in Algiers. For the 12 Canadians posted in the capital city of Algeria and the 51 locally engaged staff, life in this country burdened by seven years of terrorist activity has its fair share of risks.

Bullet-proof vehicles and vests are normal tools for day-to-day activity. Says Political Officer Rick Savone, "While the situation in Algiers proper has calmed in recent months, there was a time when it was not uncommon to fall asleep to the sound of gunfire and exploding bombs." Diplomats are

required to travel with armed military escort whenever they leave the fortified compound that houses the Embassy, the Official Residence and the staff quarters. Without the assistance of the six Canadian Military Security Guards, the mission's tasks would become infinitely more complicated.

Diplomats, including Canadians, are always at risk of being targeted by terrorists or of simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. On numerous occasions, car bombs or explosions in city markets have gone off at almost the same time as they were driving by. And every now and then they have to deal with threats from extremist groups.

Nevertheless, our diplomats manage to provide a full range of services to Canadian and Algerian clients, including consular, visa and immigration services, as well as regularly updated travel advice. The commercial section,

for its part, continues to provide assistance to Canadian and Algerian companies interested in trading opportunities. In November 1998, the section organized the first Canada-Algeria Bilateral Commission in several years, and this spring it planned and organized trade and investment missions in both directions. Two-way trade in 1998 was estimated at \$1.2 billion, and Algeria is still Canada's largest trading partner in all of Africa and the Middle East.

The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is also active in Algeria. Says CIDA Officer Norman Boukhalife, "Canada's support for the establishment of the Algiers Stock Exchange, and support for development projects encompassing environmental and public health priorities are some of the Agency's most noteworthy achievements in Algiers." Also, through the Canada Fund for Local Initiatives and in collaboration with local NGOs, the Embassy has been instrumental in furthering the role of women in society, and in providing for the health and education needs of abandoned and orphaned children.

Ambassador Franco D. Pillarella is proud of his staff and their work: "We go to great lengths to encourage dialogue between Canadian and Algerian civil society. Whether it is through our support to traumatized children or as a result of the frequent visits we organize for Canadian NGOs, we are able to work together with Algerians on political, economic and social issues of common concern."

Ambassador Pillarella and his staff are particularly proud to have received a citation under the 1998 Minister of Foreign Affairs Awards for Consular and Foreign Policy Excellence. "Their efforts have been remarkably successful in piloting our relations," said Minister Axworthy. "Their performance was even more remarkable when one takes into account the exceptionally difficult living and working conditions in Algiers, as the poor security situation forces our staff to live under virtual house arrest."

Adding to the praise is the Algerian government's deep appreciation of the fact that, while a number of embassies closed their doors when terrorist violence reached its peak in 1993 and 1994, Canada's was one of the few that never flinched. ●—



photo: Rick Savone

Canadian and locally engaged staff at the Algiers Embassy



photo: Rick Savone

The newly constructed Chancery (1998) inside the Canadian Embassy compound in the district of Ben Aknoun, Algiers



photo: Richard Day

Political Officer Rick Savone plants an acacia tree in the new botanical garden of the National Institute for the Study of Desertification in Tamanrasset. CIDA Officer Norman Boukhalife and Institute staff look on.

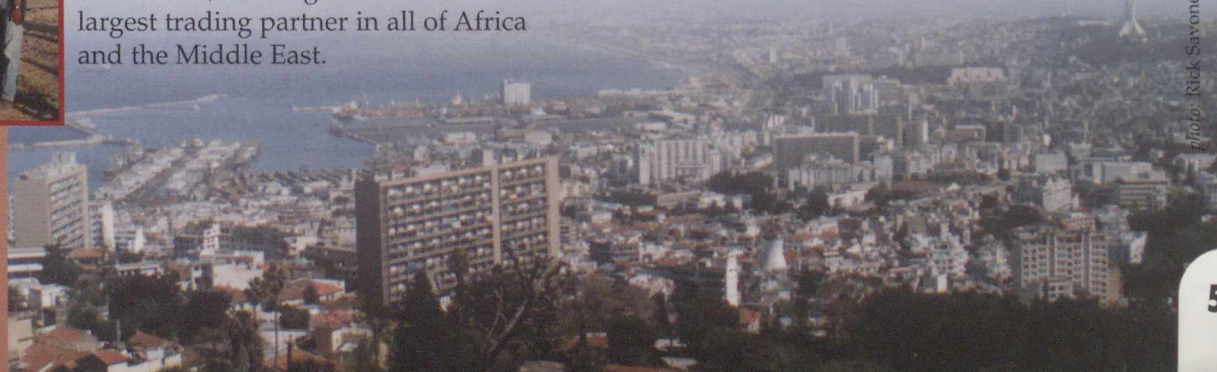


photo: Rick Savone