



# COMING HOME

Global Affairs' Quest to Repatriate Canadians

KATHRYN MAY

SEPTEMBER, 2020





## ABOUT PPF

**Good Policy. Better Canada.** The Public Policy Forum builds bridges among diverse participants in the policy-making process and gives them a platform to examine issues, offer new perspectives and feed fresh ideas into critical policy discussions. We believe good policy is critical to making a better Canada—a country that's cohesive, prosperous and secure. We contribute by:

- Conducting research on critical issues
- Convening candid dialogues on research subjects
- Recognizing exceptional leaders

Our approach—called **Inclusion to Conclusion**—brings emerging and established voices to policy conversations, which informs conclusions that identify obstacles to success and pathways forward. PPF is an independent, non-partisan charity whose members are a diverse group of private, public and non-profit organizations.

© 2020, Public Policy Forum  
1400 - 130 Albert Street  
Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1P 5G4  
613.238.7858

[ppforum.ca](http://ppforum.ca)

[@ppforumca](https://www.instagram.com/ppforumca)

WITH THANKS TO OUR PARTNERS

Canada 

LAWSON  
FOUNDATION

The Wilson Foundation

 Microsoft

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Consular Affairs there to help but not obligated to bring you home .....3
- When borders, airspace, airports closed, government was the only option .....5
  - Top 5 countries from where most Canadians returned:.....5
- The dry run: Canadians rescued from China and cruise ships .....6
- The main event: Global Affairs becomes the Department of Consular Affairs .....7
- Supersize operations; deputy minister becomes incident commander.....9
- Collaborate and play by the rules: emergency powers and orders in council ..... 10
- Martial law strands 3,000 Canadians in Peru ..... 11
- Flying home: first commercial deal to repatriate Canadians..... 14
- On the fly: loan program goes from idea to money for travellers in days.....17
- What’s after COVID-19? ..... 20
- Timeline .....22
  - Global Affairs Consular and Emergency Response .....22
  - The Five Days: March 16 to 21.....23

OTTAWA - Brent Robson spent 20 years in emergency management and security helping to pull Canadians out of harm's way. He's seen it all—war, civil unrest, hurricanes, terrorist attacks, deadly Ebola outbreaks—but he never fathomed the magnitude of upheaval caused by an invisible virus that shuttered the world.

How were Canadians going to get home? That's all Robson, who leads Global Affairs Canada's emergency watch and response centre, could think about when Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called Canadians home in mid-March, setting off the country's largest peacetime repatriation effort in history.

The deadly coronavirus was on the march and the world was coming to a near halt. One after another, countries abruptly shut borders and airspace; airlines cancelled flights. Quarantines were mandated, even martial law imposed.

While federal departments, led by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC), raced to contain the spread of the virus at home and manage the economic collapse, the job fell to Global Affairs' consular and emergency operations to handle the international response with \$100 million in COVID-19 funding.

The strategy to manage the crisis unfolded and was up-and-running in a record five days—from March 16, the day Trudeau told Canadians to come home, until March 21 when the government, in partnership with Air Canada, picked up its first batch of stranded Canadians in Morocco.

Over the next six months, Global Affairs morphed from the rarefied world of diplomacy and international affairs into a giant consular and travel service. The historic department-wide shift to consular services, to help Canadians abroad, enlisted a volunteer workforce of more than 1,000 public servants pulled from their day jobs.

This consular focus led to major rethinking of how the department responds to an emergency and underscored the need to communicate the way Canadians do.

It built a network of rolling and shadow embassies, deploying people around-the-clock at missions and headquarters to arrange the logistics for 692 flights from 109 countries that brought 57,202 Canadians and permanent residents home.

The department found partners with airlines and pioneered new commercial agreements to underwrite repatriation flights that cost the government only \$4.1 million. A \$20-million emergency loan program was created, a first and almost overnight, for stranded Canadians who wanted to come home but had no money.

Some argued the strategy even changed the way the department saw itself, bridging that divide between diplomacy and consular services by driving home that the safety and security of Canadians are at the core of all foreign policy issues.

“I have the highest regard for consular work in Ottawa, and around the globe, and what they do on a daily basis is extraordinary, but in this pandemic the efforts have been supernatural,” said Patricia Fortier, a retired diplomat and former Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for security, consular, and emergency management in Global Affairs Canada.

Robson is director of Global Affairs’ emergency operations. He reports

to the Director General of mission security and emergency operations, who answers to the Assistant Deputy Minister for consular affairs, security and emergency management. This branch, headed by then ADM Heather Jeffrey, was “the glue; the brains; the experience, the everything of the operation,” said Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Secretary Rob Oliphant.

“I have to tell you the Canadian public service came through on this,” said Oliphant. “I can be critical of the public service. I find it’s not very imaginative at times and can be slow to change but this one moved quickly. I was constantly impressed. It was stunning.”

The small around-the-clock emergency watch and response centre that Robson runs is a well-oiled machine. The team, along with its army of volunteers, are trained and can turn on a dime to expand and contract their numbers to suit the demands of the emergency.

“We plan, we train, we exercise and we strategize on how we’re going to deal with emergencies,” said Robson. “This was just so unprecedented in size and scale. Nobody ever really thought that we would have a pandemic that would simultaneously affect every country on the planet and Canada.”

The usual emergency model and incident command structures were not encompassing enough. They needed to be “blown up” into a supersized operating model for the entire department.

After five frantic, nerve-wracking days and nights, the plan was implemented and adjusted on the fly to the fluctuating needs of Canadians as the pandemic developed. The last repatriation flight was on July 17, when WestJet delivered home 165 passengers from Trinidad.

