



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence

September 2, 2008

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS IN CANADA:

How the fine arts of bafflegab and procrastination hobble the people who will be trying to save you when things get really bad . . .

Is Canada capable of being more than a country that just muddles through? Does our country have any plans in place to deal with what is likely to come at Canadians in the future? Or are we one of those visionless countries that tries to scramble its way through every crisis, always making do with *ad hoc* solutions?

The Senate Committee on National Security and Defence deems Emergency Preparedness a good area to measure the kinds of adjustments Canada is making to meet the kinds of new challenges that will face our country in the future.

Every country is beset by natural and human-made disasters from time to time – from tornados to floods to ice storms, from terrorist attacks to flu epidemics to water quality failures. These are, by definition, emergencies. The crucial difference between emergencies and disasters almost always comes down to one thing: *preparedness*.

For the second time in four years the Committee has examined how well Canadian governments are doing in preparing first-responders across the country to handle local, regional and national crises.

In terms of human assaults on our safety, Canadians have not experienced a 9-11 type of attack. But we did experience the bombing of Air India Flight 182 that killed 329 passengers in 1985. This was a terrorist act directed at Canadians. It should have served as our first national wake-up call.

As for of natural disasters, anyone who reads history books knows that the Canadian list is long and chilling. Even an incomplete compendium of the last few years should serve as a reminder that these kinds of incidents will keep happening and are likely to happen more often with changing climate conditions: floods in Quebec, the ice storm in eastern Ontario and Quebec, the *E.coli* epidemic in Walkerton, forest fires in British Columbia, the Mad Cow scare in Alberta, SARS in Ontario, hurricanes in the Maritimes, the power blackout in Ontario . . . the list goes on.

“Discouraging” is Too Kind a Word

In its first report the Committee published on emergency preparedness in Canada – *Canada’s Fragile Front*

Lines, published in March 2004 – the Committee showed that federal initiatives to improve the country’s emergency-response capacity in the wake of 9-11 were proving to be painfully slow and ponderous.

This follow-up report gives new meaning to the word discouraging. Seven years have elapsed since September 11, 2001. Yet despite all the bureaucratic promises from three successive governments progress is still “just around the corner”. And Canada’s emergency preparedness capacity is clearly still thin and fragmented.

This report records responses from departments and agencies to the Committee’s queries as to what kind of progress is being made to deal with long-standing weaknesses in the following areas:

1. **Lack of coordination to assure continued functioning of the federal government during emergencies**
2. **The uncertainty that the Canadian Forces will have the resources available to help out in national emergencies**
3. **Problems with the contents of federal emergency caches scattered around the country, and lack of municipal awareness as to the location and contents of those caches**
4. **Lack of funding for municipalities for maintenance, training and more appropriate equipment once local vulnerabilities have been identified**
5. **Poor emergency preparedness collaboration among federal, provincial and municipal governments**
6. **Lack of centralized compilation and sharing with first responders of “lessons learned” from earlier crises and “best practices” for dealing with future crises**
7. **Continuing inability of municipalities to arbitrarily interrupt TV and radio broadcasts during emergencies**
8. **Lack of interoperability among regional first responders**
9. **Failure of senior governments to consult municipal first responders to determine their actual needs**
10. **Lack of federal measures to assure the protection of national “critical infrastructure” in various locations across the country**
11. **Lack of planning for coordinated responses to serious outbreaks of infectious diseases**
12. **Inadequate police capacity to act effectively as first responders when emergencies hit municipalities**

Readers who wish to skip over the often frustrating back-and-forth between the Committee and federal bureaucrats will find our conclusions at the end of each of these sections. But anybody with the time to look at the back-and-forth will – we believe – share the Committee’s frustration.

Just a tiny sampling of the Committee’s continued concerns: municipalities get initial grants for emergency planning but little in the way of follow-up money to maintain or improve their readiness; there is no centralized system of funneling “lessons learned” and “best practices” to first responders who will have to deal with emergencies on the front lines; there is still no system that would force the communications industry to keep citizens informed during emergencies; overall emergency planning (and funding) is “top-down” – federal and provincial bureaucrats issue edicts to municipalities to prepare for emergencies

without listening to first responders . . . and so on. There are at least a score of major issues that deserve serious (and timely) attention.

The People on the Front Lines Speak

The final section of the report is definitely worth reading. It sets out selected verbatim responses from municipal emergency managers across Canada to a questionnaire the Committee sent out to 100 municipalities. Fully 92 of them responded, and their responses reflect growing frustration with (a) an overall lack of funding; and (b) inflexible funding mechanisms, both of which are preventing Canadian communities from improving their capacity to deal with the kind of emergencies that, sooner or later, we will likely have to face.

Three Complementary Volumes

The first volume of the report documents the Committee's search for answers, and sets out our conclusions.

Three complementary volumes - Volumes 2, 3 and 4 - contain the survey sent by the Committee to municipalities across Canada, along with their responses, listed alphabetically by municipality. Readers may wish to check whether their community responded, and if so, what local emergency officials have to say about emergency preparedness in their locale.

Volume 2 contains the responses from Abbotsford, British Columbia to Kingston, Ontario; Volume 3, from Kitchener, Ontario to Saint-Jérôme, Québec; Volume 4 from Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, Québec to Woodstock, Ontario.

All four volumes are available online at www.sen-sec.ca.

Hard copies are also available upon request.

