

Olympic security: Not just slab-faced apes with earpieces

Many high-flying VIPs will be shielded quietly but firmly from ever-present threats

BY ETHAN BARON, THE PROVINCE JANUARY 27, 2010



Celebrities and business bigwigs are hiring legions of bodyguards and security agents during their Olympic visits to protect their safety — and their reputations.

One security company has added an extra 300 staff to safeguard just a dozen high-flying clients.

Many bodyguards won't be slab-faced apes with earpieces. You may not even see the security that's in place for CEOs and Hollywood stars — unless you get too close.

"A lot of times, when we're looking after these people, it's not obvious that we're there, until we have to be," says Sunil Ram, owner of Executive Security Services International, a Canadian company with several clients attending the Games.

Although private bodyguards aren't allowed to carry guns in Canada, those providing what's known in the industry as "close protection" possess hand-to-hand combat skills. Many are former police officers and soldiers.

However, violence in the service of a client remains a last resort, private-security heads say. For most who buy security services, an ugly incident with a celebrity-obsessed fan or an angry protester could cause injury beyond the physical.

"We're not the dogs of war, we're the cats of war," says Mark LaLonde, a director of Canpro Global, an international "risk-mitigation" company working the Games.

"At the first sign of trouble, we get our clients to run away. It may be a personal safety and security issue, but it may also be something that can prove embarrassing."

Canpro Global has hired 300 extra staff for the Olympics to protect 12 clients. Some staff have specialized driving skills, others are bodyguards. While planning for all manner of threats, Canpro has paid particular attention to civil unrest and terrorism.

Protesters may create problems for the company's clients by blocking traffic or committing violence, LaLonde says.

The fact that two tonnes of ammonium nitrate — favoured by terrorists for huge homemade bombs — appear to have gone missing while in transit from Alberta to North Vancouver has upped the threat level for security-company clients. "There's certainly an elevated risk now," LaLonde says.

The U.S. State Department has warned that heavy security at some Olympic sites may broaden the area vulnerable to terrorist attack.

"As security increases in and around Olympic venues, terrorists could shift their focus to more unprotected Olympic venues, open public spaces, hotels, railway and other transportation systems, churches, restaurants and other sites not associated with the Olympics," a department advisory says. The terror threat will put private guards "a little bit on edge," Ram says.

"Canada has been mentioned by some of these extremist groups as a potential target. This would be a great venue, unfortunate as it is, for extremists."

To protect athletes, the RCMP-led Integrated Security Unit will use tactics similar to that which are in place when the Vancouver Canucks play hockey, says RCMP Cpl. Joe Taplin.

"We look at any type of scenario . . . where somebody would try to approach an athlete, and that's where the security plan is developed from," Taplin says. There is nothing to suggest a major threat to public security at the Games, police say.

"Right now, our threat assessment's at 'low,' " Taplin says. "We're continuing to gather intelligence and information in relation to that."

For South Korean figure-skating sensation Kim Yu-na, a Canadian teenager who has professed undying love and written to her under different names has created security concerns.

But Skate Canada isn't expecting such problems. "With Canada, our fans have grown up with our skaters," says Skate Canada's high-performance director, Mike Slipchuk.

"For some of these countries — like Korea, that's in a sense newer to the world of skating since Yu-na has really put them on the map — the attention that's been on her is really a lot higher than it would be on our skaters."

Many businesses in the Olympic zone are beefing up their private security, leading Commissionaires B.C. to hire 350 additional guards and bringing its Games-time staff to about 1,000.

"Not all our visitors are likely to be nice, law-abiding citizens," says Commissionaires B.C. president Allen Batchelar.

"There's probably the threat of potentially increased crime. Sometimes during an event like this, crime actually goes down because of the security presence. That's our job, to provide that presence, so vandalism and theft don't take place."