Every employee, regardless of job, branch, division or posting, was enlisted whether to book hotels, buses, arrange flights, travel documents or prepare passenger lists. They dubbed Global Affairs the new “Department of Consular Affairs.”

Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne was so knee-deep in daily operations, calling airlines or negotiating with his foreign counterparts for airspace and landing slots, that he called himself the “travel agent of Canada.”

Bureaucrats say ministers are rarely as involved in details as Champagne, but his voice as minister was a critical bullhorn in communicating updates and getting information to stranded Canadians and their families.

And it was all done while many embassies abroad were stripped down to skeleton staff to contain the virus.

In Ottawa, most employees were isolated in makeshift home offices trying to work remotely on overloaded computer networks. To complicate matters, Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Marta Morgan—the designated incident commander-in-chief—tested positive for COVID-19 at the height of the crisis and had to isolate for 14 days.

The crisis forced innovations, but also exposed the department’s need to “get with the times” and re-think how to reach and communicate with Canadian citizens and permanent residents when abroad, said one official.

“We’ve been communicating with Canadians using phones and emails for 30 years and haven’t really updated ... but that’s not how everyone communicates these days,” said Robson.

“Certain people communicate by phone and email. Others use chat apps. They want WhatsApp and WeChat. They might want to use Facebook, they might use Signal. We have to evolve with the environment in which we operate and with the clients we support and provide these tools.”

## Consular Affairs there to help but not obligated to bring you home

There are up to three million Canadians abroad at any given time, whether working, travelling, studying or living there. Unless they’re registered, the government has no idea where they are. The Registration of Canadians Abroad—known as the ROCA system—has never been used by travellers as much as government would like, which became a problem when trying to reach Canadians.

In January 2020, as the coronavirus began its spread, Canadians made 4.7 million trips abroad—more than three-quarters of them to the United States. As repatriation flights kicked into gear, Global Affairs was swamped with more than 350,000 calls and emails from Canadians abroad looking for help

The calls came from Canadians concerned about the stability and quality of the health care in the countries where they were living. They came from business or leisure travellers who found their flights home cancelled and hotels and restaurants closing around them. People were running out of money and medication, getting sick or unable to find places to stay.

In the hierarchy of foreign ministries, consular affairs operations are overshadowed by the grander affairs of diplomacy, trade and international politics. Canada’s consular services employ about 550 people globally and cost about \$57 million out of the yearly \$7.1-billion budget for the department.

That supports consular services in 150 countries for Canadians who run into problems while travelling or living abroad. Their passports are lost or stolen; they are arrested or detained or must be repatriated because of illness or death. In 2019, the department had 202,400 such consular cases; most were considered routine but 6,675 ranked as urgent.

Gilles Rivard, a former ambassador to Haiti and the United Nations, who teaches crisis management, called consular officers the “poor” cousins of the foreign service whose work in missions is vastly underappreciated. Fortier described them to MPs as “negotiators, confessors, daredevils and family stand-ins.”

“I can tell you when you’re given a crisis or are in difficult country, you need your mission and consular officers because without them, you’re in deep, deep trouble,” said Rivard.

Despite what many Canadians think, the government isn’t legally obligated to bring them home, or pay for or even organize such trips. The consular officers’ bible, or Consular Charter, as it’s known, clearly lays out that travel is a choice and Canadians are responsible for their safety and getting home if they run into trouble.

“We can give travel advice that you shouldn’t travel during COVID and, if you are away, you should make every effort to come home, but that doesn’t require us to actually send planes for people,” said Jeffrey. “Canadians can travel and do travel to all sorts of places where our travel advice recommends they don’t go. We provide information to people to help them make the right decisions for themselves.”

## **BY THE NUMBERS**

- **More than 4,600 emergency loans totaling over \$17.5M**
- **More than 117,100 calls and 233,700 emails received**



# When borders, airspace, airports closed, government was the only option

So, Trudeau’s plea for Canadians to come home didn’t compel them to do so or compel the government to go and get them. It underscored the gravity of the rapidly spreading virus, declared a pandemic by World Health Organization.

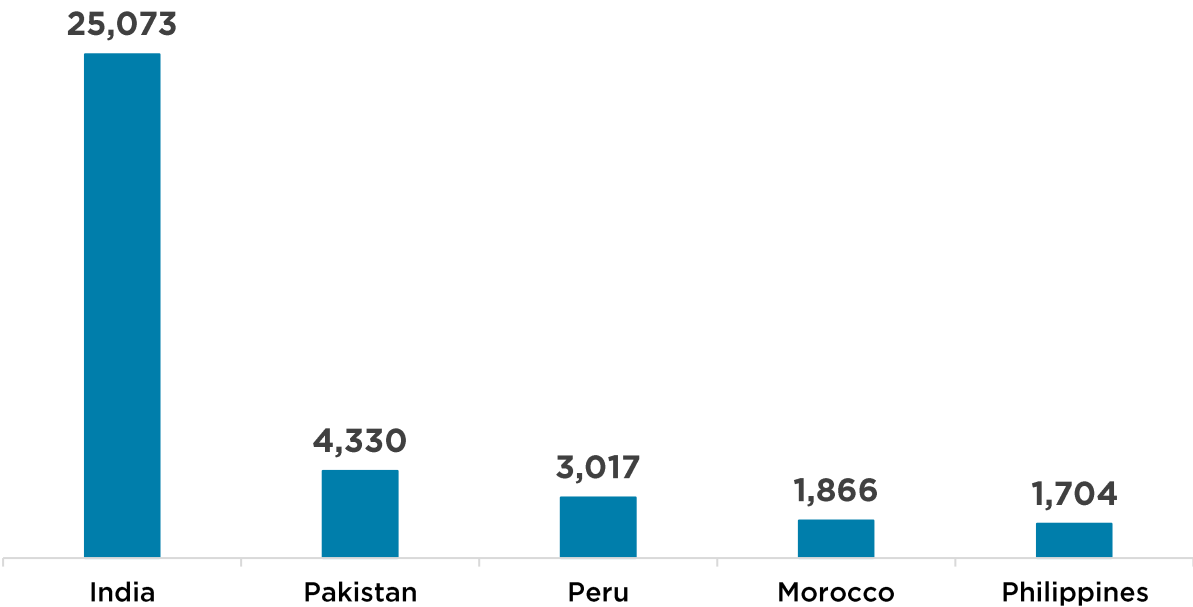
He also made it at the same time the world started shutting down, creating a moral obligation of sorts for the government. Overnight, countries slammed shut borders, airspace, airports and even local roads. Without the government’s help, many Canadians wouldn’t have been able to get home on their own.

