

When the catastrophic earthquake struck Haiti just before 5 p.m. on Tuesday, January 12, 2010, Edmund Lee was in his office, getting ready to go home. For the Deputy Director of the Latin America and Caribbean Commercial Relations Division, it would be his last regular day for quite some time.

Over the next two months, Lee and his officers, Anne-Marie Mosey and Christopher Wimmer, received and processed more than 700 offers of assistance from the Canadian private sector, often working with little sleep—and with no script. The team took a leadership role in the management of Canadian businesses, complementing the work of the Humanitarian Affairs and Disaster Response Division and the Policy, Emergency Planning and Training Division, the two lead divisions for any DFAIT emergency response.

“It was definitely busy,” Lee recalls. “Lives were at stake, and we wanted to ensure that we properly managed the offers for help and directed them toward the right places.”

To prioritize the overwhelming number of offers pouring in from across Canada (and beyond), the team created a triage system. Companies offering immediate transportation (including aircraft) and shelter received top priority, while those offering bottled water and goods not immediately usable during the chaos were placed lower on the list. The team developed communications tools for the government to help companies understand what type of aid was useful in the middle of the crisis and committed to responding to each and every inquiry. There was even a harried coordination with a Canadian company’s large search and rescue operation in Port-au-Prince.

“I was very happy to see how many Canadian companies genuinely wanted to help with the immediate humanitarian needs,” he says. “The response was immense.”

Today, Lee thinks he has found an important role that the department’s commercial officers can play whenever Canada is asked to respond to a global disaster. “There is sometimes a gap between the companies’ offers and what the NGOs on the ground find useful. We bridged that gap—and tried to do it quickly.”

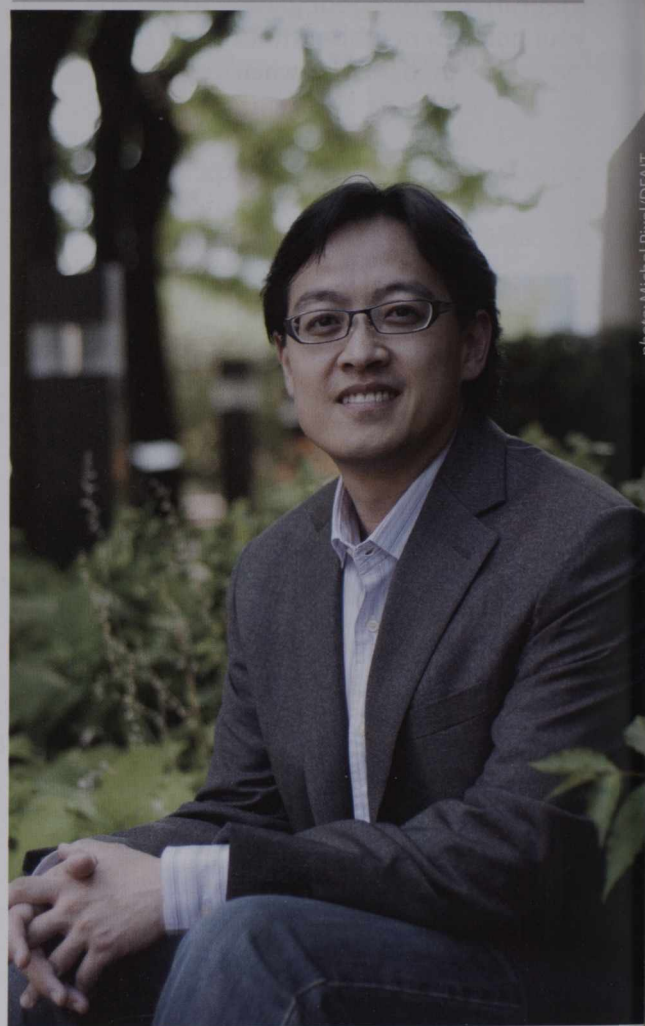
Lee found that best results are reached when departments, the UN and NGOs are coordinated, and when information is tracked accurately and quickly. The first step is to form a team of responsible officers and equip them with tools such as a triage plan, communications strategy, updated websites and dedicated team email accounts. The companies who offer assistance can then receive the advice and assistance they need.

“Haiti is still recovering and will be doing so for many years, but these tools continue to be relevant in the reconstruction phase, allowing us to obtain a quick and clear sense of what some active companies in different sectors can provide,” says Lee.

“The tools are also helpful for when the next disaster strikes—we should be capable of reacting more nimbly and have a plan of action in place regardless of the severity.”

Managing to Save Lives

By Campbell Morrison



Edmund Lee and his officers handled more than 700 offers of assistance from the Canadian private sector following the Haiti earthquake.