

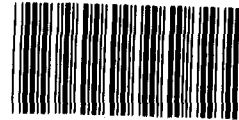
GAO

Report to the Chairman, Legislation
and National Security Subcommittee,
Committee on Government Operations,
House of Representatives

August 1991

TRAVEL ADVISORIES

State Needs Better Practices for Informing Americans of Dangers Overseas



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National Security and
International Affairs Division

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August 28, 1991

The Honorable John Conyers, Jr.
Chairman, Legislation and
National Security Subcommittee
Committee on Government Operations
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As requested, we are providing this report on the State Department's program for informing overseas travelers of potential dangers. The objectives of our review were to identify and assess State's policy and procedures for issuing travel advisories and notices, especially those alerting travelers about crime conditions. We also evaluated State's methods for disseminating travel advisories and notices to the public.

Results in Brief

State lacks an official written policy and procedures on issuing travel advisories and notices, especially those mentioning crime conditions. In practice, according to State officials, several factors are considered in issuing travel advisories. These factors include whether the crime is part of a pattern, how prevalent crime is against tourists, and whether economic and political concerns exist.

Because of inconsistencies in reporting information on crime conditions in foreign countries and in distributing travel advisories and notices, State may not be adequately informing the public about potential dangers of traveling to some foreign countries. For example, State has issued travel advisories and notices for some foreign countries in which violent crimes against American citizens have occurred but not for others. Also, not all travel notices contain pertinent information on crime conditions, the "Tips for Travelers" pamphlets for geographic areas do not consistently address pertinent crime conditions, and State's telephone number for recorded advisories is not publicized in all public telephone directories and in passports.

Background

One of the State Department's functions is the protection and welfare of American citizens traveling in foreign countries. When conditions in foreign countries may endanger an American's safety or health or may present an inconvenience, State makes such information available through travel advisories and travel notices.

Travel advisories have been issued since the mid-1970s to provide information about physical dangers, unexpected arrests or detentions, health hazards, and other conditions abroad that could have serious consequences for American travelers. The advisories usually reflect trends or patterns but not isolated criminal attacks. Normally, between 40 and 50 travel advisories are in effect; however, during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, the number of travel advisories in effect peaked at 74. Travel advisories are usually recommended by U.S. embassies. They are processed and issued by State's Bureau of Consular Affairs after extensive review and coordination within State, with the embassy, and, if necessary, with the White House. State distributes the advisories by facsimile machine to over 120 recipients in the news media, international companies and organizations, the travel industry, and U.S. passport offices. Also, State's foreign posts, several other U.S. government agencies, and various military organizations receive the advisories by telegram. Advisories are also recorded on a telephone message at the State Department—(202) 647-5225.

Travel notices usually describe a short-term condition or event in a foreign country that could inconvenience American travelers, such as hotel shortages, sudden disease outbreaks, currency changes, or new customs or entry requirements. As of April 1991, 23 travel notices were in effect. Travel notices are usually recommended, processed, and issued in the same manner as travel advisories.

Since 1989, State has also made public announcements to disseminate information quickly regarding terrorist threats and other conditions posing significant risks to the security of American travelers. It also issues "Tips for Travelers," which are pamphlets that contain less critical but relevant travel issues, such as personal safety, foreign government travel restrictions, or differing social customs.

Written Policy and Procedures Are Limited and Informal

The State Department has no official written policy and procedures in its regulations, the Foreign Affairs Manual, on issuing travel advisories and notices, and only limited guidance has been provided to foreign posts through a few telegrams.

The basic guidance is a one-page telegram, dated August 22, 1986, from the Bureau of Consular Affairs to State's foreign posts. The telegram revised the method for issuing travel advisories and narrowed the focus of the advisories to serious safety or health problems for which information may not be readily available. The telegram stated that travel

advisories should deal with conditions of civil and political unrest, crime, and actual warfare rather than matters unrelated to physical safety. The telegram contained no criteria on what conditions warranted issuing travel advisories or how travel advisories should be distributed. As a result, State issues travel advisories on an ad hoc basis.

State officials expressed various views on the issuance of travel advisories. Some officials believed travel advisories should not be issued solely to alert travelers of crime conditions. Others told us advisories were considered on the basis of how prevalent crimes against Americans were in that country, whether Americans had been targeted or a pattern of crime against Americans existed, and whether the local government was taking effective actions to deal with crime. Also, some State officials indicated that foreign policy and economic considerations may be factors in the decision-making process.

Mexico, Kenya, and Brazil illustrate different approaches that State used in reporting crime situations in those countries. Between June 1989 and February 1991, State reported that 139 Americans were the victims of violent crimes in Mexico: 39 murders or attempted murders, 29 rapes or attempted rapes, 3 kidnappings, and 68 assaults and armed robberies. Neither a travel advisory nor a travel notice was issued. State said that the crime situation in Mexico did not warrant issuing a travel advisory, primarily because the number of Americans that had been victims of crime was relatively low compared with the millions of Americans that visit Mexico each year. Other reasons included that the crimes did not indicate a general trend or danger directed specifically at American tourists and that Mexican authorities have demonstrated a commitment to combat crime and improve tourist safety.

