CJAD-AM interview with Ms Cheryl Bertoia
on the Elias Makos Show with Trudie Mason
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Audio part 1:
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TM: …Stay tuned for that.

Did you know that 10 September, today, is Global Search and Rescue Day? Why 10 September? It is the anniversary of the first-ever satellite-assisted rescue in history. It occurred here in Canada in 1982, and the day, Global Search and Rescue Day is designed to pay tribute to people involved in the global search and rescue network.

We'll talk now with someone with the International Cospas-Sarsat Programme. That's a real mouthful. It's based here in Montreal and it is key to keeping people safe. Cheryl Bertoia, thank you for joining us on CJAD.

CB: It's great to be here. Thank you very much, Miss Mason.

TM: Cheryl is Principal Operations Officer and Deputy Head of Secretariat for the International Cospas-Sarsat Programme. Again, a little bit of a mouthful there… Tell us what the Programme is all about, Cheryl.

CB: I'd love to. Cospas-Sarsat, it is a mouthful of an acronym, unfortunately, but it can be simplified into understanding that it is a global satellite system that listens for emergency distress beacons anywhere on Earth. So whenever a person in a distress situation activates a distress beacon, they could be at sea, they could be in the mountains, they could be flying in a plane… our satellite system detects the signal and shunts it on to search and rescue authorities around the world. And I think a really interesting part of our Programme is that the service is free of charge to anyone in a distress situation.

TM: Is there international support for the Programme? Which nations are in on supporting it?

CB: Oh, there is very much international support for the Programme. The original four founding countries were the USA, Canada, France and the Soviet Union, of course now Russia. But since then we've been joined by many more countries around the world and have over forty-five member states and organizations supporting our System.

TM: And by supporting, do, they also contribute to, for example, the maintenance of the satellites? The staff that listens for alerts?

CB: Yes, they do. Indeed they do. The satellites themselves, they do all the design and development for the sensors that are carried aboard the satellite. They operate the antennas that receive the signals and what we call Mission Control Centers, which are giant data routers that take all of this satellite data, make it into a man-readable format and send it to the great folks who put their lives at risk, rescuing people in distress. These are the Rescue Coordination Centers.

TM: It makes sense to me, for example, that, you know, an oil tanker might have one of these beacons; an airline sending planes overseas; but can anybody get one of these beacons in order to ensure their safety in the event of an emergency?

CB: Absolutely, so the two examples that you gave are actually what we call our regulated market, so the United Nations agencies that are responsible for safety of life at sea and for international air travel do require carriage of our beacons. However, anybody can buy a beacon, because emergencies don't happen only to those aboard aircraft or ships. They happen not only to explorers. It can happen to anyone: boaters, pilots, hikers, hunters, snowmobilers, even families traveling in remote areas. Anyone can find themselves beyond cell phone coverage, and a distress beacon gives you that safety of a direct connection to our international search and rescue System.

TM: Have there been any technological advances that have helped the work of this System since it was set up?

CB: Yes, absolutely, there have been numerous, but the three that we are really celebrating this year are the return link service, which allows a confirmation to people in distress that their alert has been received. This is almost a messaging system that sends a message to the beacon, giving the user in distress confidence that help has been notified. We also have a new type of aviation beacon which allows aircraft to automatically transmit their position when abnormal flight conditions occur, even before any potential impact. And the latest developments on the satellite side are the MEOSAR satellites. These are probably most commonly known as GPS-style satellites where we use multiple satellites simultaneously to pinpoint a beacon location and this happens very fast, within minutes.

TM: You mentioned that the service is free, but I assume there's a cost to obtaining one of these beacons. And then, is it possible you get dinged for your rescue by whatever country has to send people to rescue you?

CB: There is indeed a cost for the beacon itself. Those are commercial products. Our role as the International System is only to certify that they operate with our satellite system. The cost for rescue is considered an inherently governmental responsibility in countries around the world. So if you are genuinely in a distress situation, there is no charge for the rescue itself and indeed many of the vendors of our beacons will replace your beacon for free if you use it in a real distress situation.

TM: This is one of the organizations I wasn't aware is based in Montreal, an international organization here. How many people do you have based here that are contributing to the running of the Programme?

CB: Our headquarters in Montreal has been here since 2005. Before that we were collocated with the International Maritime Agency, that's the UN agency that mandates carriage of our beacons on commercial shipping. Now we're collocated in Montreal, with ICAO, the International Civil Aviation Organization, because again of the intersection with the safety responsibilities. Our staff here in Montreal is quite small. Our Programme headquarters only has about twelve people in it at any given time. But the global Programme is much larger with thousands of people involved.

TM: Well, if you're monitoring twenty-four hours a day around the world, the I would expect that requires quite a bit of manpower.

CB: Yes, of course, at the Mission Control Centers themselves.

TM: And there are some three dozen of those, I believe.

CB: Yes, exactly, and the Canadian Mission Control Center is in Ontario, located in Trenton,

TM: Also site of a major Canadian Air Force base. So again, kind of dovetailing on the aviation aspect of that, I would guess.

CB: Yes, of course.

TM: Cheryl, thank you very much for helping us to learn more about this important Programme.

CB: Excellent! And I think an important message for your listeners is that behind every distress alert, someone is listening, and that's what we're here to celebrate today on Global Search and Rescue Day… the people who are dedicated to saving lives around the world.

TM: Cheryl Bertoia, Principal Operations Officer and Deputy Head of Secretariat for the International Cospas-Sarsat Programme, based here in Montreal.