

The Canadian Response to the Gulf Oil Spill

Further to today's press release announcing measures being taken the Government of Canada in response to the Gulf oil spill, Canada is actively pursuing the feasibility of establishing permanent mechanisms to deal with man-made, international environmental disasters. Two areas for action have been identified:

A) Establish Rapid Emergency Response Mechanisms

- All governments should have rapid access to information from designated experts and responsibility centres for coping with environmental disasters. Such a mechanism does not exist. However, Canada has been discussing with foreign and UN officials an idea for a global computer-based network that would fulfill this need. The reaction to this proposal has been positive.
- Once the required action has been identified, there is a need for coordination of the disaster relief operation. Existing agencies such as the United Nations Disaster Relief Organization (UNDRO) and the Red Cross are experienced in dealing with disasters that threaten human life. However, they have either not been sufficiently funded or mandated to cope with disasters to the environment. Canada is assessing the cooperation between the UN Environment Program, the International Maritime Organization and other agencies on the current crisis and will be making specific proposals to the United Nations regarding future coordination of international emergency responses.

B) International Legal Action

- Canada favours an international legal effort to make it clear that Saddam Hussein's action in deliberately causing an oil spill in the Gulf is illegal and unacceptable to the international community of nations.
- The proposal being made by Canada at this time is that a group of high-level legal experts from a number of interested countries meet to review the existing body of international law that might apply to intentional damage to the natural environment, and to examine ways to improve its effectiveness. Canada would be happy to host such a meeting.
- Under customary international law, a state is liable for damage caused to other states and their environment by activities under its jurisdiction or control. This concept is embodied in Principle 21 of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration on the protection of the environment, and is also to be found in the 1982 United Nations Law of the Sea Convention.