



Review of
Foreign and Commonwealth
Office
Travel Advice

*Presented to Parliament
by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
by Command of Her Majesty
April 2004*

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REVIEW OF FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE TRAVEL ADVICE

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**FOREWORD BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND
COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS,
THE RIGHT HONOURABLE JACK STRAW MP**

Travel Advice is one of the most important public services which the Foreign and Commonwealth Office provides. British people made almost 60 million trips abroad in 2003, three times as many as 20 years ago; and over 15 million UK nationals live overseas. Every week, the Travel Advice pages on the FCO website get an average of 280,000 hits and 1,600 people receive Travel Advice through our telephone call centre.

But alongside the continuing growth in travel has come the rise of a form of international terrorism which aims not only to take innocent lives through indiscriminate attack, but to spread a sense of fear and instability in order to undermine the freedom and prosperity which we cherish.

Our Travel Advice must inform people of the threat from terrorism; and, when the threat is acute, it will inevitably lead to some disruption in travel in the interests of public safety. But at the same time we must make sure we do not do the terrorists' work for them by causing too much of the very disruption which the terrorists want. So our Travel Advice needs to strike an important balance, making public safety its prime concern while minimising the disruption which terrorists want to cause. We must give people the information they need to remain vigilant, and to make judgements about risk and security as they do every day, while allowing normal life to go on to the greatest extent possible.

FCO Travel Advice is, quite rightly, under greater scrutiny than ever before, so more than ever it must be timely and of the highest quality. Much has been done in recent years to improve our Travel Advice; but we can do more. So as I announced to Parliament on 10 December, I asked FCO officials to look again at the underlying issues.

This Command Paper contains the resulting Review of Travel Advice. Its conclusions and recommendations are well-argued and persuasive, and reflect wide consultation including with the travel and insurance industries, parliamentarians, users of the FCO website, the media, British businesses working abroad, victims of terrorism and their families, and destination countries.

But given the importance of the issues, I want to ensure that everyone with an interest has the chance to have their say before I make any changes. I invite parliamentarians and others – including from the groups I have mentioned above – to offer their views on the Review and on FCO Travel Advice more generally, before the end of April, either to me or to the Travel Advice Unit, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Old Admiralty Building, Whitehall, London SW1A 2PA.

At the end of this period of public consultation I will announce appropriate revisions to our Travel Advice system to Parliament.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Jack Straw". The signature is written in a cursive style with a prominent initial "J" and a distinct "S".

JACK STRAW
Secretary of State
for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Context

- FCO Travel Advice serves a growing market as more Britons travel to more destinations;
- Statistically, other hazards (road accidents, drowning etc) represent a greater threat to Britons overseas than terrorism. But terrorism arouses particular public concern;
- FCO Travel Advice has improved. This reflects successive reviews since 1999, the greater priority it now receives in the work of the FCO, and the advent of the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) as a single source in HM Government for assessment of the terrorist threat;
- Our Travel Advice compares well to that offered by other governments. There is no perfect solution to the dilemmas posed by the need to balance information, warnings and prescriptions against travel;
- There are many external stakeholders with an interest in Travel Advice, including the UK travel/tourism industry, the UK travel insurance industry, Parliament, UK businesses operating overseas, the UK media, FCO website users, and destination countries. There is no single way of satisfying them all.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Significant change is not needed in the process by which Travel Advice is produced in Whitehall and the FCO. Some editorial changes could sharpen its impact;
- There are many options for presenting Travel Advice. I recommend that:
 - we should continue to provide prescriptions against travel in cases of non-terrorist threats (coups, civil wars, natural disasters), as at present;
 - but we should confine such prescriptions in the case of intelligence-based terrorist threats to situations of extreme and imminent danger;
- More generally, the FCO could adopt a new presentational strategy aimed at:
 - framing the issues more openly;
 - enhancing public trust;
 - building on the principles for risk management in the public sector recommended by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

Note

To avoid confusion, throughout this Review 'Travel Advice' refers to the FCO product, 'travel advice' to other countries' product, and 'prescription', 'prescribe' etc to the issuing of formal advice against categories of travel, including 'all' and 'non essential'.

