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Helping U.S. Citizens Abroad During a Crisis: Role of the Department of State

Overview

The November 13, 2015, Paris terrorist attacks prompted the Department of State (DOS) to review its warning systems for Americans overseas for any possible improvements, a senior Diplomatic Security official testified on December 8. Such systems are used to communicate threat information when Americans find themselves confronted by a crisis in a foreign country, such as a natural disaster, heightened terrorist threat, or the outbreak of war.

The Department of State is required by law to provide a range of threat-related services to Americans abroad. In all but the most extreme situations, the department will serve primarily in an information-distribution role. However, when the departure of U.S. citizens is advised, additional assistance may be provided.

Providing Threat and Crisis Information

Travel Information and the STEP Program

The Department of State is required by law to serve as a clearinghouse of information on any major disaster or incident abroad which affects the health and safety of U.S. citizens abroad (22 U.S.C. 2715). The department carries out this function through the Consular Information Program, which provides a range of products, including Country Specific Information; Travel Alerts; Travel Warnings; Worldwide Cautions; Messages for U.S. Citizens; Security Messages for U.S. Citizens; and Emergency Messages for U.S. Citizens; and Fact Sheets. These messages are posted on the travel.state.gov website; 48 travel warnings or alerts were listed on the DOS website as of November 14, 2015 (see **Figure 1**; the number of alerts can change frequently). DOS also maintains active social media accounts, which may serve as communication channels in an emergency.

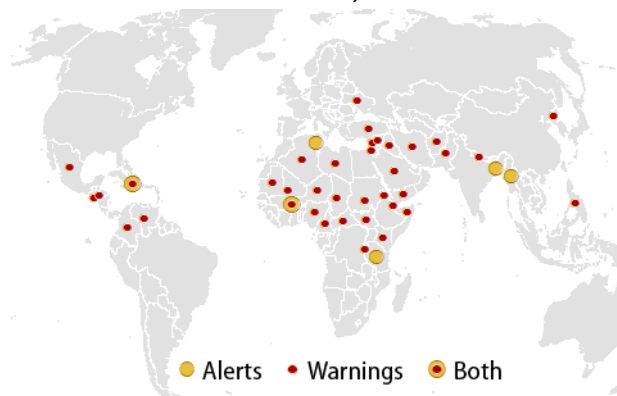
“No Double Standards” Policy

In its crisis communications, DOS applies a “no double standard” policy: any threat information shared with U.S. officials and their families must also generally be made available to other Americans.

The department encourages—but does not require—U.S. citizens traveling abroad to enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) in order to facilitate communication in an evacuation or other emergency, addressing the requirements of another law, 22 U.S.C. 4802. STEP is an Internet site through which U.S. citizens residing or traveling abroad can enroll themselves online (DOS does not collect information on non-U.S. citizens).

The system provides country-specific and post-specific email lists that registrants can join to receive updates. The site allows both short- and long-term travelers abroad to provide their itinerary, residence, and emergency contact information. Organizations such as travel agencies or firms with employees overseas may also enter information on their clients or staff.

Figure 1. Active Country-Specific Travel Warnings and Alerts as of November 14, 2015



Source: Graphic created by CRS using Department of State (2015) and Esri (2014).

Should telephone or Internet services be interrupted during a crisis, DOS also uses local television and radio to broadcast emergency information and may also use a system of predesignated U.S. citizen “wardens” to pass on information to other U.S. citizens through means such as text messaging. The wardens are individuals connected to communities of Americans, such as hotel representatives or business contacts, who agree to serve in a liaison role.

When crises overwhelm embassy and consulate switchboards, DOS also uses crisis-specific web-based databases that accept identifying information about U.S. citizens that may be used to locate the individual and offer emergency consular assistance; special email addresses established for public inquiries during a crisis; and/or a central phone number for the Bureau of Consular Affairs’ Overseas Citizen Services staff.

