

Crisis contingency plans:

The Lebanon experience

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Measured on the inter-departmental pendulum, the institutional relationship between Defence and DFAT has fluctuated over the years, which is not surprising given their different cultures and functions. However, that relationship is now widely viewed by many in both organisations as warmer than it has ever been, in part an outcome of their close working relationship in recent years developing and implementing contingency plans in response to crises precipitated by natural disasters, civil unrest or terrorism.

During the last 3-4 years in particular, with one exception, the contingency plans that were activated were in response to regional crises. These crises included evacuations due to civil unrest in the Solomons and East Timor, the medical evacuations following the Bali bombings, and humanitarian aid to Indonesia in response to the 2004 tsunami. The exception was Lebanon in July-August 2006. The outcomes, in all cases, were highly successful, but Lebanon posed particular challenges, and delivered notable achievements. The Lebanon experience is a story worth telling; an overview follows.

Operation *Ramp* was the codename given to the evacuation from Lebanon of Australian citizens and permanent residents during the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah. The mechanics of the evacuation involved the activation of both an existing crisis contingency plan tailored for a like-crisis in Lebanon, and of standing procedures in Canberra for overall management and co-ordination of the plan. However, because of the specific nature of the war, considerable additional innovation and responses were needed.

Contingency plans and preparations

All Australia's diplomatic posts overseas now have standing contingency plans for evacuating Australians from their country(s) of accreditation in crisis situations. Specific contingency plans also exist or are drawn up to cover potential crises during major overseas events that will or are likely to be attended by large numbers of Australians eg.

Anzac Day celebrations at Gallipoli, or major international sporting events such as the World Cup, Olympics, etc. And separate plans exist for the immediate or early provision of humanitarian aid and support to regional countries affected by other large-scale catastrophes, including natural disasters, or those caused by accidents or other reasons.

In all but very small crises overseas, routine practice is for the despatch of supplementary resources to posts in the form of Emergency Response Teams (ERTs) to help manage the crisis locally. The size and composition of ERTs will vary, each being tailored to the specific requirements of the crisis concerned. Members are sourced, as required, from various departments or agencies, including DFAT, Defence, DIMA, Centrelink and the AFP. The majority of members are despatched from Australia, but appropriately skilled personnel can also be despatched from other regional posts. The range of skills can include experienced administrators, consular specialists, mobile communications and technical teams, medical specialists, psychologists, logisticians and transportation specialists (land/sea/air), linguists and media liaison officers. ERTs are usually headed by a senior DFAT officer responsible to the local Head of Mission (HOM) for co-ordinating all detailed administrative aspects of the contingency plan.

The plans themselves are drawn up and periodically reviewed in consultation with posts by a joint inter-departmental Contingency Plan Assessment Team (CPAT). The CPAT is headed by DFAT but its membership includes all other departments and agencies involved in the development and implementation of these plans. In practice, the very character of the plans themselves, and the CPAT and ERT, is such that they are whole-of-government in almost every respect. Fortunately in the case of Lebanon, the CPAT, in consultation with our Beirut embassy and other regional posts, had reviewed and updated their plan within the previous 12 months, and had incorporated several changes that would prove important when subsequently put to the test.

Crisis management arrangements

Crisis management arrangements at the Canberra end are comprehensive, and necessarily flexible. The now well-practised procedure, implemented again in the case of Lebanon, is to establish an Interdepartmental Emergency Task Force (IDETF) and a supporting Crisis Centre, both chaired by DFAT.

The role of the IDETF is to monitor and manage the event, focusing on the consular crisis and operational response rather than on political or strategic aspects. The IDETF meets as often as necessary, including several times daily if required. It produces daily, or more frequent reports on the crisis, which keep members, their departments and ministers informed of developments and key issues involved.

The Crisis Centre (CC) is usually activated concurrently with the IDETF but can operate in support of DFAT specific needs. It is the engine room for managing and co-ordinating the contingency plan, and is usually staffed on a 24 hour basis. It has dedicated facilities within DFAT headquarters and is able to communicate directly with all other departments, agencies and posts involved. For co-ordination and security reasons, it also has direct access to the DFAT passport and DIMA border control databases. The Centre's layout has work stations for seven staff, including dedicated terminals for staff integrated from other departments and agencies such as Defence, DIMA and Emergency Management Australia (EMA).

