



The Importance of Being Prepared

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Overview

Emergency preparedness has become a critical consideration for U.S. citizens traveling overseas. Development of a safety- and security-minded culture is critical to an organization. Although development of emergency preparedness plans generally falls on senior-level staff, adherence to and compliance with these plans often falls on the layman who may travel to security “hotspots” or be faced with the fallout from a national disaster. To maintain security awareness, employees need to understand that they are also a crucial part of the equation.

By examining three recent crises around the world in which U.S. private-sector organizations found their crisis-management plans put into action, this report looks to encourage OSAC constituents to develop new (or reassess existing) plans by considering lessons learned from those who shared their experiences. It also offers basic advice on training personnel to consider emergency-preparedness as part of their job, even if their position falls outside the realm of organizational security.

Lessons Learned

Nepal Earthquake

On April 25, 2015, [a 7.8 magnitude earthquake](#) shook Kathmandu and surrounding areas in Nepal. The earthquake, aftershocks, and subsequent landslides contributed to the deaths of over 8,600 people, with over 21,800 injured, and many unaccounted for. Evacuations were difficult due to constant power outages, widespread road damage, and flight delays and cancellations. Furthermore, the Nepalese government did not have a coordinated evacuation strategy for foreign nationals.

The Nepalese government, OSAC constituents, and independent travelers could have benefited from improved natural-disaster contingency plans. As OSAC constituents – many from U.S. academic institutions – rushed to evacuate their students and personnel, a lack of telecommunications capabilities hindered timely roll-calls and evacuation strategies. In countries prone to natural disasters and where the public infrastructure is underdeveloped, OSAC constituents should consider having satellite phones readily available to travelers in the event that the Internet and telephone lines become inoperable. OSAC constituents may also consider purchasing emergency evacuation insurance to evacuate personnel.

Constituents must also consider the medium- to long-term risks that develop after an initial disaster. With the annual monsoon season looming, organizations still in Nepal are experiencing heightened [sanitation and hygiene concerns](#) because of collapsed infrastructure.

West Africa Ebola Outbreak

The largest outbreak of Ebola virus disease (EVD) ever reported – in number of infections, in geographical scope, and in duration – swept through three countries in West Africa beginning in March 2014, causing over 11,100 deaths and at least 15,800 more infections. This Ebola outbreak, the first in West Africa, began in Guinea’s heavily forested southeast when a child was bitten by an infected bat. [It wasn’t until May 9, 2015, more than a year later, that the World Health Organization declared Liberia Ebola-free.](#)

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West African governments and OSAC constituents took precautionary measures against Ebola. Many countries closed their land, air, and sea borders with countries that reportedly had citizens infected with Ebola, and many more closed their borders to citizens of affected countries and travelers with recent visits to the region. Airports that received traffic from affected countries increased their medical surveillance of passengers with questionnaires and thermal-imaging cameras. The governments of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone established treatment and isolation centers and increased public awareness campaigns in attempt to stop the spread. Sierra Leone imposed multiple three-day [stay-home education campaigns](#).

OSAC constituents, apart from those involved with medicine and healthcare, were at a very low risk for contracting the disease. U.S. embassies in all three countries remained fully staffed throughout the outbreak, although family members were evacuated. Some constituents withdrew operations, and others prohibited travel to countries impacted by Ebola, based on State Department Travel Warning guidance and often due to logistical and travel impediments.

Terror Attack in Kenya

On September 21, 2013, four attackers armed with guns and grenades stormed the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, indiscriminately attacking shoppers. The al-Shabaab terrorist group claimed responsibility for the attack, claiming retaliation for Kenyan involvement in the Somali conflict. At least 71 people were killed, and more than 175 were injured.

Many OSAC constituents responded to the attack by avoiding all Western establishments such as restaurants, hotels and tourist attractions and prohibiting travel after dark. Some U.S. organizations restricted all travel to Kenya until the situation was resolved.

OSAC constituents utilized various methods -- such as telephone trees, text or SMS messages, emails, or social media -- to account for employees and travelers in Kenya. Constituents used text or SMS messages, robocalls, emails, social media, and other mass communication mediums to distribute information within their organizations as events became known. Several constituents reported problems accounting for personnel -- some taking as long as a few days to account for everyone. As a result, many now recommend establishing crisis-management plans include alternate mechanisms for accounting for personnel in the event that landlines and cellular networks are unavailable.

How do OSAC Constituents Manage Emergency Preparedness Programs?

