



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

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by Denis Thompson
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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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During the uncertain times the coronavirus pandemic has created, one might wonder how the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is preparing to help its fellow Canadians. The CAF is and always has been the force of last resort during domestic emergencies. The CAF's involvement in domestic operations is replete with many examples, such as support during the Manitoba floods of 1997 and the Quebec ice storm of 1998, at many G7 summits, at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games, and during numerous forest fires and floods across Canada brought on by climate change.

How, then, could the CAF assist Canadians during the unprecedented threat the coronavirus poses?

From a policy perspective, Canada's 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, governs the CAF's involvement. One of the CAF's eight core missions is to: "Provide assistance to civil authorities and nongovernmental partners in responding to international and domestic disasters or major emergencies."¹ The COVID-19 crisis certainly qualifies as a major domestic emergency.

As a democratic country where civil control of the military is the norm, the CAF does not deploy without a request from the federal, provincial, territorial or municipal government levels. These requests can range from large-scale assistance to federal law enforcement agencies (i.e., CAF back-up during the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics), to small-scale provision of service (i.e., use of a city armoury to help house the homeless).

The *National Defence Act* (NDA) authorizes the employment of CAF assets in domestic instances. In the absolute worst-case scenario – the breakdown of law and order – Part VI of the NDA authorizes the use of the CAF, when called upon, to resolve "a riot or disturbance of the peace, beyond the powers of the civil authorities to suppress."² Given the current progress of the COVID-19 crisis, this type of operation should be considered low probability, but definitely high risk.

Flowing from the NDA are orders-in-council and memoranda of understanding that have been developed to facilitate CAF assistance to civilian agencies in lesser scenarios. In these cases, the authority for the provision of service to local agencies or police forces is ordinarily delegated to base commanders and/or commanding officers.

Also, under the *Emergency Management Act*, a province may ask, as Quebec has done, for assistance from the CAF.³ In the case of the Canadian Rangers, the 2nd Canadian Ranger Patrol Group (2 CRPG) has mobilized its 14 patrols in Nunavik to perform a variety of tasks such as preparing triage points to facilitate the work of health-care personnel.⁴

The Canadian Joint Operations Centre (CJOC) in Ottawa commands CAF domestic operations, which are directed on the ground by six regional joint task forces (North [Yukon, Northwest

¹ Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (Ottawa: 2017), 17.

² *National Defence Act*, Part VI, Article 275.

³ *Emergency Management Act* (S.C. 2007, c. 15), Articles 4(1)(i) and 6(3).

⁴ Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, News Release, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, 2nd Canadian Ranger Patrol Group, April 6, 2020.



Territories, Nunavut]; Pacific [British Columbia]; West [Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba]; Centre [Ontario]; East [Quebec] and Atlantic [New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland and Labrador]). Except for JTF North, each of these JTFs would have an immediate response unit (IRU) of regular force members on short-notice readiness to respond to domestic emergencies and a territorial battle group made up primarily of reservists that could be activated over a longer time horizon.⁵ Other elements of the CAF are also available to respond, as the RCAF has done in bringing home internationally stranded Canadians.

To speed the response to domestic operations, CJOC holds several contingency plans which can be activated. The chief of the defence staff (CDS) has activated two such plans – Operation LENTUS, the plan for a CAF response to natural disasters, and Operation LASER, the plan for a CAF response to a pandemic (yes, the CAF has an on-the-shelf contingency plan for a pandemic).⁶ Indeed, on April 3, the CDS gathered the CAF's senior leadership for a rehearsal of concept drill led by the commander of CJOC in Ottawa.⁷

As part of CAF preparations, the regional JTFs have verified their IRUs and been directed to stand up their predominantly reservist territorial battle groups, including the hiring of reservists on full-time contracts known as Class C.⁸ The bulk of these troops have been sent home to avoid contracting the virus and to await further developments. In the Pacific, HMCS Regina and HMCS Brandon, and in the Atlantic, HMCS Ville de Québec and HMCS Moncton have been assigned to pandemic response with similar isolation precautions being made to avoid the virus being present among the crews. In all, the CAF has some 24,000 members standing by to assist when called.⁹

What can be done? Essentially, any number of tasks could be asked of the CAF. The CAF has already taken care of returning Canadians both through the provision of airlift and support for some returnees during their quarantine at Base Trenton. The Canadian Rangers have been partially mobilized upon a request by Quebec. Discipline has been applied to the process to avoid the use of CAF assets to perform services which civilian agencies can provide. For example, it would be absurd for CAF tentage to be used as temporary shelter when multiple special-events companies are without business.

Perhaps most encouraging is that the CAF is clearly poised and ready to be the instrument of last resort in the nation's struggle against COVID-19. Let us hope that cool heads continue to prevail, and that Canada never has to reach for the last arrow in its quiver.

⁵ Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, Regional Joint Task Forces. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/military-operations/conduct/regional-task-force.html>.

⁶ Letter from CDS, March 27, 2020. https://twitter.com/CDS_Canada_CEMD/status/1243631267494666240/photo/1.

⁷ Canadian Joint Operations Centre rehearsal of concept drill, April 3, 2020. https://twitter.com/CFOperations/status/1246140566926233600?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Etweet.

⁸ Letter from CDS, April 3, 2020. https://twitter.com/CDS_Canada_CEMD/status/1246156330412490754/photo/1.

⁹ Murray Brewster, "Canadian Military Assembles 'Rapid Reaction' Teams to Help with Pandemic Response," CBC News, March 30, 2020. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canadian-forces-pandemic-covid-coronavirus-sajjan-1.5514922>

► About the Author

*Major-General (Retired) **Denis Thompson** served 39 years in the Canadian Army as an Infantry Officer. He deployed on multiple operations commanding at the platoon, company, battalion, brigade, national, and multinational level in Canada and abroad in Cyprus, Germany, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Egypt including command of NATO's Task Force Kandahar (2008/09), Canada's Special Operations Forces (2011-2014) and the Multinational Force & Observers in the Sinai (2014-2017).*

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