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Public Health Agency of Canada: Emergency Response Teams Tested at One of Largest Disaster Exercises in Canadian History

TORONTO, ONTARIO--(Marketwire - Nov. 23, 2007) - Emergency response teams took part in a live, simulated large-scale disaster exercise today at a Toronto-area hotel, involving a simulated bomb blast. The purpose of the exercise was to test the coordination and interoperability of these teams in a real emergency, and identify where improvements can be made. In total, close to 1,000 participants, observers, and evaluators were involved.

Sponsored by Public Safety Canada, this mock disaster involved four emergency responder teams:

- The Public Health Agency of Canada's newly established Health Emergency Response Team (HERT);
- Public Safety Canada's four Heavy Urban Search and Rescue (HUSAR) Teams;
- The Ontario Ministry of Health's Emergency Medical Assistance Team (EMAT); and
- The Ontario Provincial Police's Provincial Emergency Response Team (PERT).

Also in attendance was the Honourable Tony Clement, Minister of Health and Minister for the Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario and the Ontario Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, George Smitherman.

"It's vital to be fully prepared in the case of an emergency in Canada, and today's mock disaster will allow us to practice how to best protect Canadians," said Minister Clement. "We have made a special addition to today's exercise -- our new Health Emergency Response Team."

The HERT team is comprised of 185 medical professionals and support staff, and can be rapidly deployed anywhere in Canada on short notice to provide medical surge capacity support in an emergency.

Also involved were the Government of Canada's HUSAR teams, which are made up of emergency responders that carry out complex rescue operations in collapsed structures and other difficult situations. This was HUSAR's second national exercise. To support HUSAR's work, the Honourable Stockwell Day, Minister of Public Safety made an investment in Toronto's new Heavy Urban Search and Rescue facility.

"As Public Safety Minister, I am proud to be sponsoring today's mock emergency exercise, which is an amalgamation of Canada's trained emergency response teams," said Minister Day. "I am also proud to announce an investment of more than \$2 million in the new Toronto HUSAR facility, which will strengthen our on-going urban search and rescue capabilities."

"Ontario's highly mobile and highly professional Emergency Medical Assistance Team, or EMAT, is eager to share its practical experience gained through its recent deployments to various emergencies in the province," said Ontario Deputy Premier and Minister of Health, George Smitherman. "Ontario's national leadership in successfully working with emergency responders from all levels of government will be invaluable in helping the Public Health Agency of Canada's HERT team achieve success."

Following the mock explosion, the provincial PERT team's role is to secure the site so the Toronto Fire Service's HUSAR team, augmented by teams from Calgary, Manitoba and Halifax, can evacuate simulated casualties from the building and deliver them to the HERT and EMAT teams for treatment. The exercise runs to November 24.

BACKGROUNDER

Heavy Urban Search and Rescue (Heavy USAR)

Heavy USAR teams (HUSAR) locate trapped persons in collapsed structures and other entrapments using search dogs and electronic search equipment. Heavy USAR involves work to breach, shore, lift and remove structural components, the use of heavy construction equipment to remove debris, and the medical treatment and transfer of victims. USAR is a general term for a group of specialized rescue skills that are integrated into a team that includes search, medical and structural assessment resources.

Public Safety Canada (PS) provides national leadership for USAR development to ensure that program development is coordinated and appropriately shared among the federal government, provinces and territories, major urban centres, and other national and international stakeholders. The USAR program is one aspect in the enhancement of Canada's National emergency response capacity.

The main elements of a national USAR program are based on operational readiness and capacity to deploy at short notice in response to domestic disasters. PS has identified the five following priorities for the development of a national USAR program:

- Plans, policies and protocols to outline responsibilities of the federal government, and of USAR teams deployed in afflicted areas outside home jurisdictions;
- Standard equipment designed for Light, Medium and Heavy USAR operations;
- Training in technical skills and joint operations with other teams;
- National guidelines or standards, where required; and,
- Exercises to improve capability and develop interoperability.

Four Canadian cities (Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, and Halifax) and the Province of Manitoba currently have, or are developing, interoperable Heavy USAR capacity. The cost of USAR development is shared with provinces and territories through the Joint Emergency Preparedness Program (JEPP).

In addition to Heavy USAR development, PS also supports the development of a complementary range of capacities for Light and Medium USAR in smaller urban centres across the country. Forty-one jurisdictions in Canada have accessed available funds to develop Light and Medium USAR capabilities with 50% of funds coming from the JEPP.

In the development of the USAR program, PS has ensured that teams, equipment and technology are interoperable at a national level. PS has published The Canadian USAR Classification Guide, which defines the standard array of tools, equipment and supplies suitable for teams at Light, Medium and Heavy operational levels.

Ce document d'information est aussi disponible en français.

Health Emergency Response Teams (HERT)

The Public Health Agency of Canada established the National Office of Health Emergency Response Teams (NOHERT) within the Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response to improve its ability to respond in a coordinated and efficient manner to support provincial, territorial and local government management of health emergencies.