“If you can get on a commercial flight and make your own way home, we don’t get involved. Repatriation support is given as a last resort where Canadians would have no other option and some imminent risk to their safety,” said Jeffrey.

“But Canadians were stuck. They were caught when border restrictions were imposed on very short notice; sometimes overnight. People found themselves, even if they wanted to come home, unable to do so,” said Jeffrey.

On top of that, stripped down embassies couldn’t have managed the risk of infection of hundreds of Canadians potentially getting sick abroad.

## TOP 5 COUNTRIES FROM WHERE MOST CANADIANS RETURNED:



Hundreds of thousands did make it back on their own. They drove home from Florida and other parts of the United States, took commercial flights or were picked up by their tour companies. The media reported more than a million citizens and permanent residents returned in a single mid-March week.

## The dry run: Canadians rescued from China and cruise ships

The repatriation efforts began in early February when Global Affairs, with the support of a military medical team and PHAC officials, chartered three flights to airlift 400 Canadians out of Wuhan. They were taken to a Canadian Forces Base in Trenton for screening and went into quarantine.

Then came cruise ships with thousands of Canadians on board sailing around the world as the pandemic raged. The Diamond Princess became infamous when Japan put it under quarantine after a passenger was diagnosed with COVID-19. More than 700 were infected and 14 died during the ship's month-long lockdown.

Canada decided, because of the “extraordinary circumstances” facing Canadians aboard the ship and the burden on Japan's hospitals, to send a charter for 129 uninfected Canadians. They were flown to CFB Trenton for screening and then to NAV Canada Training Institute in Cornwall to quarantine.

A few weeks later, a charter picked up 225 Canadians aboard the Grand Princess being held off the coast of California for coronavirus testing.

For weeks, the emergency response centre kept close tabs on the thousands of Canadian passengers and crew aboard 197 ships. Giant screens tracked hundreds of red dots, each representing ships, sailing from port to port unable to dock for fear of infection.

Passengers crammed into cabins, communal dining and group activities made cruise ship floating virus incubators that no country wanted. Countries refused to let ships dock, or let passengers disembark or transit through port facilities or airports. That's when a newly formed sea team took over.

The sea team negotiated with the various countries, cruise lines and airlines—at the same time as 45 other countries with passengers aboard were trying to do the same. It arranged the pickup of passengers, transported them home, negotiated landing rights for humanitarian reasons and, along with public health officials, ensured they were screened, tested and quarantined upon return to Canada.

It was late April before all cruise ships with Canadian passengers had docked. The government paid for their flights and billed the cruise lines the cost. The last Canadian crew disembarked in July, by which time 5,729 Canadian passengers and 366 crew stranded on cruise ships had been repatriated.

In retrospect, the Wuhan and cruise ship repatriations were dry runs for the main event. The coronavirus was not yet deemed a pandemic and it had not yet escalated to a domestic emergency in Canada.

Robson described them as “medium level” emergencies. They were managed using the standard incident command management system the centre always uses.

Each had unique complications. Containing a deadly and rapidly spreading virus posed a major challenge. Add to that the obstacles getting into Wuhan, a quarantine zone riddled with roadblocks and checkpoints—and 11 hours from the nearest Canadian embassy in Shanghai. The department also had trouble getting a handle on how many Canadians were there. Dual nationals who travelled on their Chinese passports tended not to register and weren’t tuned into Canada’s social media.

Jeffrey said both Wuhan and the cruise ship repatriations were “highly complicated and fraught” but they ultimately boiled down to getting people out of one location, which was much easier than moving the “thousands from everywhere” that awaited as the world locked down.

“It was much more similar to an earthquake in Turkey or a small civil war in which a group of people in a specific location need to be brought back. It was complicated by the fact it was a health emergency and the different parameters around that, but they were much more analogous to our typical emergency response,” said Jeffrey.

## BY THE NUMBERS

- 692 flights from 109 countries
- 6,093 Canadians at sea on 197 vessels

## The main event: Global Affairs becomes the Department of Consular Affairs

A week after returning passengers from the Grand Princess, Trudeau told Canadians to stop travelling and come home. The showdown began.

Behind the scenes, bureaucrats scrambled. The emergency response team activated for Wuhan was still in place. Public servants had been tossing around ideas on how to help Canadians get home, from arranging flights to offering emergency loans, but nothing was crystalized or ready to go.

First, the department had to re-organize because the old way of handling emergencies wasn't going to work. It was too big and the decision-making was coming from the top.

Global Affairs has its own emergency playbook, built on the standard incident command system and structures that governments around the world use during emergencies.

