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DEFINING THE NEW NORMAL IN EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT – THE CANADIAN AND AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

A brief review of rising numbers of technological incidents, of ongoing environmental degradation, the globalizing consumer culture and of the global environmental impacts of industrialization, all set against the seeming lack of political and popular will to change, certainly makes it look like humanity has been courting emergencies. Pelling [1] states that the average number of natural disasters has doubled every decade since 1960s.

As the community has become global, interdependent in its communication and commerce, the need for international assistance during natural disasters has become vital to the well-being of all nations. The loss of commerce in one region of the world results in recession in other parts of the world. In addition, each event represents a learning experience for those with similar geological characteristics. By jointly improving strategies to alleviate vulnerability, all nations benefit [2].

The global scale of contemporary risk analysis challenges emergency management in two ways. First, the motors of global change (e.g. past industrialization in North America and Europe) are often distanced in time and space from its impacts (e.g. sea-level rise and flooding in Bangladesh). Second, mitigating disasters requires co-ordination at the local, national and global scales [3].

Several Russian politicians and experts in the field of emergency response and management have pronounced the recognized need for international co-operation and sharing the experiences of response to emergencies globally.

According to Brazhnikov Yu.V. the role of the Russian Federation in the field of international co-operation and response is defined by both geographical and political factors. Practically and historically Russia international humanitarian response has fallen into the following geographical theatres: European, Central Asian, African, Asian-Pacific and American.

This article is intended to open up academic discussion in the field of international co-operation in emergency management between the Russian Federation and North American countries based on the experience and materials of 15th Annual World Conference on Disaster Management.

With the conference theme of "The Changing Face of Disaster Management - Defining The New Normal", it has defined the trends, and challenges in emergency management, business continuity planning and risk management sharing experiences from around the world, with the primary focus being on Canada and the United States of America.

The Canadian system of emergency response considerably differs from Russian system. Canada is both a unitary state and a confederation of provinces with three levels of government: federal, provincial and local. Since most emergencies in Canada occur upon territory within the jurisdiction of provincial governments each of the provinces and territories has its own emergency legislation. The operational aspects of civil emergency planning and response are carried out by the operational units of the departments located in regional and local areas.

The American system is more similar to the Russian. It is represented by the federal emergency management agency (FEMA). This body unites and coordinates the emergency activity on the federal, regional and territorial management structures and is sponsored by the state [4].

The conference gave an interesting insight on the post September 11th world in both countries. A massive transformation is taking place in emergency management. For good or for bad, the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States have resulted in a significant reformulation of the purpose and nature of emergency management. Terrorism has become the priority hazard among those making policy decisions.

Ken Jones, Emergency Response Coordinator at Shell Canada Limited states that: September 11, 2001 has brought a new emphasis on regulations in the emergency area, ostensibly to increase preparedness and capability. Few of the government personnel creating these regulations have a response background, and found themselves having to move fast to respond to the terrorism threats, thereby shortening the ability to consult with those that have the experience. The result is overly-prescriptive regulations, focusing disproportionately on prevention (security) to the detriment of response preparedness; on each agency's mandate for what should be exercised, on plans to the exclusion of the other pillars of emergency management".

It also results in a double-standard; governments have rarely held themselves to the same standard of emergency planning, training, exercises and response capability as those they regulate. One of the positives of the post-September 11 world is that while there is still an imbalance in this area, provincial and federal governments have increased their internal expectations.

Dr. Irwin Redlener, director of the American National Center for Disaster Preparedness has summarized the latest in a series of surveys designed to identify trends and public attitudes related to the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.

Three years after September 11, three-fourths (76 %) of Americans are concerned that another attack will occur in the United States.

Despite these high levels of concern, only 39 % believe their community has an adequate emergency response plan.

Confidence in the federal government's ability to protect Americans has fallen to a crisis level—dropping to 53 % from 62 % in 2003—according to a new study from at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and The Children's Health Fund (CHF) [5].

The survey results show that America is more concerned than prepared and that the fear factor is one of the major threats in the United States.

Thus far, the article has addressed some of the problems facing emergency management development and shown ways in which Canada and the United States have dealt with the changes in the post September 11 period.

In defining the new normal in dealing with emergency and disasters, theoretical frameworks and practical experience of the past should not be discarded but should be adapted and enhanced to meet future demands. McEntire points out that in the past practitioners and academia initially gave priority to the civil hazard of the nuclear exchange between the United States and USSR. The attention was shifted to technological hazards due to Bhopal and Chernobyl and then to natural hazards due to the Loma Prieta earthquake, Hurricane Andrew and others.

The civil hazard of modern terrorism is much more complicated than the nuclear threat of the Cold War era. The main dilemma is the confrontation between more common but less consequential events versus infrequent but higher impact events.

September 11th has had an enormous impact on the emergency management system in North America, it became a recognized profession by the general public, while legislators have increased its funding. In addition, training and educational opportunities are providing qualified professionals to meet the future challenges that will result from continuing environmental degradation and the increasingly complexities of modern infrastructures and their possible failures.

What will be the Russian contribution to world emergency management development and what would it cost to make the necessary changes – these questions are left open. The Russian Emergency Management professionals were not present at the World Conference of Disaster Management therefore they cannot benefit directly from the experience of their North American counterparts. This article is an attempt to open a door between the North American experience and the Russian reality.

References

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