

HELPING CANADIANS IN NEED

The magnitude of the Boxing Day tsunami that slammed the coasts of 12 nations across the Indian Ocean prompted an unprecedented effort by Canada's Consular Affairs Bureau to bring order into chaos, assisting Canadians in the region and those concerned about them back home.

THE CALL FROM CANADA

In the early hours of December 26, as reports of the tsunami disaster began to reach the media, Canadians worried about friends and relatives in the region began calling the Consular Affairs Bureau's 24-hour helpline in Ottawa.

The calls came in to the Operations Centre, a sprawling office tucked in a high-security corner of Foreign Affairs Canada (FAC). The crew of two manning the phone lines on Christmas night had logged 35 pages of calls by morning. A regular night shift usually produces four pages of calls.

The concern of callers heightened as hours and then days passed without word. Many reported the names of people who might have been on the washed-out beachfronts or elsewhere in the affected countries. Others inquired about relatives, friends, neighbours or colleagues travelling

somewhere in Asia, fearing that fate had put them in the path of the waves.

As the calls increased, Serge Paquette, Director of Emergency Services for FAC, drew on off-duty staff from the Consular Bureau to answer the phones.

By the morning of December 27, the crisis centre—an inner circle of work stations unused since the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York City—buzzed with activity, the division's 14 operations officers augmented by hundreds of staff from across FAC and International Trade Canada manning a bank of 40 phones around the clock.

"I knew it was an overwhelming volume of work and that it was important for Canadians to get through to someone," says Amy Galigan, a political officer in FAC's Eastern Europe and Balkans Division who came forward to work for six days in the centre. "To be able to help people in times of distress is something I don't get to do everyday."

More than 100,000 calls were logged in the two weeks following the tsunami. Over time the focus shifted to phoning people back to check for news of those missing or to collect additional details for their files. Sometimes it was the person feared lost who answered the phone, having returned safely from a resort hundreds of kilometres away from the catastrophe. The person's name was crossed off the list and the news transmitted to any others who had been concerned.

Galigan, who made many such "happy calls," says, "I've never had people say 'bless you' so many times in my life."

Nevertheless, out of the 3,948 people originally on the centre's list, at the time of printing 15 are confirmed dead, 5 who were clearly in the region are still missing, and 7 who might

have been there remain unaccounted for. Friends or relatives of the missing have provided the RCMP with dental records, x-rays and DNA samples such as hair from brushes to be compared with forensic data from 5,000 unidentified bodies across the region. Experts will need months to complete the task.

The Consular Affairs Bureau provides families with help to repatriate bodies or deal with legal work if there is no confirmed death and thus no death certificate. Last year 808 Canadians died abroad, while more than 12,000 were injured, robbed, in trouble with the law or stranded in foreign nations. 🍁

The 24-hour Consular Affairs emergency line is at 1-800-387-3124 or (613) 943-1055.

If you go...

Take some precautions to ensure you are prepared if disaster strikes:

- Read the Travel Report for advice on safety and security, health conditions and entry requirements;
- Buy travel insurance;
- Leave a hotel number or your itinerary with someone at home;
- Register with the local Canadian embassy—you can do it on-line;
- Keep a photocopy of your passport in a separate place;
- Bring along the telephone number of the nearest Canadian mission.

For additional tips consult the booklet *Bon Voyage, But...* Find it as well as Travel Reports and other information on the Consular Affairs Web site at www.voyage.gc.ca.



Consular help: Serge Paquette, Director of Emergency Services for FAC.