In the event of emergency, Robson typically becomes the incident commander. He mobilizes his small team, drawing reinforcements from throughout the department, and co-ordinates the government's response, whether it's a plane crash or a hurricane.

The team morphs into an emergency response team using the incident command model with pre-assigned roles and duties as the crisis unfolds. It has separate groups handling operations, planning, logistics, reporting, finance and administration.

As commander, Robson can quickly pull people in areas of specialty needed from around the department and call the shots on managing the response, including reporting structures and who is accountable for what.

The model worked in handling any humanitarian, political or natural disasters and even juggling a couple at time. In fact, the emergency response team ran full-tilt, dealing with one crisis after another, in the year before COVID-19.

Early in 2019, the emergency response team was dispatched for the Ethiopian plane crash that killed 18 Canadians. Cyclone Idai slammed into Africa; civil disorder broke out in Khartoum and Port-au-Prince, and anti-government protests rocked Hong Kong for months. There was hurricane Dorian, Bolivian protests, more Ebola outbreaks and months of fires raging in Australia.

By January, the novel coronavirus had emerged on the international radar. But Canada was in the throes of the crisis emerging out of the downing of a Ukrainian jetliner that killed 85 Canadians.

The pandemic would quickly outstrip the capacity of existing emergency operations and roles—and the need for a response could drag on for months. The sheer volume of people, stranded in more than 100 countries, and the logistical nightmare of finding them, arranging flights and getting them airports, required something new.

The incident command structure for emergencies had to be “blown up” and become the operating model for the entire department, said Reid Sirrs, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister for consular affairs, security and emergency management.

“While they (senior management) were focusing on the big government and policy pieces, those down in the response room were hammering on the flights, the calls, the emails, the loans,” said Sirrs. “We had to keep hammering away at that part; we had no choice but to elevate, escalate, expand, explode, whatever you call it, the whole incident command structure from a traditional model to one on steroids plus.”

## Supersize operations; deputy minister becomes incident commander

All those jobs heading up all the key functions, from logistics to communication, were expanded and divided among executives from across the department to cover 24-hour shifts.

Take communications, which is critical during a crisis. The two-person team Robson has during a normal emergency mushroomed into 45 people. They gathered information and updates from missions to synthesize into reports that went up the line to the Deputy Minister, the Minister, Privy Council Office and other departments.

At the peak, more than 1,000 employees from headquarters and missions were working round the clock. About 700 volunteered as “surge responders” and hastily trained for the various teams and call centres set up.

Air and sea teams were created for the first time, tackling the logistics of getting home people in 109 countries and on 197 cruise ships. The air team carved up the world with three regional teams responsible for flight planning: one in the Americas, one in Europe, and one in the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

At the call centre, separate teams handled calls and emails pouring into missions or took over when embassies closed for the day. A team fielded calls for loans and another stickhandled calls from worried families in Canada looking for information about family members.

The surge went upward, right to the Deputy Minister, who became the de facto incident commander in chief—until she was isolated for coronavirus. With the scale of the emergency, all other business of foreign policy ground to halt and, on the Deputy Minister’s instruction, the whole department focused its energies on the pandemic.

A big challenge was with the missions, many of which were running as stripped- down operations. Canadian employees considered high risk or vulnerable to infection had been sent home and many locally engaged staff were isolated or quarantined in their homes.

This forced the department to create rolling shadow missions so repatriation efforts could continue 24/7. The New Delhi embassy in India, which was managing massive numbers of Canadians and permanent residents for repatriation, turned over its work at the end of the day to a shadow team in Ottawa to continue overnight.

“The mission in Delhi worked on India time and when they went to sleep they handed over to the shadow team, which was the repatriated Delhi embassy, and they would take on the work and work remotely from Ottawa until India woke up,” said Jeffrey.

Jeffrey said the shadow embassies were a first, proved highly effective and will be continued in future as a “best practice” particularly for prolonged or overlapping emergencies that exhaust staff. The department often faces one storm after another during hurricane season and the non-stop pace for months at a time is unsustainable. An on-the-ground team and a remote “shadow” team, who knows the local context, creates a much more sustainable pace.

Other embassies kicked in by helping with the extra workload. With the pandemic, demand for passports plummeted. Visa officers at Hong Kong, for example, who issue the largest number of passports, pitched in on the processing of emergency loan applications during Ottawa’s off-hours and later helped on collecting the loans.

## Collaborate and play by the rules: emergency powers and orders in council

GAC was the lead on the international response, but its plans also relied on what other departments were doing—Transport, Canada Border Services Agency, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and Health Canada, the Public Health Agency of Canada. In fact, a special unit was created to interpret orders-in-council and interim orders the government issued to manage the pandemic and its spread.

The government used its emergency powers under the Quarantine Act and the Aeronautics Act to issue strict rules around travel, mandatory isolation and quarantines. Unlike many countries, it required airlines to conduct health checks, screen passengers and deny boarding to anyone with COVID-19 symptoms or even suggestive of the respiratory virus.

Those orders also forced a discipline and level of collaboration between departments that can be undermined by turf wars in day-to-day operations.

“They effectively guided our response, said Robson. “It was essential that we had a common understanding and interpretation of the language in the orders-in-council. If we didn’t, we would risk having individuals stranded in airports in various parts of the world. The close partnership was essential to ensuring a smooth operation.”

Hundreds of bureaucrats and diplomats were working out of improvised home offices with unreliable access to overloaded computer networks.

The call centre received an average of 626 calls a day between April and July—nearly 2,000 a day at the peak.

Almost overnight, the call centre that typically operates with 15 people ramped to 140 people to field calls. The system, however, couldn't handle more than 50 calls at once, which Shared Services Canada bumped up to 250 concurrent calls “in a weekend, which is unheard of in government,” said Robson.

