

News: Auditor-General; Senate Report Criticizes Canada's Emergency Preparedness

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Reporter

Auditor-General Sheila Fraser came down on the federal government again last week, charging that the government's \$7.7 billion spent in the wake of September 11th to protect Canadians was mis-spent and left "significant gaps and errors" in Canada's national security.

In examining the Liberal response to terror attacks on the United States, Fraser cited several deficiencies in contingency plans across the nation. She also addressed many record-sharing discrepancies, specifying that about 25,000 Canadian passports are lost or stolen every year, and that while the RCMP are immediately notified, such information often never reaches customs agents and front-line border workers. She also noted that over 4,500 airport employees at five major Canadian airports that have access to restricted areas could have "possible criminal associations" to various illegal organizations, and that Transport Canada and the RCMP do not share criminal intelligence, making it harder to

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do background checks. A antiquated and underfunded system also leads to a chronic backlog in fingerprinting, with a delay often spanning two and a half months. "These matters" she said "are serious and they need to be addressed." One of the major concerns that she highlighted was

the fact that many departments and agencies in Canada are not assessing situations adequately, nor are they sharing enough relevant information with the other agencies.

The Liberals were attacked in the House for their complacency on this issue last Tuesday. "Nobody is minding the security store and I expect that our American friends are going to be extremely alarmed when they read this report" Conservative MP John Williams told CTV. Conservative leader Stephen Harper asked why Canadians should continue to trust the Liberals after "10 years of these kinds of failures."

Prime Minister Paul Martin responded by saying that his government has been proactive in securing Canada's defense. "One of the very first things... [we did] was, in fact, to consolidate all of the activities required for national security." said Martin "We've created a new post of minister of public safety and national security and we have put it under the deputy prime minister." Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham conceded that border guards do not have the same information as the RCMP when it comes to stolen or lost passports, but stated that a program to facilitate the transfer of such data is now being developed.

In the same report, the Federal Auditor General took aim at Health Canada, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the Canada Revenue Agency, denoting mismanagement and inadequate implementation of regulatory procedures in each of the three bodies. She claims that Health Canada has not sufficiently monitored the risks of new medical devices on the market, such as heart valves, blood-test kits and

artificial hips, while that the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has failed to properly screen the threat of new plants that are being imported and introduced to Canada.. Fraser also alerted the government that due to faulty and lax penalties, that the Canada Revenue Agency could be overpaying GST refunds and claims, perhaps to an amount somewhere in the millions of dollars.

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While these findings reveal considerable oversights within the government, it is expected that the security problems will become the most pressing issues to the current mandate. A Senate Committee report on Canadian disaster-preparedness was released last week as well, finding that severe under funding and a lack of cooperation between all levels of government has crippled Canada's ability to deal with potential disasters. "Within the bounds of financial realism, there is no excuse for unreadiness." The report stated "Governments are paid to be ready."

The report stated that there was "over-whelming" evidence suggesting there was very little cohesion between the federal and

respective provincial and municipal governments on this matter. "Insights of municipalities on the front line of emergency response are largely ignored by federal and provincial planners," the report stated. It found that while larger cities were considerably better prepared for disaster than were smaller municipalities, that all were relatively unaware of resources available to them. Two-thirds of the 86 municipalities asked said that they had no knowledge of Health Canada's emergency medical supplies and equipment, provisions which are stock-piled in centers across the country.

This report called for better cooperation and increased funding for first responders, pointing to the complaint that most police, firefighters and ambulances across Canada would have trouble responding in a disaster, as many use different equipment and communication systems. Re-iterating a point from Fraser's report, it also calls for the strengthening of the federal government's emergency system and its cooperation with other jurisdictions in Canada.

At the press conference, Fraser commented that other countries are also having difficulty in security preparedness but that the Canadian government has failed to properly assess the current global climate and adjust accordingly. "The government as a whole failed to adequately assess intelligence lessons learned from critical incidents such as September 11th and systematically follow up on needed improvements," said Fraser, but added "Other countries, including the United States, have examined similar areas and have reported [comparable] findings."