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Hundreds of emergency personnel from across Canada practise disaster skills

By Colin Perkel, THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO - Hundreds of emergency response workers from across Canada clawed and drilled their way through the rubble of a badly damaged high-rise Friday in one of country's largest ever disaster exercises.

The realistic scenario, designed to look like the aftermath of a car bombing of an office tower, included rescuing and treating scores of mock victims covered in fake blood or with simulated injuries.

Dogs sniffed out "victims" from beneath twisted cement and steel, while rescuers working in sub-zero temperatures used jackhammers to drill their way through concrete walls and clambered through the holes.

Others, decked out in full protective gear, built wooden support structures to stabilize the partially collapsed building, requested specific assistance as they encountered difficulties, or called for stretchers to ferry the wounded.

"Initially, you're worried about a secondary explosion," explained David Eckerman of the Toronto fire department, as he surveyed the abandoned hotel that served as the training site.

"Then just victims - you're looking for persons that you can remove quickly and then you work your way from there to the ones that are trapped."

In a tent hospital set up nearby, dozens of doctors, nurses and other medical personnel treated the "wounded," who sported a variety of horrific "injuries" from broken bones to impaled metal.

The aim of the real-time disaster drill, held under the auspices of Public Safety Canada, was to give various teams of frontline rescue personnel as realistic a scenario as possible in which to practise their emergency-response skills, planning and co-ordination.

Federal Health Minister Tony Clement said people look to governments for help when disaster strikes, and Canada has to be prepared.

"The hope of course is that these teams will not be needed very often, but when they are called upon, they will be a valuable and ready resource," Clement said.

"We engage in these exercises so that when it really matters, when lives truly do hang in the balance, we are ready to play our parts to protect Canadians together."

The teams, sporting an alphabet soup of acronyms such as HUSAR (heavy urban search and rescue), EMAT (emergency medical assistance team) and HERT (health emergency response team), came from Calgary, Manitoba, Toronto and Halifax.

"In a time of disaster, one team just wouldn't be enough," said Tony Comella, a HUSAR coordinator who helped design the three-day exercise.

"This is an opportunity for them to come together and experience working together as a unit."

More than 900 people participated in the round-the-clock drill that ends Saturday, including about 200 college students posing as disaster victims.

Clement said he hoped the next mock-disaster effort will involve American and even Mexican emergency personnel in a joint exercise, perhaps about 18 months from now.

"Some of these disasters can have international implications," Clement said.