

The Canadian Rangers and COVID-19

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Purpose

To offer preliminary reflections on the activation of approximately 1200 Canadian Rangers to full-time readiness to assist their remote communities pursuant to Op LASER.

This briefing note supplements another that is specifically focused on 2nd Canadian Ranger Patrol Group (CRPG), which reflects on how Rangers in Nunavik support their communities in the fight against COVID-19.

Background

Commonly described as the military's eyes, ears, and voice in remote communities, the Canadian Rangers' leadership, organization, and training often makes them the *de facto* lead during local states of emergency. Examples include avalanches, flooding, extreme snowstorms, power plant shutdowns, forest fires, and water crises. Over the years, Rangers have played many roles, from delivering supplies to performing community evacuations. Their effectiveness in times of crisis flows from the relationships, networks, and partnerships that they have in their communities, their familiarity with local cultures, fluency in Indigenous languages, and the trust that they have earned from their fellow community members.

Under Operation LASER, available and willing members of the Canadian Rangers may be employed on full-time Class C service [as part of an integrated CAF response](#). Contracts began as early as 5 April 2020 and will continue until end of August 2020.

When announcing the plans on 30 March, Minister of National Defence Harjit Sajjan explained that “these flexible teams are capable of operating as local response forces to assist with humanitarian support, wellness checks, natural disaster response and other tasks as required. Canadian Ranger patrols will be available to enhance our understanding of the needs of the northern, remote and Indigenous communities, and we will be ready to respond as required.”

Discussion

The Rangers' activation fits within a broader "Whole of Government" approach. Placing Rangers on full-time service to support their communities shows a genuine commitment that the federal government, through this unique group of CAF members, is looking out for Northerners' needs by leveraging existing community resilience and capacity. Follow up work should be directed to systematically assessing how the Rangers perceived their roles and the ways that they were employed; how their contributions were perceived by medical authorities and other stakeholders; and how other community members perceived their service.

Although Canadian Rangers are not trained in primary health care delivery, preliminary evidence suggests that they have proven well positioned to support those who are. They know their communities, who is most vulnerable, and where support and assistance might be required. Their myriad roles and tasks include:

- conducting wellness checks
- establishing community response centres and establishing triage points to facilitate the work of healthcare personnel
- setting up remote COVID testing centres to facilitate triage
- delivering essential personal protective equipment and goods
- providing detailed information on COVID-19 precautions, including social distancing and handwashing
- delivering prescription medication to people in need
- providing food (including fresh game and fish) and supplies to elders and vulnerable community members
- clearing snow
- cutting and delivering firewood
- helping to unload and distribute freight from aircraft
- helping to screen air passengers
- conducting bear patrols
- harvesting and distributing traditional medicine
- monitoring the health and well-being of Junior Canadian Rangers and other community youth, and provided activities in which they could participate
- crafting masks
- serving as translators, and acting as a conduit between their communities and the government agencies involved in responding to potential community outbreaks
- gathering data and statistics on the current state of the community relative to pandemic relief efforts

Future access to additional information will further reveal how COVID-19 has exposed, and in many cases exacerbated, stresses, gaps, and vulnerabilities in isolated communities. For example, high rates of food insecurity in northern Indigenous communities are well documented, and travel restrictions associated with

COVID-19 have exposed [weaknesses in the food supply system in Northern Saskatchewan](#). Since April, more than 60 Rangers from the [Ile-a-la-Crosse, Lac La Ronge, Wollaston Lake, and Fond du Lac Ranger patrols](#) activated under Op LASER have helped their communities by fishing and hunting, as well as ensuring that community Elders have adequate firewood, water, medications, and groceries.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rangers have continued to safeguard their communities in more traditional roles, including flood preparedness and relief operations, ground search and rescue, and fire watch. These activities demonstrate the ability of Ranger patrols to conduct concurrent missions, as well as their utility as a community-based Reserve force that prepares and provides essential humanitarian assistance to vulnerable populations in Canada so that other CAF assets can be directed elsewhere.

Preliminary evidence from Op LASER affirms that the Canadian Rangers are a strong example of how DND/CAF relationships can effectively build disaster resilience in at-risk, remote, and isolated communities with small populations, limited infrastructure and local resources, and little access to rapid external assistance. Ongoing investments in Ranger patrols have strengthened the resilience of over 200 Canadian communities particularly vulnerable and exposed to natural hazards, including pandemics.

Recommendations

A dedicated effort must go in to consolidating lessons learned and best practices, across all 5 CRPGs, that might be applied in future public health missions and other emergency situations. This work must be conducted by analysts with a deep understanding of the unique challenges and constraints facing isolated Northern and coastal communities, Indigenous peoples in the Territorial and Provincial Norths, and the Canadian Ranger organization. Measures of effectiveness or “success” in other parts of the country may not be applicable or appropriate.

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Date prepared: 15 June 2020