



# How to Prepare for Travel in a Potential Crisis Zone

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## Summary

Locations in U.S. Department of State Travel Advisories are rated on a scale from 1 to 4, with Level 1 advising U.S. citizens to exercise normal precautions, and Level 4 advising U.S. citizens to not travel to that location. The Level 4 advisory is typically issued to countries with severe levels of crime, unrest, or terrorism where embassy support is very limited. Despite the risk, many individuals and organizations currently have operations or travel to these higher-risk countries. This report will provide tools to improve the personal security of those traveling, and guidance on what to do during a crisis.

## Background

Two major crises that can occur while traveling to high-risk countries are natural disasters and a non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO). Natural disasters are a steady phenomenon that impact many regions. Earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, wildfires, and blizzards often carry second- and third-order effects. With extreme weather events, critical infrastructure can be impacted, cutting off vital resources to travelers and hindering movement or isolating them from rescue or support efforts. NEOs are ordered or authorized departures of civilian noncombatants and nonessential military personnel from areas of risk overseas to a designated safe haven.

## Examples of Natural Disasters

The 2020 South Asian floods that persisted from May to October devastated parts of Nepal, Bangladesh, and India, resulting in the displacement of millions and the deaths of over 600 people. In 2025, Myanmar was struck by a 7.7-7.9 earthquake that killed over 5,000 and injured over 11,000 people. Damage to infrastructure, overwhelmed emergency services, and crippled communication networks contributed to the crisis.

- See OSAC reports: [Wildfires: Risks and Mitigation Measures](#), [Landslides: What Are They and How to Prepare](#), [Earthquake Preparedness Toolkit](#)

## Examples of Non-Combatant Evacuation Operations (NEO)

In April 2023, clashes between two rival factions of Sudan’s military government—the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF)—sparked the Sudanese civil war.<sup>1</sup> Foreign travelers and aid workers were caught in the violence erupting through the capital and surrounding areas.

During the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban in 2021, security deteriorated at such a fast rate that many were displaced throughout the country, forced to hold for windows of opportunity for rescue, or to find alternate methods of escape.<sup>2, 3</sup> Foreigners and specifically westerners or those allied with the U.S. were hunted by the Taliban in the days and weeks following the formal evacuation, with many having to flee across the border into neighboring Pakistan.

Although a traveler’s own government may work to assist in bringing its citizens to safety, this should not be relied upon as evacuation efforts may be delayed or hindered by numerous factors.

## Accommodation

When planning a trip to a country with a Level 3 or 4 Department of State travel advisory, consider the following:

- Is the accommodation in a well-lit area?
- Are there camera security systems?
- How far is the accommodation from the main road?
- What is the distance from the accommodation to emergency medical facilities?
- Are there armed security guards or patrols of the grounds?
- Are there gates or barriers?
- Does the room’s door have a secure lock?
- What floor is the room on? Too low could allow access from the street, too high could hinder evacuation during a fire or other emergency.

Hotel rooms should be selected between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> floors, if possible, as these floors provide their own deterrence in their difficulty to access from outside; however, in case of escape, they are not located on floors that are too high and allow for a quick exit. These floors also provide refuge in case of natural disasters, such as flooding. Ensure the door is secure with no considerable gaps between the door and frame. Large gaps can allow the insertion of lock-

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<sup>1</sup> Center for Preventative Action, [Civil War in Sudan](#), April 15, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Atlantic Council, [Evacuating noncombatants from Ukraine will be a mess. The West needs to ditch the blame game this time](#), February 16, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Business Insider, [US officials helped an American citizen and their family escape Afghanistan across an overland route](#), September 6, 2021.

defeating objects or devices. Towels can be placed under doors to prevent access. Door jams and locking bars can be utilized to prevent or delay entry by force.

Informed site selection can help turn you into a “hard” target as opposed to a “soft” target. “Soft” targets are people, places, or things that are easily exploited or harmed by aggressors due to ease of accessibility, lack of security measures, and potential positive gain from exploitation. An example of a “soft” target is a traveler wearing expensive jewelry walking down a dark alley in an area with high crime and poor law enforcement. The environment and lack of situational awareness make the traveler a soft target; easy to exploit and take advantage of. Accommodation in isolated locations, with little to no security, and a great distance from emergency medical facilities or law enforcement make for easy targets of crime.