Adjacent to the Crisis Centre is DFAT's Emergency Call Unit (ECU) with two main roles. First, it creates and maintains a central master list of the identities, location, status and contact details of all potential evacuees or persons in the process of evacuation. Second, it provides an accessible contact point for potential evacuees overseas and for their family and friends in Australia. As part of the related communications strategy, the ECU receives and handles all public calls to the switchboards of the diplomatic post or posts primarily involved, and is also the first point of contact for all domestic calls to the DFAT public enquiry '1800 hotline'. The centre has work stations for 25 staff.

Where the number of telephone calls exceeds the capacity of the ECU to cope (as occurred in the Lebanon crisis), the workload is shared with the larger, 'integrated', Centrelink call-centre facility in Geelong, whose staff are trained in these duplicate responsibilities. Because of the widespread use of mobile telephones amongst travellers, they are now the primary means of communication by evacuees with those managing the evacuation (email is the next most common means of contact). This means of communication enables direct and timely contact with the ECU which assists the Crisis Centre to determine who, how many and where the evacuees are, and how best to help facilitate their evacuation. This particularly applied in Lebanon.

The Defence-DFAT interface, which is a critical contributor to the success of crisis plans, works remarkably smoothly. Within Canberra, the principal point of interface within Defence is with Military Strategic Commitments branch within the Russell Offices complex. Branch members represent Defence on the IDETF, are integrated into the

Crisis Centre, liaise with Joint Operations Command (JOC) in Sydney for the provision of Defence resources, and liaise with Defence and the Minister for top-level approvals. The Defence component of the ERT is known as the Defence Supplementary Staff (DSS) and will include planners, logisticians and communications and medical specialists. The DSS can deploy independently of an ERT and is a valuable resource available to the Head of Mission. Defence can also deploy what are called Evacuation Handling Centres (EHCs), staffed by people-movement specialists to directly manage the movement of evacuees and transportation providers.

Lebanon – further then ever before

Notwithstanding our experiences in managing crisis contingency plans within our region, managing the Lebanon crisis was significantly different in several ways:

- The first was the scale of the operation; it was Australia's largest consular assistance operation ever. Some 5300 Australians and an additional 1240 non-Australian nationals were evacuated from Lebanon during the 34 days of the war. Our previous largest evacuation numbered hundreds, not thousands.
- It took place well outside our region; some 10,000 kilometres from Canberra. In effect, it was a Mediterranean-area operation.
- It was beyond the immediate reach of large-scale ADF personnel or land, sea or air transportation resources. The concept of turning on a large-scale ADF-assisted or protected evacuation, which would be feasible regionally, was simply not on. Evacuation transport resources, therefore, had to be found elsewhere. And we were in competition for most resources with many other countries (including particularly the US, Canada, and a majority of EU members) which were also seeking to evacuate their nationals.
- The evacuation took place while the war continued. This had a significant impact on the availability and safety of evacuation routes, and necessitated crucial representations to and co-ordination with both the Lebanese and particularly the Israeli governments.
- Evacuees could not be brought directly back to Australia by air from Lebanon and they had to transit third countries. This involved negotiating the co-operation of such countries as Syria, Jordan, Cyprus and Turkey to receive the evacuees, and temporarily accommodate them pending their onward movement. Without that co-operation, an evacuation of this size would have been very difficult, probably impossible.
- Finally, arranging transport resources, negotiating the safety of evacuation routes within Lebanon, and negotiating and arranging the reception and the onward movement of evacuees in recipient countries, took time, certainly more time than was the norm with crises in our immediate region.