With a pandemic, work that typically requires physical proximity had to be re-thought. Crammed emergency response centres where hundreds of staff and volunteers are taking calls, talking loudly and a lot, are ideal for viral spread.

With most of the building empty, they were able to space workers two metres apart and spread out over several floors at headquarters in Ottawa—with rigid protocols for what doors to enter and exit and for cleaning surfaces. Catered meals or food delivery also had to be stopped.

Robson couldn't risk a COVID-19 outbreak that “would take down our call centre.” With new technology and business processes, he developed a backup team of workers who handled calls remotely. A remote workforce increased “our resilience and contingency planning to continue providing service,” and will be a permanent feature, he said. It also opened up a new pool of experienced volunteers among the high-risk workers who were sent home.

But learning how to manage remote workers is a big challenge for operations where people come to together to urgently work on a crisis.

Supervisors were no longer in the room to help when calls were clearly going off the rails. Managers couldn't simply clap their hands for attention at the front of a room to deliver updates or bark new orders. They had to learn how to do this with people working at home. They did regular check-ins, required detailed shift change reports on the type and nature of calls, and introduced teleconferencing that looped a supervisor into any call that needed extra support.

“It has given us the ability to take our routine emergency response frameworks, tweak them, educate people on them, exercise them and train on them, so going forward when we have to do this again, we have the tools and language to do it,” Robson said. “That's a huge opportunity for us.”

## Martial law strands 3,000 Canadians in Peru

The baptism by fire came in Peru.

The prime minister had no sooner told Canadians to come home when Peru clamped down with a national quarantine. No flights, a night curfew, no public transportation, people confined to their homes and police enforcing the measures.

“It was a complete shutdown. No movement across the country. Everybody stayed at home. Nobody was working. A complete overnight closure of the border, including all commercial airports. No flights in or out. And all done without any advance warning,” said Ralph Jansen, Canada’s Ambassador to Peru.

The idea of contracting for repatriation flights had bubbled up from the bureaucracy to ministers, but it was not much more than an idea when Trudeau called Canadians home.

“There was an announcement to come home, but there wasn’t an organization back home to organize that ... It all had to be ramped up,” said Jansen.

It would take more than a week to get Canadians out of Peru.

The job was divided up between Ottawa and the embassy in Lima. Jeffrey’s team was negotiating an agreement with Air Canada, which eventually sent seven flights to Lima over nearly two months to pick up passengers. But the embassy did all the legwork in finding trapped Canadians, scattered across a roadblocked country, and getting them to the airport.

As Jeffrey told MPs at a parliamentary hearing, sending in planes is the easy part. The big work is negotiating with local authorities to get “Canadians to the place where we can reach them directly and help them to exit.”

As in Ottawa, the mission set up its emergency response team, everyone taking on their preassigned roles to manage logistics, communications and operations, with Jansen as incident commander.

And Peru was daunting. Large numbers of people stuck in a national quarantine nowhere near Lima, the city from which they had to depart. Apart from the drastic shutdown, Jansen said the embassy quickly discovered at least 3,000 Canadians and permanent residents were travelling or living in Peru who wanted out.

First, came negotiations with Peruvian government for permission to bring in planes, followed by layers of approval to create a system for flights to come and go.

A military base had the only operating airport and a 400-passenger aircraft was the biggest it could handle. It was not equipped for passengers, and had no ground services or customs, and no place to screen, check in passengers or issue tickets. The embassy staff had to do all that.



Canada and the United States had the largest number of people in Peru, but 25 other countries were also lobbying Peru, competing for landing slots and wangling for permits, authorizations and rights to bring planes in and out.

About 500 Canadians were in Cusco, reachable only by air, so the government had to charter eight small planes and maneuver the tangle of permission for them to take off and land.

Others were scattered across the countryside, often 15 hours by bus from Lima. Embassy staff scrambled to get approvals from federal, regional and local authorities for dozens of buses and then had to get individual permits for every person who rode them.

Once in Lima, there were no taxis or buses. Staff gathered up passengers at the embassy, screened them for the virus and shuttled them on the dozen buses they hired to take passengers to the military base airport.

All this legwork was done by embassy staff of about 15—five times smaller than normal. Staff considered high risk to the virus had been sent back to Canada and local staff were quarantined. Those who remained couldn't leave their homes without authorization, so everything was managed “by iPhones and laptops from home,” said Jansen.

Looking back, Jansen said the repatriation unfolded “remarkably fast to jump from zero to 100 in less than 10 days.” The wait, however, was hard on anxious Canadians, especially the vulnerable or families who had children there on school trips.

Many complained Canada was too slow to communicate and took too long to get them out compared to other countries. About 2,500 people had registered on ROCA, but that had its problems.

Canadians tend not to register or they forget. Many have long bristled at the idea of a mandatory registration system, uncomfortable with the government knowing where they are and able to track them.

During the pandemic, Global Affairs strongly encouraged Canadians to register on ROCA so they could receive instructions and information on flights, but some didn't receive them or they went to spam.

Problems arise when people don't remember to unregister; they aren't where they said they would be, or they have already left. That means people are on the list who shouldn't be and others were dropped. Many used messaging apps to keep in touch and didn't receive the notices the government sent out by email, text or social media.

The embassy used ROCA to send high-risk and priority passengers—such as the elderly, school groups or those with medical conditions—booking codes, so they could book seats before ticket sales were thrown open. The codes, however, were widely shared on social media, potentially taking seats away from priority passengers.