Conversely, if this individual removed the expensive jewelry, traveled through well-lit areas, maintained situational awareness, and did not travel alone, they would make themselves a harder target for crimes of opportunity. “Hard” targets are people, places, or things that have multiple interlocking methods of protection, dissuading possible assailants or hostile threats.

- See the following OSAC reports, [Creating Accommodation Safety & Security Guidelines](#), [Hotels: The Inns and Outs](#), and [Considerations for Hotel Security](#).

## Movement

Varying daily routes can improve your security posture and prevent the possibility of a targeted crime. Consistent routines provide criminals or terrorists the information needed to pattern victim movements to accurately coordinate a crime, kidnapping, or attack. Restricting foot travel to daylight hours improves security posture due to increased civilian presence acting as a deterrent.

Selecting public transportation versus private transportation is a situational-dependent dilemma. Packed trains and buses with poor traffic laws can create situations with increased risk of crime or accidents. A lack of safe public transportation infrastructure can further degrade security posture and capabilities in the event of a crisis. It may be safer to use verifiable ride booking companies or ride share services.

Natural disasters and other crises can arise quickly with very little warning. For example, vehicle checkpoints, combat zones, or blocked roads may completely alter travel routes. Having robust plans in place for a broad spectrum of risks—including weather, unrest, civil war, or political violence—and drilling steps with employees in advance is a sound best practice. Consult [Travel.State.gov](#) before traveling and follow its social media channels to stay current on alerts relevant to your destination.

Enroll your trip in the U.S. Department of State Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). This will facilitate rapid contact in case of emergency, as well as provide updates on health, weather, safety, and security of the area you will be traveling or working in.

## Communication

Communication with reliable, outside support networks is a vital component of safety when traveling to high-risk countries.

The most common means of overseas communication identified by OSAC members is the use of eSIM cards. Many smartphones can accept local SIMs to utilize local networks; check with your carrier in advance that your phone is unlocked for overseas use to prevent any lapses in communication. Alternatively, you can consider adding an international travel plan through your cell phone carrier. These can often be charged by the day or by data usage. Satellite phones are the best method of communication for austere environments or in the event of a natural disaster when phone services or networks are non-functioning. However, many countries consider satellite phone usage illegal, so always make sure to check the laws and regulations of the country you plan to travel to regarding satellite phone usage.

Establishing predetermined communication times can provide an early warning system in case of emergency and facilitate active movement tracking by authorities in the case of natural disasters, disappearances, or other crises. One example of a predetermined communication plan that OSAC members have found effective is having communication windows every eight, 12, or 24 hours. Missing two windows would trigger contact with authorities or local points of contact on the ground to initiate plans for an in-person check-in or notification to emergency services.

- See OSAC reports: [Traveling Abroad with Mobile Devices: Best Practices for the Private Sector](#) , [Satellite Phones: Critical or Contraband?](#)

## Evacuation

Multiple factors including the nature of the crisis should be considered when deciding whether to stay in place or leave during a crisis. The course of action may be different for a natural disaster vs unrest. For example, during a natural disaster, you may not need to evacuate if you are deemed safe in your current location until rescue services can arrive. A rapidly dissolving political situation, paired with unrest and the risk of civil war, may require a different approach. The more time spent in a hostile environment may increase the risk, especially where foreigners are targeted.

For more information on evacuations and protocol, see OSAC's report, [Guide to U.S. Government-Assisted Evacuations](#)

## Go Bags

Having the right tools ready in the event of a crisis can improve your odds of survival and safety. “Go” bags are typically loaded with all the essential items needed if you must “Go” in a hurry during a variety of different emergency scenarios. Keep the bag light with the fewest items necessary for survival. This should include such things as proper documentation, a multi-tool, flashlight, a lighter, and some mode of communication. In an emergency where you may be isolated or cut off from support networks, these simple items can make a critical difference.

- See OSAC’s report: [Before Disaster Strikes: Preparing Your Go-and Stay-Bags](#), for more information on what to pack for an emergency.

## Conclusion

Traveling to high-risk countries can pose a multitude of challenges. Understanding the various natures of crises and the different responses they require and having robust communications and emergency planning drilled in advance is necessary for effective risk mitigation and management.

## Additional Information

For more information on this topic, please contact OSAC’s regional teams:

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