Formidable challenges

The challenges posed by these difficulties were formidable. But the first challenge was fundamental: how many Australians were there, who were they, where were they located, and how to contact them. Estimates put the number of Australians in Lebanon and potentially eligible for evacuation at between 20,000—25,000. Many, probably thousands, were assumed to be older Lebanese-born naturalised Australians who had returned permanently to Lebanon on their retirement. Most were not registered with the Beirut embassy, had not made contact with the embassy, and for many their Australian passports had long expired. The war also coincided with a peak time for Australian visitors. It was school holidays in Australia, which traditionally means a large number of Australian-based people with Lebanese heritage, including many school-age children, were visiting their families in Lebanon. And most were staying with their families, not in readily identifiable and contactable tourist hotels. Few visitors were registered with the embassy. And even if details of Australians were known, how many, especially retirees, were likely to seek evacuation was not known.

In fact, on day one of the war there were some 2500 Australians registered with the embassy. By day five that number had risen to more than 12,000. Most new registrations were made through the DFAT website. Others were made by telephone calls from Australians in Lebanon to the embassy, but which were routed directly to the Crisis Centre in Canberra (including the integrated Centrelink facility), or by concerned family members in Australia to the DFAT hotline. Details were entered on the master list. Some cases proved to be dual registrations, or identities and whereabouts given by third parties proved incorrect. Importantly, through direct contact with evacuees and by cross-checking with DFAT passport and DIMA records, the Crisis Centre was able to compile a more accurate list of who were the potential evacuees, their whereabouts and contact arrangements. This gave the Defence evacuation planners something positive to go on. The process also identified other consular considerations; many of these involved medical issues, lost passports, and visa requests for newly married non-Australian spouses or children born to Australians in Lebanon but as yet without Australian travel documents.

Ultimately, some 5300 Australians were evacuated by Australian resources, and a further 651 by British, Canadian, French, Greek and other assistance, most in the first week of the war. Many thousands more Australians, including many who were registered, left Lebanon independently. Fortunately, many of the latter rang the embassy (in fact, the Crisis Centre) to advise their movements, or this information was passed on by families in Australia who phoned the DFAT hotline. But accounting for all Australians was very difficult. In time, others were accounted for when they returned to Australia, by monitoring DIMA records. But it was impossible to track evacuees who did not register, who moved independently, and who did not travel on an Australian passport. They, too, could have numbered in the thousands.

Evacuation routes

Evacuation routes were also a major challenge. During the early days of the war, the bombing of Beirut international airport and the Israeli air and sea blockade generally, permanently ruled out air evacuation, and initially, any evacuation by sea. Land evacuation was the only option at first, but was also dependent on Israeli 'safe passage' clearances. The first evacuation comprised a convoy of three buses and the evacuees included many children and other minors. The route taken was north to the Syrian border, then east and south to the Syrian capital, Damascus, then on to Amman in Jordan. Jordan was selected as the end destination for two reasons. First, Australia does not have an embassy in Damascus, and administering in-coming evacuees could be more easily arranged from the nearest capital where we did have a mission. However, DFAT did send a number of staff from Cairo to Damascus, co-locating them with the Canadian embassy to supervise the transit of evacuees through Syria. Second, accommodation in Damascus was limited due to the northern hemisphere holiday season and more accommodation was available in Amman. All up, a total of 166 Australians were evacuated via Syria to Jordan.

The majority of evacuees from Lebanon (some 5100) went by sea on chartered ferries. The earliest departures took place on 18 July (Day 5 of the war) when the Israelis first allowed ferries and other designated evacuation vessels to pass through their blockade during daylight hours. Two basic routes were used: to Larnaka in Cyprus or to Mersin in Turkey. Because of the shortage of accommodation in both countries due to the holiday season, those evacuees wishing to return to Australia boarded chartered aircraft in Larnaka, or Ankara and Adana in Turkey, and were flown directly back to Sydney. Charter flights were organised because seats on existing commercial flights were not available in sufficient numbers due to peak holiday season bookings. Also, a Middle East-based RAAF C130 was re-tasked from other operational duties to provide general support to the evacuation. Due to limitations on civil flights from Cyprus, this aircraft was used to fly some 80 evacuees in two lifts from Cyprus to waiting charter flights in Ankara, and had the capacity to move significantly more evacuees if required.

Some 4600 evacuees chose to return to Australia via 15 charter flights. No Australians, including several hundred living close to the Israeli border in southern Lebanon, were evacuated via Israel, although for some this would have been the more logical route. The Israelis did agree to a request for one medical evacuee to cross their border, but delays in Israeli approval resulted in the individual being evacuated by sea through Tyre instead.

