

Statement

Minister for
External Relations
and International
Development



Déclaration

Ministre des
Relations extérieures
et du développement
international

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

LAUNCH OF CANADA'S CONSULAR AWARENESS PROGRAM

NOTES FOR A SPEECH BY

THE MINISTER FOR EXTERNAL RELATIONS AND

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT,

THE HONOURABLE MONIQUE LANDRY

VANCOUVER, British Columbia
April 25, 1991

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

through 52 honorary consuls and 12 Australian posts with which we have formed a valuable partnership. Last year alone, our Department provided over 600,000 specific consular services or responses. These included:

- almost 3,000 enquiries concerning the well-being or whereabouts of Canadians;
- over 1,100 cases involving the death of Canadians abroad;
- over 600 child-custody cases;
- 300 cases of repatriating Canadians;
- 2,000 cases where Canadians were hospitalized in other countries; and
- over 900 incidents in which our citizens were detained by legal authorities abroad.

In 1990, our Department, represented through passport offices across Canada and missions abroad, issued over 1.2 million passports -- a 4.5 per cent increase over the previous year.

The risk of misfortune can never be eliminated abroad any more than it can be at home. But it can be minimized. Part of that is simple precaution and planning:

- getting documents in order;
- securing health coverage where needed, ensuring vaccination where required; and
- registering with our missions abroad where that is recommended.

Another element is knowing what our missions can do when trouble arises. Those services include:

- in situations of legal or medical difficulty, helping Canadians find professional help;
- assisting seriously ill Canadians to return home;
- in cases of deaths abroad, helping to arrange for burial or return of the body to Canada;
- issuing replacement passports if these are lost or stolen; and

- providing travel advice in times of civil unrest or natural disaster and facilitating the evacuation of Canadians, if that becomes required.

These are some of the many services we provide. Knowledge of them will help Canadians enjoy a safer and more secure stay abroad.

But it is also important that Canadians realize the real limits which exist on the services we can provide or the influence we can exert. Much of the responsibility rests squarely on the shoulders of Canadians themselves. Our missions cannot pay bills or cash cheques or provide loans. Our missions are not travel agencies; they cannot make travel arrangements at will. Our missions are not firms. They cannot provide legal advice or post bail or pay fines. And our missions are not employment agencies to help Canadians get work abroad.

Many of these limits reflect the basic reality that when Canadians are in another country, they are subject to the laws of that country. We insist on the application of Canadian law to everyone inside our own borders. We would reject interference from others outside. It is not different for other countries. We may dislike laws elsewhere and find them extreme or unjust. But those are the laws there. Those are the laws Canadians must obey. No one can be happy with the fact that there are some 450 Canadians now in prison abroad, some waiting years for trial, others subject to terrible conditions. Prison cells can be primitive, open to the elements and shared with several people. Some of those who knowingly committed crimes are facing the consequences. Others transgressed the law through ignorance or irresponsibility. Consular officials can visit those Canadians and try to ensure they are treated fairly under local laws. But there is often little else we can do. That is reality.

A particular problem relates to drug-related offences. There are far too many Canadians languishing in overseas prisons for this reason, some as young as 16 years of age. Canadians must recognize that going abroad makes them more, not less vulnerable to serious punishment and that there is often little recourse after conviction. In 1986, as an example, two young Australians were executed abroad for drug crimes, despite repeated representations by their government. A Canadian passport is not a carte blanche for crime or an insurance policy against conviction. By far the best protection is to know the laws abroad and to obey them.

Those in consular services deal with very human problems. Their work requires compassion. Sometimes it wrenches the soul. How many of us, for example, would relish being called to identify the body of a Canadian traveller? How many would feel no emotion at visiting a young Canadian student just imprisoned

for years because of a moment of recklessness with drugs? We must appreciate consular work for what it often is -- life in the trenches of the diplomatic world.

The Consular Awareness Program I am announcing today is designed to educate Canadians as to the limits of what we can do and to detail the services we provide. Knowing what we cannot do should assist Canadians in taking responsible measures themselves to protect their well-being. And knowing what we can do will allow missions abroad to help Canadians more efficiently and effectively.

In the coming months, my Department will help Canadians travel with realistic expectations of our consular services and an appreciation of their own responsibilities while abroad. This is not a responsibility of the Government alone. I am pleased that for the first time the travel industry will work with us to inform Canadians about safe travel abroad. To date, American Express Canada, Canadian Airlines International, NationAir, Alberta Blue Cross, Ontario Blue Cross and the Medical Services Association of British Columbia have joined us in this partnership. I am pleased that several representatives could be here today. We look forward to expanding these links with other partners in the travel industry as the Consular Awareness Program gets under way.