“The biggest problem is we did not have a system that could handle tens of thousands of people,” said Oliphant. “ROCA was simply not designed for this kind of global crisis. It might be able to handle one country at a time, earthquake or a hurricane, but we had a tsunami in the whole world. ... We have to redesign the system and have a plan, for this could happen again.”

Jansen said nothing in his diplomatic career came close to the pandemic and the experience raises the long nagging question around the balance of responsibilities between government and its traveling citizens.

“People go to places that are difficult or at difficult time. ... Is it reasonable to expect you will be rescued when you want to come home? And what are you as a citizen responsible for? That’s the question.”

## Flying home: first commercial deal to repatriate Canadians

Global Affairs Deputy Minister Marta Morgan told an in-house podcast that in the early days, no one imagined the complexity, scale or sheer volume of the repatriation effort that unfolded.

“When we started, we were, you know, looking at the back of an envelope saying, ‘Well, what do you think? Like 10, 12 flights?’”

By July, the government partnered in, facilitated or assisted 692 flights. It was mid-March and Air Canada watched global travel advisories report country after country going into lockdown. The airline had decided to park its fleet when Global Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne called CEO Calin Rovinescu to see if they could work together to find a way bring Canadians home.

“We were just in the midst of taking down our entire network and parking our planes,” said Ferio Pugliese, Air Canada’s Senior Vice-President. “It was actually fortuitous. He said: ‘well, hang on, before we go park some of the wide-bodied planes, maybe we can fly some missions around the world and get people home.’”

The negotiations began. Within days, Global Affairs and Transport Canada officials hammered out the first commercial deal for repatriating Canadians which Jeffrey delivered to the deputy minister at 7 a.m. in time for an 8 a.m. meeting.

Air Canada’s first stop was Casablanca on March 21 and to Peru three days later. By the end of April, Air Canada had flown more than 10,000 people home on 41 repatriation flights.

The government’s longstanding policy is to charge for evacuation flights. Payments have been waived in desperate circumstances or if everyone can be rescued in one flight. But looking at the cost of hundreds of flights, it “made sense to recover the costs,” Jeffrey said.

Charters were out; too expensive. National Defence didn't have the capacity and didn't want to risk infection in the military should it be dispatched to an emergency. Free flights were ruled out because they could draw more than the vulnerable and those with a pressing need to get home.

Rather, the government wanted to partner with airlines, who were the experts and had the infrastructure. The government insisted airlines set reasonable fares, and it would underwrite the flights.

Air Canada officials say they ran the numbers and figured they could cover their costs if planes were 80% full. The deal was done and became the template for contracted flights with Canadian and foreign airlines. Any flight with fewer than 80% of the seats filled, the government paid the difference. That difference cost taxpayers about \$4.1 million.

"We knew the volume of demand on all of these routes and it was a very, very rare day that we did not beat that 80% backstop," said Robson. "It was a great way of operating: good for air carriers, good for Canadian citizens and good for the taxpayer."

The fares were higher than normal because planes were flying empty to pick up passengers who paid a round-trip fare for a one-way journey. Air Canada said its fares for repatriation flights for the government ranged from \$900 to \$1,800. Some fares in Africa were close to \$6,000, which the emergency loan helped offset.

But many passengers were furious. Not only were they paying higher fares, but the airlines refused to reimburse cancelled flights and offered credits for future travel instead.

"We had to put a price tag on that because we laying off thousands of people and burning in the neighbourhood of \$40 million a day in cash. No way we could do these on a pure humanitarian discount, where we just offer the aircraft at no cost. We had to recover the cost ... and that was something everyone understood," said Pugliese.

The backstop was originally aimed at minimizing the risk for airlines who were concerned that flights could be stopped mid-air or unable to land, or that passengers would fail to show and the planes would fly home empty. Pugliese recalled Air Canada was notified mid-flight about a curfew in Casablanca that closed the airspace and airfield.

"Literally while the plane is in the air, they (Global Affairs) were negotiating with the Moroccan government to allow us to come in, operate, turn around and get out," he said.

All major Canadian airlines were approached about backstop funding, but Air Canada was the first to accept the proposal. Others—WestJet, Air Transat and Sunwing—quickly followed and offered repatriation flights using the guarantee.

But Canadian airlines weren't always willing to fly, especially to countries they didn't serve or routes not part of their network. That's when foreign carriers stepped in, but they were not as keen on the financial backstop.

Under those contracts, the government paid up front and recovered its costs directly or through a travel agency. The rule of thumb, however, was that all flights had to be booked at 80% capacity or no contract.

"A flight had to be full or no contract. We didn't run partial flights," said Robson.

The government only contracted flights if no airlines offered commercial options—which were still available in much of Europe and the United States. It typically wouldn't contract a flight unless there were at least 150 passengers—the 80% threshold needed for the smallest 190-seat planes used.

The repatriation effort was built on four flight models. The largest number were contracted flights. The government backstopped those flights to either 80% or 100% capacity or paid up front and recovered the cost from passengers.

The government also partnered with airlines for "facilitated flights." These were normal commercial flights and the government had no contract. Public servants, however, did much of the legwork, whether negotiating landing rights, approvals, permits, travel documents, manifests or passenger lists.

Foreign governments, such as the U.S., France and Britain, offered Canadians seats on flights they sent to pick up their citizens. The government would promote those flights on social media or ROCA. Finally, airlines, travel agencies or private companies organized relief flights, which the government also promoted to help fill seats.

Relief flights were used, for example, in getting citizens out of India to hubs in Doha, Frankfurt, London or Paris and then to their home country—or to ferry Indian citizens in Canada back to India.

"It was a pretty complex playing field. We used whoever we could get to go places that we needed them to go as quickly as possible. It was a big mixture of partnerships and of airlines," said Jeffrey.

