What the Department of State Can and Can't Do in a Crisis

1. What is the Department of State's role during a crisis overseas? Do you always evacuate U.S. citizens during a crisis overseas?

The actions we take depend on the nature of the crisis. In some instances, we may only need to provide information on conditions in the country, such as warning about areas of unrest, how and where to seek help, and other useful advice. In more serious situations, we may recommend that U.S. citizens leave the foreign country, and, if commercial transportation is not available, provide departure assistance, as our resources permit.

2. What departure assistance do you provide? Why do you tell U.S. citizens they should leave, and then don’t offer transportation?

The assistance we provide depends upon the nature of the crisis. Regularly scheduled commercial flights or transportation are always the best option when local communications and transportation infrastructure are intact and operating normally, even if we have advised all U.S. citizens to leave. Our efforts are devoted to keeping the local U.S. citizen community informed of developments and travel options.

3. What happens during an evacuation?

Each evacuation depends on the nature of the crisis. In extreme situations, where local infrastructure is damaged or severely compromised, we work with the host government, other countries, and other U.S. government agencies to arrange chartered or non-commercial transportation for U.S. citizens seeking to depart. This could include transportation by air, land, or sea. While we partner closely with the Department of Defense, military options are only used as a last resort. You should not expect the U.S. military to assist you when we issue a Travel Warning advising you to leave a country.

4. Why don’t you use the U.S. military in every evacuation?

We use the resources that are most expedient and appropriate to the situation. Expectations of rescue by helicopters, the U.S. military, and U.S. government-provided transportation with armed escorts reflect a Hollywood script more than reality. While some evacuations involve U.S. military or other U.S. government assets, most rely on commercial transportation and local infrastructure. Any level of departure assistance constitutes an enormous logistical effort.

5. Will the U.S. government come and pick me up if I need assistance getting to the airport or other evacuation point?

Crises place an enormous strain on our resources as embassy personnel focus on assisting U.S. citizens affected by the crisis. Security conditions can also limit our ability to move freely around the country. It is almost impossible for the U.S. government to provide in-country transportation service to individuals or specific groups during a foreign crisis. You should therefore pay close heed to our travel and safety information for the country they are traveling to or residing in, monitor local conditions, and have a plan of action in case of emergency.

6. Will the U.S. government pay for my travel? How much will it cost?

Departure assistance is expensive. U.S. law 22 U.S.C. 2671(b) (2) (A) requires that any departure assistance be provided “on a reimbursable basis to the maximum extent practicable.” This means that evacuation costs are ultimately your responsibility; you will be asked to sign a form promising to repay the U.S. government. We charge you the equivalent of a full coach fare on commercial air at the time that commercial options cease to be a viable option. You will be taken to a nearby safe location, where the traveler will need to make his or her own
onward travel arrangements. If you are destitute, and private resources are not available to cover the cost of onward travel, you may be eligible for emergency financial assistance.

7. **What about my pets? Will the U.S. government transport them?**

In general, we are not able to provide transportation assistance for your pets. If the pet can fit into an under-the-seat carrier, it can accompany the traveler. U.S. citizens traveling or residing abroad with pets should make alternate plans for their care or commercial transport if a crisis occurs abroad.

8. **How can I receive updated information during a crisis?**

We encourage all U.S. citizens traveling abroad, especially citizens who plan to be overseas for a significant amount of time, to enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP). It is important that you keep your contact information up-to-date so that we can notify you or your designated emergency contact of developments and provide valuable information.

Also be sure to monitor our website, travel.state.gov, for updates, as this is our primary tool to disseminate important information during a crisis. Our Facebook and Twitter accounts are also good sources of information. Rest assured that in case of a crisis, we will make use of all available modes of communication to keep our citizens informed, including the internet, social media, TV, and radio.

9. **If I don't hear from the embassy or I'm not enrolled in STEP, can I call them?**

Often our embassies and consulates abroad cannot handle the huge volume of calls that follow a major crisis. We encourage you to contact us using the Task Force Alert (see below for more details), special e-mail addresses established for public inquiries during a crisis, or our U.S.-based telephone number at 1-888-407-4747 (from overseas +1-202-501-4444).

10. **What is Task Force Alert? How can I provide information about myself or my U.S. citizen friends and loved ones who are affected by a crisis overseas?**

The best way to contact us during a major crisis overseas is via Task Force Alert, a free service that allows U.S. citizens to enter information about themselves or their U.S. citizens friends and loved ones into a database that we use to provide emergency consular assistance to U.S. citizens during a crisis. This service does not automatically alert emergency medical or law enforcement officials. U.S. citizens experiencing an emergency that requires immediate medical or law enforcement response should contact appropriate local responders. It is only applicable to U.S. citizens who are in the affected foreign country, and we do not collect information on people who are not U.S. citizens.

11. **What if I don't have access to e-mail or phone?**

We know that Internet and cell phone service is sometimes interrupted during a crisis. Land line phones might also be affected. In such cases, we will use local television and radio to broadcast emergency information and may also use a system of pre-designated U.S. citizen “wardens” to pass on information to other U.S. citizens in your area. We also encourage citizens to reach out to family and friends outside the affected area to obtain information and relay messages to and from the task force handling the crisis at the Department of State. Don’t underestimate the power of social media – regularly updating your status through social media sites is an effective way to let your loved ones know how you are doing.

12. **What about my family and friends who are not U.S. citizens? Will you help them depart the country?**
During a crisis, our priority is assisting U.S. citizens. You should not expect to bring friends or relatives who are not U.S. citizens on U.S. government chartered or non-commercial transportation. Exceptions may be made to accommodate special family circumstances, such as when the spouse of a U.S. citizen is a legal permanent resident, or "green card" holder; however, it is the non-U.S. citizen's responsibility to be sure he or she has appropriate travel documentation for the destination location. Any services provided to non-U.S. citizens are on a space-available basis after U.S. citizens are accommodated.

13. **If my U.S. passport is expired, will you still assist me?**

We strongly recommend that all U.S. citizens traveling or residing abroad keep their travel documents up-to-date. If your U.S. passport expires, you may be required to obtain a valid emergency travel document from the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate before traveling. In some cases, we may need to take additional steps to determine your citizenship.

14. **What happens to visa processing during a crisis?**

In a crisis, our priority is assisting U.S. citizens. Depending on the nature and extent of the crisis, visa processing could be limited or suspended.