

# Canada has no legislative responsibility to rescue citizens abroad

By Jennifer Pritchett, Associate Editor



Complaints that the federal government didn't react fast enough to get Canadians out of the Caribbean when Hurricane Irma hit highlight a misconception about Ottawa's responsibility to airlift its citizens out of harm's way in foreign countries, says Toronto civil litigator [Sarah O'Connor](#).

"The government has no clear policy to extract people out of international disaster zones," she tells [AdvocateDaily.com](#).

"In fact, Ottawa has no legislative responsibility to protect Canadians abroad. I believe there is a misunderstanding about what the government's duties are to its citizens worldwide."

O'Connor, principal of [O'Connor Richardson Professional Corporation](#), weighs in on the issue as some have complained the Canadian government's response to the hurricane wasn't adequate, reports [CBC](#).

Even after Canada airlifted more than 1,652 citizens out of the Caribbean, Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland apologized, saying, "I'm very sorry for your ordeal."

But one former Canadian diplomat says Canada has nothing to apologize for and maintains such rescue services should be on a cost-recovery basis, reports the national broadcaster.

O'Connor agrees.

She notes the taxpayer-funded health system doesn't, in many cases, cover the cost of a medivac for Canadians who are injured outside their home province. Citizens have to foot the bill for those flights, which can cost thousands of dollars.

One woman learned this when her daughter was injured in an ATV accident in Norman Wells, NWT, reports the [CBC](#). The 15-year-old required a medivac to Edmonton and the cost wasn't covered by the family's home province of Alberta or their private health insurance.

But yet, O'Connor says, some Canadians expect the government to pay for an international flight home when disaster strikes.

"If you're leaving on the last flight to Cuba before the hurricane, that's your choice to go," she says. "There has to be some personal responsibility. The government issued warnings and some voluntarily went anyway. I gather it's cheaper going to these islands during hurricane season because there's that risk."

There are also questions about whether the government did enough to warn citizens abroad about the dangers, O'Connor says.

It's good practice for people travelling to areas during hurricane season or to other danger zones to register with the Canadian consulate in that country so they can be reached, she says.

"Are some people suggesting the government should somehow monitor who is travelling to areas that may become dangerous because of weather or conflict?" she asks.

"Are they saying there needs to be controls, where the government would say, 'No, you can't board this flight because there is a civil war near where you're travelling so your passport is not valid,'" she says. "I don't think anybody wants that. Nobody wants Big Brother watching."

O'Connor says the issue has come up a number of times in the past. In fact, in 2011, then-prime minister Stephen Harper [said](#) Canada would not evacuate citizens from Japan following its massive earthquake.

She says it simply isn't reasonable that people expect the Canadian government to airlift them out of foreign countries when conditions become too dangerous for them to be there.

"Is it fair that they expect other Canadians to foot the bill for those efforts?" O'Connor says.