Some airline officials argued the government was caught flat footed, fanning panic to come home when there was no repatriation plan ready. But they praised the government's partnership approach. By all accounts, the negotiations were frank and open. The government was collaborative and didn't tell the airlines what to do or push a "father knows best" plan, said one airline official.

"It's one of the best examples of government and private sector collaboration I've seen in eight years of WestJet. It didn't impose a duty on us that was insurmountable or not possible financially and it recognised we could do something the government can't," said Andrew Gibbons, WestJet's Director of government relations and regulatory affairs.

Coronavirus hit different parts of the world at different times, but Canada's repatriation flights did not always follow the path of the virus. If no commercial flights were available, the timing of flights was dictated by the severity of a country's shutdown measures rather than the outbreak.

Over five months, more than half of those repatriated—36,000—were in five countries: India, Pakistan, Peru, Morocco and the Philippines. Canada has a large Indo-Canadian population with thousands holidaying, working or studying in India. The government used its four flight models to return more than 25,073 citizens and permanent residents from India to Canada—with some relief flights continuing into the fall.

The last formal repatriation flight was July 17, when WestJet delivered 165 passengers to Toronto from Port of Spain. There was no fanfare or public announcement, other than applause from passengers on the flight and employees in the response centre. The emergency response team quietly disbanded on Aug. 7; volunteers went back to their jobs and the centre's 15 people resumed their 24-hour watch for the next crisis.

## On the fly: loan program goes from idea to money for travellers in days

Bureaucrats were completely caught off guard when Prime Minister Trudeau announced an emergency loan program—worth up to \$5,000—to help stranded Canadians.

The idea of emergency assistance had certainly been talked about within the bureaucracy as public servants watched borders close, but nothing was fleshed out or approved before the Prime Minister told Canadians on March 16 to come home.

The scramble began that very day to retroactively put together a loan program, an implementation plan and a team to administer it, and get it to Finance and Treasury Board for approval. The web application form went live two days later.

"We worked backwards. This is the total inverse of the way we would normally operate," said Lisa Almond, Director General of consular, who headed the loan program.

"We typically develop our proposals, they work their way up the chain, they get approved. You already have an implementation plan. This was the complete inverse. Something is announced and we were like 'What?' What's in an emergency loan program? We had to retroactively do all of that work."

And it had to be done fast.

The calls and application requests were already rushing in, with 4,000 received over the five days after Trudeau's announcement. Speed was also of the essence because the government was going to backstop

repatriation flights and it couldn't risk stranded Canadians unable to get home because they didn't have access to money to buy tickets.

In short, the fuller the planes, the less cost for the taxpayer.

"We realized that if we didn't get people on the plane, we were not only leaving them in a vulnerable situation but we weren't going to be able to fill those planes. It was in our interest to get as many Canadians back as possible on repatriation flights," said Almond.

But the loans weren't just to help with travel home. They were also aimed at Canadians who had to "shelter in place." It covered incidental expenses for those waiting to come home or caught in quarantine. It also could be used for medical expenses for those who became infected or were quarantined abroad.

At last count, about 4,800 loans were issued, totalling about \$17 million. About 30% of the loans went to families or groups, so close to 6,000 people received loans of up to \$5,000.

The majority of loans were for costs of returning home, air fare or local transportation to get to an airport to catch a Canada-bound flight. About 20% were "shelter in place" loans to help with expenses for Canadians who couldn't get back and were stranded abroad, and about one percent for medical expenses. The average loan was about \$3,700.

Global Affairs has long operated a small loan program of last resort for the destitute who are stranded abroad. Loans under the Distressed Canadian Fund are hard to get. The screening and approval processes are rigorous, including reference checks to ensure there are no other sources of funds, such as bank accounts or friends and family. The department typically spends about \$150,000 a year on such last-ditch loans.

Almond said the eligibility criteria for the emergency loans had to be "much broader" and the "due diligence lighter." There wasn't enough time for the normal screening, credit checks and approvals. Also, airlines would take months to reimburse or credit travelers for cancelled tickets. They largely had to take Canadians at their word.

"We realised the level of scrutiny needed wasn't possible in the time frame that we had for these flights," said Almond. "In many cases, flights were announced and they were tomorrow. It had to be quick to get to people before borders closed and they were stranded."

The loan program was a significant shift for the government on several fronts. First, consular services are only offered to Canadian citizens and the loan was extended to permanent residents under certain conditions. The minister also insisted the loan be interest free.

The decision avoided splitting up families, such as those with children and a mother who are Canadian citizens but the father is a permanent resident. The risk is the government has no recourse to collect unpaid

loans from permanent residents who don't pay taxes in Canada. The Canada Revenue Agency can collect unpaid loans from any outstanding tax refund.

Among loan applications, about 86% were Canadian citizens and 7% permanent residents.

Only about 60% of last-resort loans issued under the Distressed Canadian Fund are repaid and bureaucrats are braced for a similar or lower repayments rates because the emergency loans are interest-free.

About a month into the program, the eligibility rules were tightened, requiring applicants to prove they had intended to return to Canada before COVID-19. The rules originally didn't make a distinction between Canadians travelling or living long-term abroad. Mission staff flagged concerns that citizens living as long-term residents abroad were applying for loans as a supplement or welfare payment because they had lost or expected to lose their jobs because of COVID-19.

The decision was made the program was intended for "genuine travellers." Long-term residents in other countries, who may not have homes or places in Canada to self-isolate or have access to health care until after a waiting period, could also pose a health risk to other Canadians.

