

Politics

Government operation to bring home pandemic-stranded Canadians almost complete, says MP

'The last part of the marathon is always the toughest' - MP Rob Oliphant

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Canadian tourist Lambert Desrosiers Gaudette, left, and British tourist Emma Snashford listen as another stranded foreign tourist plays ukulele at a hostel in New Delhi, India, April 2, 2020. (Shonal Ganguly/The Associated Press)

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The massive operation to bring home thousands of Canadians stranded by pandemic travel shutdowns has hit the homestretch: nearly 90 per cent of those who sought government assistance are now back in the country.

By the end of the week, close to 40,000 people will have been repatriated from 100 countries around the globe on 356 flights, according to the federal government.

Rob Oliphant, the parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs who has been leading the repatriation operation with Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne, said the remaining cases are the most difficult and, in some cases, the most unusual.

"The last part of the marathon is always the toughest," he said.

Out of the loop in Peru

One case brought to Oliphant's attention by another MP this week presents a whole new spin on self-isolation: a Canadian woman who spent two months in the Peruvian jungle only found out about the global COVID-19 crisis after emerging from the bush.

Another unresolved case involves a Canadian cruise ship crew member now trying to get home the long way; that individual and other crew members are sailing from the Caribbean across the Atlantic to Southampton, England because no closer port will accept the ship.

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More than 5,000 Canadians were abroad on 130 cruise ships when the pandemic struck. Most of them are now home, but dozens of crew members remain at sea.

Oliphant said some Canadians are trapped in remote, isolated or island locations. Others are stuck in places where there are safety and security issues, or in countries with which Canada has no diplomatic relations.

While these cases are "hugely challenging," he said, the government still tries to resolve them. In some cases, he added, it's just not possible.

'You're going to be here for a while'

"Essentially, we say you're going to be here for a while, let's help you shelter in place until commercial options come back, until lockdowns get lifted, until transit is easier," Oliphant said.

In terms of scale, one of the most challenging countries for the repatriation effort has been India. The federal government has helped more than 12,000 Canadians and permanent residents get home from there.

Oliphant said Canada has been working recently with India to get Indian citizens home, so planes have been carrying passengers in both directions.

Neeraj Bhardwaj of Waterloo, Ont. has spent many sleepless nights worrying about his father, wife and severely disabled son, who were stuck in India for several weeks.

'It was terrifying'

After what he calls an "agonizing wait," they arrived home Wednesday.

It was a tremendous relief for Bhardwaj, whose three-year-old son Jay has developmental issues and a rare form of epilepsy that can cause multiple seizures per day. He was anxious about medical care and treatments for his son during the unexpected extended stay.

"It was terrifying," Bhardwaj said. "That was my absolute worst fear — what if something happened? I don't know if they're going to arrange an ambulance or a helicopter, if needed, to go to a better hospital."





Neeraj Bhardwaj of Waterloo, Ont. is reunited with his son Jay after his family returned home from India with the help of the federal government. (Supplied by Neeraj Bhardwaj)

The group made the trip to visit family and seek specialized medical advice for Jay. After their scheduled return flight was cancelled, they missed the first government-assisted flight for financial reasons. They were removed from the second flight shortly before departure because Jay experienced an episode of nausea (it was not related to COVID-19).

They finally got home on a government-arranged flight operated by Qatar Airways. Bhardwaj said he is grateful for the many people who helped make it happen.

His family is now in a 14-day quarantine, as required by law in Canada for people arriving home from international destinations.

At the peak of the repatriation operation, Oliphant said, he was getting up to 1,800 emails a day about stranded travellers. That's dropped down to about 200 since.

'Problem-solvers'

Oliphant said the operation's success has been due largely to the work of Global Affairs Canada's diplomatic, research and policy staffers, who have been working around the clock.

"They have become travel agents. They have become problem solvers," he said.

Canada's strong diplomatic relations with countries around the world also greatly aided the emergency exercise, he said.

Canada has been working with other countries to coordinate and swap seats on flights. With airspace closures, lockdowns and curfews in place in various countries, the government also must negotiate with local and national authorities for permits and other logistical requirements to get people out.



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