Advising the Private Sector Through OSAC

The Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC) is a key channel of communication between DOS and U.S. private sector entities abroad. Created in 1985 as a public-private partnership, OSAC provides liaison and interchange of information concerning developments in the overseas security environment. The OSAC “Council” comprises 34 private and public sector member organizations that

represent specific industries or agencies operating abroad. Through OSAC, the DOS Bureau of Diplomatic Security (DS) populates a website with unclassified information on security related incidents and threats overseas, including “OSAC Analysis” reports on major security incidents around the world and security-specific coverage of major events such as the Olympics, G8 meetings, and the World Economic Forum. DS also maintains a dedicated Research and Information Support Center staffed with personnel dedicated solely to the needs of the U.S. private sector. Finally, DS supports 143 OSAC Country Councils overseas, where private sector personnel meet with the embassy or consulate staff to share information about security issues of mutual concern in the region and pool resources in response.

Evacuation of U.S. Citizens

Direct Assistance Is the Exception, Not the Rule

The Secretary of State is also required to provide for the safe and efficient evacuation of private U.S. citizens when their lives may be endangered, per 22 U.S.C. 4802. In practice, even when the department advises U.S. citizens to leave a country, DOS will advise citizens to evacuate using existing commercial transportation options whenever possible. For instance, a September 21 Travel Warning recommended that “U.S. citizens currently in Burkina Faso depart as soon as it is feasible to do so” and advised that “U.S. citizens are responsible for making their own travel arrangements.”

In more rare circumstances, when the local transportation infrastructure is compromised, DOS can arrange chartered or non-commercial transportation for U.S. citizens to evacuate to a nearby safe location determined by the department. For example, on May 15, U.S. Embassy Bujumbura informed U.S. citizens that it had chartered flights to evacuate nationals from Burundi. Given the challenges associated with in-country transportation during crises, the department typically requires citizens to make their own way to the departure point. On arrival in a safe location, evacuees are then typically required to make their own onward travel arrangements.

The cost of any State Department-provided evacuation assistance to U.S. citizens is, by law, required to be provided “on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable” (22 U.S.C. 2671(b) (2) (A)). This means that evacuation costs are generally the responsibility of the U.S. citizen evacuated, who is asked to commit in writing to repayment of the U.S. government (although emergency financial assistance may be available for destitute evacuees). The department typically charges the equivalent of a full coach commercial fare on a comparable mode of transportation at the time that commercial travel ceases to be a viable option (in the previously mentioned Burundi case, the announced cost per passenger was approximately \$620). To the extent appropriated funding is employed to support evacuation activities, such funds are drawn from the Emergencies in the Diplomatic and Consular Service account.

Involvement of the U.S. military in any evacuation of U.S. citizens is a last resort, as most evacuations are able to rely on commercial means and local infrastructure. When those elements are not available, DOS and Defense Department coordination is addressed through a standing Memorandum of Agreement that addresses the roles and responsibilities of each agency. A notable example is the July 2006 evacuation of nearly 15,000 American citizens from war-torn Lebanon.

Key Resources for U.S. Citizen Travelers:

Bureau of Consular Affairs: www.travel.state.gov (for warnings, alerts); also 1-888-407-4747 (or +1-202-501-4444 from overseas).

Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) - step.state.gov/step/ (Department of State database intended to facilitate communication in an evacuation or other emergency)

Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC): www.osac.gov (security information for U.S. private sector entities abroad)

Questions for Congress

Some observers have scrutinized areas in which the State Department’s broad threat messages provided during times of crisis might be improved. For example, on November 23, DOS issued a Worldwide Travel Alert, warning citizens of the risks of travel due to an elevated threat of terrorism. The message was derided by some observers as being vague and containing little new information, as the content largely overlapped with a July Worldwide Caution. The repetition and lack of specificity of such messages, some have suggested, might cause target audiences to pay less attention to future warnings.

The State Department, in extreme situations, provides assistance to U.S. citizens evacuating a location in crisis. However, questions have been raised regarding the reliability of DOS estimates of potential U.S. citizen evacuees in each country, an annual process that produces what is known as an “F-77” report. A number of factors make accurate accounting challenging (no requirement for registration in the STEP program, dual nationality, etc.). Some have suggested that the potential inaccuracy of such estimates could hamper evacuation planning.

Finally, some have questioned whether DOS evacuation practices and resources are adequate for the current threat environment. Observers have noted that in some instances, such as in April 2015 in Yemen, the United States advised citizens to depart using commercial means, while other countries arranged for the evacuation of their nationals. A review of lessons learned in such situations may be useful in informing related policies.

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