In contrast, State issued a travel advisory for Kenya in 1989 because of a few violent incidents, including the murder of an American tourist near a game park. However, before the murder, State reported that the incidence of crimes against tourists did not justify issuing a travel advisory.

In another situation, State reported 164 crimes against Americans in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1988 and 1989. Of these crimes, 20 percent involved assault or robbery with a weapon. After 3 years of consideration and a recommendation by the State Inspector General in February 1990 that a travel advisory be issued, State issued a travel notice in July 1990.

Travel industry representatives stated that standards for issuing advisories should be established and applied consistently and that the meaning or significance of the various types of advisories should be clearly indicated. Although some State Department officials believed that standards would be difficult to establish and apply, others said standards needed to be established because existing guidance was vague and unclear. In July 1991, State officials informed us that they were reviewing guidelines on issuing advisories for inclusion in the Foreign Affairs Manual.

Crime Conditions Are Inconsistently Reported

State has not consistently reported information on crime conditions in foreign countries to American citizens, even though its 1986 guidance to overseas posts mentioned crime as a factor in determining the need for issuing a travel advisory.

In 1990 and 1991, State issued worldwide travel notices on crime. These notices drew attention to the fact that crime against travelers is a growing problem worldwide and listed some precautions that travelers should exercise. State officials told us that travel advisories are not issued only for crime conditions. However, we found travel advisories for Papua New Guinea and Kenya that appeared to be based primarily on crime conditions. We also identified crime conditions in other countries that were not reported in either a travel advisory or a notice. In July 1991, State officials indicated that they were studying whether it should issue country-specific crime advisories.

State officials indicated that crime conditions are normally included in travel advisories issued primarily for other safety and health reasons, and we found 16 advisories with this inclusion. However, we found two advisories in which crime conditions were not mentioned, even though conditions appeared to warrant their inclusion. An advisory was issued for Zaire in June 1990 because of the possibility of public disorder and risks to personal safety, but the crime situation was not mentioned. According to a December 1989 embassy report, the crime situation worsened to the point that visitors were exposed to the threat of crime while at hotels, in cars, on the street, and at work. A November 1989 embassy report stated that during the past year the average number of crimes against officials working at State's Zaire post was six per month. These crimes included robbery, assault, burglary, or theft.

The crime rate in Trinidad, as reported by the embassy in May 1988, increased dramatically in the preceding 2 years. State's electronic bulletin board, an information source for use by U.S. private enterprises doing business in foreign countries, contained a report in November 1989 that muggers and thieves seemed to be operating at will and a report in April 1990 that an American businessman was robbed while en route from the airport to his hotel. An August 1990 travel advisory regarding the improvement in previously unstable conditions made no mention of crime.

We found no instances in which information on crime conditions was included in travel notices issued for other safety and health reasons. For example, from 1988 to 1990, State issued travel notices for the Bahamas, Brazil, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Trinidad, and Zaire, but none of the notices mentioned the crime problems in these countries.

The crime content contained in the "Tips for Travelers" pamphlets has varied from specific information for a few locations, to general passing remarks, to no such information. Some of these pamphlets have not been revised since 1987.

Advisories Provide Inadequate Warnings

Because of general, limited, or apparently misleading information, some advisories and notices may not appropriately warn travelers of potential dangers. For example, the July 1989 travel advisory for Kenya reported a few instances of attacks. Some of these attacks resulted in deaths of tourists along the coast south of Mombasa and in remote areas of the country, including some national parks. The advisory attributed the attacks to wildlife poachers and encouraged Americans visiting game parks to travel in tour groups with a guide from a reputable safari firm or a game ranger. However, the advisory did not state that the American tourist who was killed was part of a reputable tour group that included an armed guard or that the motive for the attack appeared to be robbery.

Attacks on tourists in Kenya continued into 1990, including an incident in June 1990 in which one person in a tour group was murdered and others were robbed. Yet, a revised travel advisory issued in July 1990 indicated that security in the game parks had improved markedly. About 1 month after that advisory was issued, a mini-van, similar to the ones used by tour groups, was attacked, and two passengers were killed.

In early March 1991, the embassy reported an increase in crimes against tourists since the beginning of the year. A revised advisory was issued in April 1991 that stated that attacks on tourists were continuing and that, even though robbery was generally the motive for these attacks and most had ended without injury, some recent incidents had resulted in deaths of the victims.

