

Ladies and gentlemen, colleagues, invited guests and members of the press, I am very pleased to be here in Vancouver this morning to announce the start of the Consular Awareness Program entitled "Bon Voyage, but ...." The beautiful city of Vancouver, with its strong ties to the Pacific Rim and indeed the world, is an ideal venue to speak to you about consular services available to Canadians abroad.

Let me say briefly that the goal of the program is two-fold: to improve consular service to the Canadian public and to inform them about the range of consular functions performed by my Department. In this way, Canadians can travel with realistic expectations of our consular services and an appreciation of their own responsibilities while abroad. I know that consular services are vital to travelling Canadians. Indeed, for Canadians from coast to coast, the provision of consular services is External Affairs. I believe we can be proud of the work done by officials on their behalf both at home, through the 21 passport offices across Canada, and the 105 missions abroad.

This is not glamour or high diplomacy. This is the daily business of helping to ensure the well-being of ordinary citizens everywhere. At this moment, Canadian Embassy personnel in Costa Rica are assisting Canadians in the aftermath of the recent earthquake. But sometimes there are risks. Canadians will know of the fine work done by their missions in China after Tiananmen Square, in Jamaica after Hurricane Gilbert and, most recently, in Baghdad and Kuwait, in getting hundreds of Canadians home and out of harm's way. Those efforts sometimes involved confronting danger and deprivation. I am pleased that Canada's Ambassador to Iraq, Mr. Chris Poole, is here with us this morning. Canadian diplomatic staff did their job well, without fanfare, and they helped others. After most foreigners were evacuated from Kuwait, the Foreign Ministers of Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States all expressed their thanks for the work Canadian officials did to help their citizens go home.

Each year, Canadians make 80 million trips outside our borders for vacation or vocation. Travel abroad has become routine. The foreign world seems much less foreign than before. But this familiarity does not erase the fact that, when Canadians go abroad, they leave behind the social, legal and political systems to which we are all accustomed. And they leave behind the many rights we take for granted, rights which can be all too rare elsewhere. Abroad, the rules can be very different. Customs, laws and medical practices can vary dramatically. And there is the ever present possibility that while outside, misfortune can strike -- illness, death, natural disaster or political crisis. What is unheard of at home can be common abroad. And what is common at home can become a crisis abroad.

Managing that reality is the purpose of the consular services offered by our Department. Those services are offered in over 100 missions abroad, on every continent, as well as