

# As Canada takes Arctic Council helm, experts stress north's vulnerability to spills, emergencies

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**Resolute, Nunavut 20.08.11 74°41'51"N 094°49'56"W**

A charter flight from Yellowknife to Resolute with 15 people on board crashed after an aborted landing. The crash occurred within a heightened level of risk as Operation Nanook, a sovereignty exercise, reclassified the air traffic control level of the airport. The availability of personnel on the ground allowed a nationally supported rescue to begin immediately.

 Injured: 3  
Fatalities: 12

Response: 

 Time until rescue: 1 hour

This Open Canada info-graphic details one of 14 search and rescue operations executed in Northern Canada since 2010. Credit: Open Canada

As leadership of the Arctic Council passes from Sweden to Canada May 15, experts say it is crucial that northern nations strengthen response

capabilities to shipping-related accidents foreseen in newly-opened northern waters, as well as to more-common local emergencies such as floods, forest fires and rescue situations.

And Canada needs to lead by example. Despite having the world's longest Arctic coastline and second-largest territory in the region, its far northern marine and aviation infrastructure badly lags by international comparison, according to experts with the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program, an initiative of the Canada Centre for Global Security Studies at the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto and the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation.

Northern emergency flight rescue operations today originate from the Royal Canadian Air Force base in the southern Ontario city of Trenton and involve at least eight hours of flying. The Canadian Coast Guard aims to respond to requests for icebreaking services within 10 hours. However, weather and distance often result in response times measured in days.

By contrast, Russia is building 10 search and rescue stations along its [Northern Sea Route](#), expected to open in 2015.

The Arctic Council ministerial meeting this week is hosted by the outgoing chair, Sweden, in that country's northernmost city, Kiruna.

The anticipated 300 delegates - perhaps the largest in Arctic Council history - include noted Canadian historian John English, author of a forthcoming book - *Ice and Water: Power, Peoples and the Arctic Council* - and a senior member of the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program team. Says Dr. English: "Chairing the Arctic Council represents a real opportunity for Canada to show leadership in a region whose importance to global affairs is rapidly increasing."

In Kiruna, specific initiatives and goals of the Canadian chairmanship will be articulated. Minister Leona Aglukkaq has detailed Canada's main priorities in the chair as "development for the people of the North," supporting this with sub-themes of sustainable Arctic communities, responsible resource extraction, and safe Arctic shipping.

"Underpinning all of the Arctic Council's work must be a commitment to the full involvement of Permanent Participants from indigenous communities," says Thomas Axworthy, President and CEO of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. "In that regard, as it moves forward on its priority of safe shipping, Canada should heed the voices of those living in the north who know first-hand the realities of Arctic emergency response."

In a May 2012 report, the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program said: "A proudly northern nation, Canada is the second largest Arctic state. Half of the country's land mass lies in the Arctic and sub-Arctic. It has a 162,000-km Arctic coast line, but is the only Arctic nation without a deep water port."

The report recommended Canada "make the necessary strategic investments in Canadian Arctic air and marine infrastructure to enable Canada to effectively implement the Arctic Council negotiated accord on search and rescue" and be prepared to fulfil its international agreement obligations.

The "Agreement on Aeronautical and Maritime Search and Rescue" negotiated under Arctic Council auspices and signed in 2011, clearly defines the territory for which a nation is the primary responder, with responses augmented as required by other Arctic states.

Local community members are often the frontline of response to emergencies in remote Arctic communities, says Sara French, Director

of the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program which, early next year, will host a major meeting on northern security issues, partnering with several international organizations sharing common concerns.

A 2010 [survey](#) conducted for the Program showed about 90 per cent of northern respondents deemed of top importance (a four or five out of five) national capacity to respond to disasters, such as major northern oil spills, emergency search and rescue teams and equipment, and basic public infrastructure.

When asked if Canada is well equipped to respond to emergencies, including search and rescue teams and equipment, only 40 per cent of northerners agreed. Just 11 per cent thought there was sufficient capacity to respond to disasters, such as a major spill. Investing in infrastructure was virtually tied with better healthcare as an investment priority among Canadians in the Far North (65 per cent vs. 66 per cent respectively).

As stated in the Program report Canada as an Arctic Power: "For northern Canadians, fatal aircraft accidents in Resolute and Yellowknife, and the deadly fire on-board a Norwegian cruise ship - all in the fall of 2011- further highlighted the need to develop effective emergency management systems in the Arctic that are matched by adequate assets to carry them out." ()

An Institute of the North survey in Alaska found similar thoughts about Northern priorities among residents of that state, with "capacity to respond to disasters, such as major oil spills" in first place; "capacity to respond to emergencies, including search and rescue teams and equipment" in third place; and "basic infrastructure, like roads, hospitals, libraries, schools and water treatment facilities" in fourth.

(<http://bit.ly/16qmKxT>)

Meanwhile, a Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program background brief,

["Interests and Roles of Non-Arctic States in the Arctic"](#), based on a 2011 meeting held in conjunction with Canadian International Council, showed many Asian interests relate to shipping.

It is not yet known how many, if any, new non-Arctic countries will be accorded Arctic Council observer status. Their role in shaping Arctic governance is already being felt at the International Maritime Organization, however, which is negotiating a voluntary Polar Code for Arctic shipping. At the talks, Canada articulated a strong stance on pollution-related issues.

Top recommendations offered by the Munk-Gordon Arctic Security Program to the Canadian government as it takes the chair of the Arctic Council: (compiled based on research outlined in Canada as an Arctic Power, <http://bit.ly/13YqH8W>):

Propose a new funding mechanism to enable Permanent Participants to fully participate in all of the working groups of the Arctic Council.

Support the Permanent Participants in co-operation with the Arctic Council member states to jointly review the role of the Indigenous Peoples Secretariat (IPS) following the creation of the Permanent Secretariat of the Arctic Council in Tromsø, Norway.

Make the necessary strategic investments in Canadian Arctic air and marine infrastructure to enable Canada to effectively implement the Arctic Council negotiated accord on search and rescue.

Encourage the Arctic Council to recognize the special role for regional, state, and territorial governments in Arctic governance and particularly in the Arctic Council.

Encourage the Arctic Council Secretariat to create plain-language

summaries of its studies and activities so that the information is accessible to interested citizens.

Propose that any candidate for Arctic Council Observer status must publicly declare its respect for the sovereignty of Arctic states and the rights of Arctic indigenous peoples.

Fund the Canadian Polar Commission to a level equivalent to counterpart institutions in other [Arctic](#) states.

Provided by Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation

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