The consequences of disaster often impose heavy demands on health systems to maintain day to

day health care services and to step up emergency treatment for disaster victims. In Canada, provinces and territories can call on each other or the federal government for help when faced with a disaster. NOHERT is a new resource that can provide surge capacity to a province or territory in need during an emergency.

NOHERT is leading the Public Health Agency of Canada's efforts to establish and train Health Emergency Response Teams (HERT) to be located in regions across Canada. A HERT is a multi-disciplinary team that is called-up to respond to an emergency from existing cadres of medical and emergency response professionals within federal, provincial and local institutions, non-governmental organizations and private practice.

HERT units are trained and equipped to respond to disease or injuries caused by natural disasters, explosions or major chemical, biological or radio-nuclear incidents. Each HERT team is comprised of up to 185 members and can be deployed to any location in Canada within 12 to 24 hours on request from a province or territory. The team can sustain itself in a deployment for up to 72 hours before needing to be re-supplied.

The first HERT team is established in Ottawa and is comprised of practicing physicians, nurses, paramedics and other medical professionals who volunteer for up to two weeks of training and exercising each year. HERT medical operations are supported by dedicated Mission Support Teams, which manage all aspects of logistics and facilities administration at a disaster location. The HERT team's core function is to provide emergency medical response to patients under austere conditions. However, it can be enhanced with trauma, pediatrics, burn treatment, decontamination, infectious disease response and other capabilities to protect Canadians in need.

HERT units are deployed in three mission configurations to address a range of event requirements or situations:

1) HERT Mass Casualty Unit (MCU)

The first HERT configuration is a Mass Casualty Unit. An MCU can provide direct support to Emergency Rooms by mobilizing medical professionals from a pre-established roster to supplement staff and back-fill where needed. It may also support hospitals with general and specialty teams for trauma, infection control or epidemiology, and provide the equipment and supplies needed to support decontamination for chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear incidents.

The Mass Casualty Unit (MCU) will consist of three component teams:

- Rapid Response Team,
- Medical Response Team and
- Mission Support Team.

2) HERT Specialized Unit (SU)

The second HERT configuration is a Specialized Unit. An SU is comprised of specialized teams of primary health care workers designed to address a particular medical situation, such as an epidemic or chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear incident. A HERT SU deployment could consist of a single health care worker or a team of experts, depending on the needs of the emergency. The HERT Rapid Response Team or Mission Support Team components would not likely be required for SU deployments.

3) HERT Air Mobile Unit (AMU)

The third HERT configuration is an Air Mobile Unit (AMU), which is designed for rapid deployment by air to remote regions of Canada. An AMU will typically consist of a reduced Medical Response Team and Mission Support Team, and a smaller equipment load, but will still be self-sustaining for up to 72 hours before replenishment.

NOHERT Exercise CADUCEUS MAJOR

The Public Health Agency of Canada's (PHAC) National Office of Health Emergency Response Teams (NOHERT) is participating in one of the largest live exercises in Canadian history to test its ability to deploy and treat patients with a range of injuries over an intense 24 hours, following a simulated terrorist attack. This exercise nicknamed CADUCEUS MAJOR is the first full deployment of a Health Emergency Response Team (HERT) and it builds on lessons learned from smaller exercises held in June and in October 2006.

The exercise was developed through a partnership between NOHERT and Public Safety Canada's Heavy Urban Search and Rescue (HUSAR) program. Canada's first Health Emergency Response Team (HERT) and four HUSAR teams are participating, along with Ontario's Emergency Medical Assistance Team (EMAT) and Provincial Emergency Response Team (PERT). The City of Toronto's HUSAR Team - Canada Task Force 3 is the Exercise host and lead response organization.

The exercise is taking place in an abandoned hotel in Toronto and the scenario involves a simulated explosion in a busy office complex linked by a pedestrian walkway. The scene has been made to look as realistic as possible with large amounts of debris. Over 300 simulated victims will require rescue and medical attention. The role of the PERT team is to assess and evaluate the risks of further explosions or other threats. The HUSAR teams are to go in and rescue simulated victims and take them to the HERT and EMAT field hospital for immediate treatment.

The simulation will allow the HERT team to assess its interoperability with Ontario's EMAT team in order to develop disaster medical practices to be used in real emergencies and it will inform the development of three more HERT teams to be based in regions across the country.

To prepare for the exercise, NOHERT trained 185 medical responders and the support personnel who maintain facilities and support medical operations. The PHAC National Emergency Stockpile System (NESS) provided portable hospital equipment, medical supplies and logistical support for the HERT team's response.

The HUSAR teams, which participate regularly in exercises and have deployed in real emergencies as part of Canada's National HUSAR program, will further test their abilities in responding to a disaster. The four participating HUSAR teams are from Calgary, the province of Manitoba, Toronto and Halifax.

In all, more than 900 personnel will be onsite, working 24 hours a day during the exercise as responders, simulated victims and evaluators.

All partners are committed to the development of a comprehensive approach to managing public health and safety emergencies through a Pan-Canadian system with a robust, integrated and seamless emergency preparedness and response capacity. The benefit for Canadians will be an improved national capability to face disasters that require prompt, organized rescue and medical assistance.