The Australian government, as for other governments, was in regular contact with the Israeli government to inform them of the whereabouts of Australian residents in Lebanon, and particularly their evacuation movements. Liaison with the Israelis was critical to ensure evacuees were not mistaken for Hezbollah combatants and bombed. The Israelis established a special co-ordination unit to identify and isolate Australian and other foreign citizens in Lebanon from military operations directed at highly mobile Hezbollah targets, but securing their safety could not be taken for granted. The Israelis were at war against an enemy whose tactics included

(illegal) extensive use of civilians and civilian facilities to screen their operations. The risk of mistaken identity or collateral damage when strikes were mounted, was ever present. Fortunately, despite the uncertainties and risks, no Australians – evacuees or those who chose to stay put in Lebanon – were killed.

Practical lessons

The evacuations were not without incident. Some of the difficulties included missed evacuations of some individuals or groups due to misunderstandings as to timings and assembly points, the handling of split families, caring for individuals traumatised or otherwise in highly emotional states due to the tense situation, language difficulties in some instances, and verbal abuse by some evacuees about delays in arranging their evacuation. The latter complaints reflected unrealistic expectations. Making many of the evacuation arrangements simply took time, and where the movement of people would or could have involved genuine danger, movement was changed or delayed until it was safe to do so.

Australian government resources committed to the evacuation amounted to some 680 persons (excluding Geelong Centrelink staff and those already based at overseas posts), and final costs could be around \$A25 million. Of the persons above, some 460 were involved in running crisis operations in Canberra, most being from DFAT, including all 2006 diplomatic trainees. The integrated ECU-Centrelink call facility operated on a 24-hour basis over 36 days, two days longer than the war, in order to ensure all loose ends were covered. The quantity of communications traffic handled by the Crisis Centre in fulfilling its co-ordination and management responsibilities was staggering, and included over 35,000 incoming phone calls, and some 15,000 outgoing calls.

Some 220 officials were deployed by civil air from Australia as members of ERTs to supplement and support the evacuation. Most moved on less than 24 hours notice. These included 92 DFAT and 120 ADF personnel.

Policy lessons

Two other policy issues related to this and other evacuations should also be noted. First, the Australian government does not, and did not, charge its citizens for transport costs to the first point of evacuation, ie. from Lebanon to Jordan, Cyprus or Turkey. Charter flights from these locations back to Australia were also provided at no cost where evacuees could prove they had resided in Australia for one year out of the past two, and two years in the past five.

Second, government policy is to extend consular assistance to any Australian citizen or permanent resident overseas, irrespective of which country's passport they might be travelling on at the time. In other crisis evacuations in future the increasing prevalence of dual citizenship and access to and use of passports of convenience, is likely to pose the same major difficulties about how many Australians are involved, who they are and what are their whereabouts and intentions, as occurred in the case of Lebanon.

Successful this time but....

Despite the many challenges, and invariably some incidents, the evacuations from Lebanon were by any measure an outstanding success. Many factors contributed to this. They included the sophistication of the contingency planning and crisis management arrangements both in Australia and those overseas posts involved. They also included the personnel involved, their availability, including their ability to move at very short notice, and the commitment, sheer hard work and competence of all in the operational and logistic chains.

The success of the Lebanon experience has lifted the bar significantly in terms of can-do-will-do expectations by government, officials and the public alike, wherever and whenever the next crisis occurs. And from a Defence perspective, the provision of assistance during such overseas crises, under the banner of support to inter-agency (Whole-of-Government) operations, is now very much a strategic role.

In conclusion, back to the interdepartmental pendulum. The views of Major Furphy, a somewhat crusty but well known contributor to this journal, who has not always been uncritical of DFAT, are often a sound litmus test for measuring the Defence-DFAT-anyone-else relationship. The story goes that Furphy recently told an audience of disciples of his grudging respect for DFAT's handling of the Lebanon crisis, albeit with Defence support. Shock and awe prevailed when he added in hushed tones 'that mob across the lake did well, they can share my dixie anytime'. The pendulum was observed to swing at least a couple of degrees higher. ♦

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