In another instance, the July 1990 travel notice for Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, provided travelers with little information regarding the severity of the crime situation, especially outside specified areas in Rio de Janeiro. The notice stated that crime in Rio de Janeiro had been increasing and that the area with the greatest number of crimes against foreigners was the Copacabana and adjoining Leme neighborhoods, where criminals sought to target tourists as victims for robbery and theft. However, the notice did not contain any information on the crime situation outside Rio de Janeiro. Thirty-five percent of the crime incidents reported to the consulate in 1989 happened at the airport or at other locations outside of Rio de Janeiro. Instead of being petty, 20 percent of these reported crimes involved assault or robbery with a weapon.

Dissemination of Travel Advisories and Notices Can Be Improved

Travel notices contain information on crime conditions and other important matters for travelers to specific countries. However, travel notices are given more limited and slower distribution than travel advisories. The concerned overseas post receives the notice by telegram, and 20 recipients receive it by mail. On the other hand, more than 120 recipients, all overseas posts, and other agencies receive travel advisories quickly by facsimile machine and telegram. In addition, although travel advisories have been available to the general public on a recording accessible by telephone, travel notices generally have not. As a result of our review, State officials informed us in July 1991 that travel notices will receive the same distribution as travel advisories and that they will be put on State's recorded message system.

The travel advisory telephone number has been publicized to some extent in the media. It has also been listed in Washington, D.C., area public telephone directories in the government section under State Department, but it has been listed as "Emergency Service for U.S. Citizens Overseas" and not identified with travel advisories. We tried to locate the travel advisory telephone number in public telephone directories for Atlanta, Memphis, and Los Angeles but found no listing. Also, although passports contain pertinent information for travelers, they do

not contain the travel advisory telephone number. State officials indicated that publishing and clearly identifying the travel advisory number in telephone directories and including the travel advisory telephone number in passports would improve the travel advisory system.

Travel advisories are on airline reservation systems, and travel agents with access to these systems also have access to advisories. However, during October 1990 we surveyed 10 travel agencies in the Washington, D.C., area regarding travel to Kenya, and only 1 agency advised us of the travel advisory for Kenya. In addition, although we did not verify the validity of its data, a travel magazine reported similar findings in May 1991. It reported testing 25 travel agencies in seven U.S. cities by inquiring about trips to four countries—Egypt, India, Pakistan, and Peru—where advisories had been in effect for months. Of the 25 agencies, 14 did not mention or denied the existence of the advisories. Two others mentioned general warnings for the region of the destination but did not provide any further details. Travel industry representatives told us that travel agents should inform travelers of travel advisories just as they inform travelers of other pertinent travel information.

State's Bureau of Diplomatic Security maintains an electronic bulletin board for American enterprises with overseas business, which contains security and crime information, including travel advisories, for foreign countries. Although it contains information that is not otherwise available, the bulletin board has not been available to the general public. However, on April 12, 1991, State contracted for the design of a system to make this information available to those who can access it by computer. State officials indicated that the system should be operational about October 1, 1991.

Recommendations

Written policies and procedures would enable travel advisories and travel notices, especially for crime, to be issued on a more uniform and consistent basis for affected countries. In addition, including country-specific crime information in the "Tips for Travelers" pamphlets and identifying the telephone number for recorded advisories in all public telephone directories and printing it in passports would be low-cost ways of increasing the availability of crime information to travelers. Therefore, we recommend that the Secretary of State

- establish written policies and procedures for issuing travel advisories and travel notices, especially for crime;

- provide country-specific crime information in travel advisories and notices for countries with crime problems;
- expand the information on crime conditions in the "Tips for Travelers" pamphlets; and
- publish and clearly identify the telephone number of the travel advisory recorded message in all public telephone directories and in passports.

Scope and Methodology

To review the policy and procedures the State Department uses to issue and disseminate travel advisories and travel notices, we examined information provided by the State's foreign posts on crime conditions in other countries and reviewed files on travel advisories and interviewed officials at State. We also had discussions with representatives of various organizations in the travel industry. We did not comprehensively review State's procedures for issuing public announcements regarding terrorist threats.

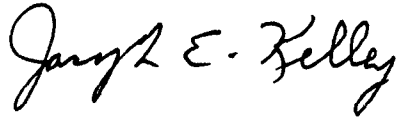
We made our review between August 1990 and May 1991 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. As requested, we did not obtain written agency comments on this report. However, we discussed the information in a draft of this report with officials from State's Bureau of Consular Affairs and incorporated their comments where appropriate.

As arranged with your office, unless you publicly announce its contents earlier, we plan no further distribution of this report for 30 days after its issue date. At that time we will send copies to the Secretary of State, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and other interested parties. Copies will also be made available to others on request.

Please contact me on (202) 275-4128 if you or your staff have any questions concerning this report. Major contributors to this report are

Jess T. Ford, Assistant Director, and Roy F. Hutchens, Senior Evaluator,
National Security and International Affairs Division, Washington, D.C.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joseph E. Kelley".

Joseph E. Kelley
Director, Security and
International Relations Issues



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