IT specialists raced to set up a new portal and online application form that could easily be downloaded and filled out by phone. It still had to be emailed and all the data re-entered in the consular case management system. A separate team with 50 volunteers took calls, screened applicants and put loans through for approval.

IT staff, however, were determined to come up a new, faster digital solution using a software wizard or set up assistant to help guide applicants through the loan process. The plan was to use artificial intelligence to collect the data that would help match, in real time, the demand for loans and need for flights.

Almond said trying to build, pilot and test a system in the midst of an emergency was simply too ambitious. She said the loan and IT teams knew it was a long shot and by the end of May, everyone realized the prototype still had a month of security checks and testing before it was ready to go.

But Almond said the work was not lost and will be used as "proof of concept" for putting more consular services online, including the Distressed Canadian Fund, or helping gather and update data for flight manifests in real time during future emergencies. Volunteers organizing repatriation flights spent long hours copying and pasting data into Excel sheets to prepare manifests.

"It did take effort and time to invest in a solution that we all kind of knew might not work out," said Almond. "But I think that was good innovation to be exploring solutions in real time that may not be an advantage to us but will be an advantage to people down the road."

## What's after COVID-19?

Robson argues the COVID-19 legacy is still being written.

The department set up an email account for volunteers, who did stints with the emergency response team, to offer feedback on what worked and what didn't in handling the crisis. Those emails have turned into the makings of formal document on lessons learned.

The demand for consular services exploded, as did the number of complicated cases of Canadians in distress abroad, long before the coronavirus swept the Earth.

The pandemic revealed in spades the need for more resources, which the department handled by expanding its emergency model to the entire department and recruiting its employees as volunteers. Robson expects the need to use more people to manage crises will continue and all employees will have to be better trained in emergency management and the work of consular officers.

The expectations of Canadians for government help when abroad have also increased and will continue to rise in the aftermath of largely successful repatriation. The government—maintaining “a Canadian is a Canadian”—expanded consular services usually offered only to citizens to include permanent residents, which vastly increased the numbers to bring home.

Many argue rising expectations reinforce the need to manage and rein in those expectations. That's partly where better technology and communications can help to give Canadians the information they need to manage the risks of their own travel.

Global Affairs completed a major review of its consular strategy for the 21st century more than a year ago. The pandemic dramatically sped up the recommended modernization of communications so it can tailor messages to target audiences, whether the elderly retired couple or the 22-year-old backpacker, and use whatever channels they want.

Embassy staff are the department's only eyes and ears on the ground, but under lockdown the department couldn't send in reinforcements and many embassy staff couldn't even get to work. Virtual teams, shadow embassies, new technology and business processes helped managed the unprecedented workloads around the clock.

The pandemic isn't over yet. Public servants managing the pandemic are now readying for or responding to the next storm or disaster.

They're tired, department budgets are strained and the economic fallout has left more Canadians with less money to prepare for the next disaster.



Jeffrey said flexibility and resiliency will become more important because people can't work 24/7 for months at a time. Consular officers and emergency teams frantically juggled one international crisis after another for more than a year when the coronavirus hit.

"We were basically on a continual ramp-up through different emergencies that went on through to July. That requires quite a different way of managing the response. It's not just a single emergency that ends; you go back to normal, re-group and catch your breath, before one starts again," Jeffrey said.

Robson believes the new thinking forced by COVID-19 built a "roadmap" for future emergencies that supports flexibility and resiliency. He said the department now knows how to "scale up from small to medium to big" and rewind back down using embassy and headquarter staff, and can do it again.

But the pandemic may also have permanently broken down that traditional divide between diplomacy and consular operations. Robson believes it drove home for all employees that foreign affairs is ultimately about consular responsibilities for the safety and security of Canadians abroad.

"Everyone in the department now has a better understanding that—no matter what your day job is—when push comes to shove, it's still the Department of Consular Affairs. I think people better understand that now. And I think that's going to stick with us."

# TIMELINE

## Global Affairs Consular and Emergency Response

Jan. 23:	Wuhan, China goes into lockdown
Jan. 26:	Emergency Response Team created
Jan. 29:	Travellers urged to avoid non-essential travel to Wuhan
Feb. 7	First Wuhan flight to pick up Canadian citizens and permanent residents
Feb. 11:	Second Wuhan flight for Canadians
Feb. 20:	Charter to pick up Canadians on Diamond Princess cruise line from Tokyo
March 9:	Pick up Canadians on Grand Princess cruise ship from San Diego
March 10:	WHO declares the coronavirus a global pandemic
March 13:	Advisory to avoid all non-essential travel
March 15:	Emergency Response Team starts 24/7 operations

## The Five Days: March 16 to 21

### Global Affairs puts together response plan and sends first assisted flight

<b>March 16:</b>	Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tells Canadians to come home
<b>March 16:</b>	Prime Minister Trudeau announces the COVID-19 emergency loan program
<b>March 17:</b>	Emails and calls flood in; more than 9,000 emails and 5,800 calls in one day
<b>March 18:</b>	25 per cent of missions redirect their calls to emergency watch and response centre (EWRT)
<b>March 21:</b>	Canada-US border closes
<b>March 21:</b>	Air Canada sends plane under contract with GAC to pick up passengers in Morocco
<b>April 24:</b>	So far, 21,400 Canadians have returned on 175 flights
<b>May 10:</b>	WHO declares the coronavirus a global pandemic
<b>June 7:</b>	More than 42,000 Canadians have returned on 425 flights from 100 countries
<b>July 17:</b>	WestJet delivers last assisted flight home from Trinidad
<b>July 18:</b>	Last Canadian crew members disembark from cruise ship
<b>Aug. 7:</b>	Emergency Operations Unit shuts down