OSAC constituents must identify a realistic, comprehensive approach for how their management and employees would prepare for and respond to crises. While there is no uniform emergency-preparedness strategy that adequately fits the needs of all organizations in all circumstances, security professionals can prepare their support staff and travelers by clearly articulating emergency communication plans and the employee's role during a crisis. Many companies give travelers a small card with emergency contacts, including corporate crisis management team, travel agents, and medical evacuation providers, to carry in a wallet or bag in case of emergency. It is also beneficial to put strategy into practice through crisis management exercises.

An OSAC constituent in the media and entertainment industry shared details of its disaster preparedness program that included centralizing its emergency-preparedness and -response duties. They have a Crisis Management Team that runs disaster preparedness exercises across the enterprise to engage company leadership. They also have a Community Watch Team that is responsible for messaging all employees on disaster preparedness, among other travel safety and security issues.

A faith-based OSAC constituent provided a step-by-step crisis preparedness guide for trips abroad. Travelers must identify emergency scenarios (like a natural disaster), establish a communication plan with other volunteers, and assemble a 72-hour emergency survival kit. During a disaster, travelers follow their

communication plan and account for their traveling party. Travelers also plan for alternative communication methods should telecommunications or transportation routes be disrupted. Alternatives could include short-wave radios or personal contact. After a disaster, travelers must report the crisis event to a supervisor. Their crisis plan must also address the implications of a violent intruder or a bombing incident.

U.S. Embassy Tegucigalpa recently ran an emergency-preparedness exercise that taught dependents basic safety and survival skills, including what to put in an emergency-survival kit and how to use a shortwave radio. This exercise taught children how to keep themselves safe in the event that an adult is not present or is incapacitated. A key lesson from the exercise was how to remain calm during a crisis disaster, a challenge that applies not only to children but to adults. Most importantly, the Embassy realized that they were working with people with different abilities and learning styles, so they incorporated a bit of fun into the exercise—the “emergency” was a zombie apocalypse—to achieve buy-in from participants. Organizations may similarly find their adult employees willing to learning emergency-preparedness techniques while they are ostensibly being entertained.

How to Prepare your Employees: The Basics

Some basic ways to prepare for an emergency scenario include.

Register on STEP:

Registering for the Department of State’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program ([STEP](#)) will inform the U.S. Embassy/Consulate of U.S. citizen travel itineraries. STEP enrollees will receive emergency Consular Affairs messages from the nearest U.S. embassy/consulate. In a crisis, U.S. citizens may be called by the office of American Citizens Services (ACS) at the U.S. embassy/consulate to assess their status, location, and needs for assistance. In the event of a crisis, U.S. citizens are advised to contact the nearest ACS; contact information is available [online](#).

Assemble a “go bag”:

A disaster supply kit, known as a “go bag,” is necessary when preparing for an emergency. Basic services (gas, electricity, sewage, and potable water) may not be available for prolonged periods. A go bag should contain equipment to sustain outages, and needs to be prepared and readily available. It should contain enough cash, non-perishable food, water, first aid supplies (including prescription medications), sanitation materials (hand sanitizers, bleach, toilet paper, etc), and other supplies and tools to last at least 72 hours. Copies of personal identification documents (driver’s license, passports, visa) are also essential, in the event a traveler is unable to access the originals.

Analyze Your Surroundings:

Consider the types of crises your employees could encounter while on travel. For example, a location could be prone to earthquakes or at risk for flooding during hurricane certain season. Terrorist attacks or threats could pose heightened risks for wrong place, wrong time violence. Political instability instigated by mass public demonstrations or a coup d’état could lead to extensive logistical disruptions and hinder employee evacuations.

In general, it is wise to:

- Select lodging that is resilient to weather-related impacts from natural disasters;
- Avoid travel when there are known periods of annual inclement weather or geo-political instability (such as elections); and
- Establish alternative travel routes and an exit strategy should critical transportation infrastructure be obstructed during a crisis.

Establishing a Communication Plan:

Employees, their families, and colleagues may not be together when disaster strikes. Make sure you have a known, [reliable communication plan](#) with redundancies to reestablish contact within the group and with friends/family/work beyond the affected region. Your plan should consist of a safe place to meet, a method to contact each other and communicate externally, and a location for shelter. You should also arrange for a check-in contact outside the region of travel for those who have not yet been able to meet in-country; the external contact can serve as an organizational point of contact not only for those involved in the emergency, but for inevitable calls from headquarters to ensure in-country personnel are accounted for.

Resource Library

[OSAC Personal Readiness and Emergency Preparedness Guide](#)

[Kathmandu, Nepal Earthquake Preparedness Guide](#)

[Logistics Cluster](#) (Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) coordination mechanism)

[Humanity Road \(Top-rated disaster response nonprofit\)](#)