INTRODUCTION

Terms of Reference

1. This Review was announced by the Foreign Secretary in a written statement to Parliament on 10 December 2003. The Terms of Reference were as follows:

i. How can FCO Advice best help UK travellers?

- How can our Travel Advice best help its users to make informed, responsible decisions about possible risks overseas, particularly from terrorism, and ways they can minimise them?
- What should be the balance in our Travel Advice between information, warning and advice (ie between description of risks in particular countries and prescription of action in response)?
- How far can risk analysis and its presentation be made more objective (eg through statistical analysis and comparison with non-terrorist hazards)?
- What would be the implications of variations in this balance for the FCO, others in HM Government (HMG) who help produce Travel Advice, and its users?
- How do we link threat level assessments and public information?
- How far should we take into consideration the capabilities of host governments in reaching decisions on Travel Advice?

ii. What are the wider implications of FCO Travel Advice?

- In responding to a terrorist attack, how can we ensure prudent precaution does not become over-reaction which risks playing into the hands of the terrorists?

2. Following Ministerial correspondence, it was agreed that the Review would also consider the following additional questions:

- How far should wider HMG/ UK interests be taken into account in issuing Travel Advice after a terrorist attack?
- What would the travel insurance industry do without HMG's Travel Advice?
- Can we quantify the economic impact of terrorism on tourism and British commercial interests?
- Can we quantify the economic impact of a change of Travel Advice for countries/ regions concerned and for UK commercial interests?

CONTEXT

The market for Travel Advice

3. FCO Travel Advice serves a growing market. More UK nationals are travelling overseas to more destinations, and in ways which expose them to new risks. The key trends are:
 - the overall number of outward visits from the UK is increasing steadily, to 58.2m in 2001 and 59.2 m in 2002;
 - the main growth area in the travel industry is long-haul and exotic destinations, at the expense of longer-established European package destinations;
 - the advent of internet booking and budget airlines is accelerating the ‘unbundling’ of the traditional package holiday. Independent and last minute travellers represent an increasing share of the market. A side effect of this trend is an increase in the proportion of travellers buying travel insurance late or not at all (less than 50 per cent of travel insurance is now sold with package holidays);
 - Increasing numbers of relatively inexperienced travellers are venturing abroad (Lonely Planet forecasts an increase in ‘GAP year’ travellers from 50,000 in 2003 to 90,000 by 2007).
4. In addition to outward travellers, the number of UK nationals living overseas has remained steady at 15.2 million. This figure includes substantial British communities living in countries directly exposed to a variety of risks, including regional tension (India/ Pakistan, the Middle East), contagious disease (Hong Kong), political instability (Zimbabwe) and international terrorism (Kenya, Saudi Arabia).
5. The growth in the number of UK nationals travelling and living abroad has resulted in an increased demand for all Consular services. Travel Advice is the most visible element of the FCO’s Consular package, including for the great majority of travellers whose journeys are trouble free. And it is the key FCO intervention point in helping travellers ensure they are properly prepared before they travel. The FCO has tried to maximise the value of this intervention through the ‘Know Before You Go’ (KBYG) campaign, marketed with partners in the travel industry.

Relative risks

6. Britons travelling and living overseas are exposed, like everybody else, to a wide range of risks. The figures for 2002 are as follows:

Natural Causes	1,111
Non –Natural Causes	316
Total Deaths in 2002 of UK Nationals abroad	1,427

Deaths from non-natural causes were as follows:

Cause of Death by non-natural causes in 2002	No of deaths of UK nationals.
Road Accident	158
Committed Suicide	57
Drowned	21
Air Accident	14
Murdered (non-terrorist violence)	10
Murdered (terrorist violence) (of which 26 were from Bali Bombing)	29
Balcony related accidents	14
Skiing/Mountaineering Accidents	12
Rail Death	1

Total casualty figures for 2003 will be available in April. We already know that the number of British nationals killed by terrorism was 10 (three of whom died in the bombing of the Consulate General in Istanbul), compared with at least 83 in road accidents.

7. Statistically, therefore, terrorism overseas represents a relatively small risk to UK travellers. In 2001 UK deaths from terrorism overseas, including the 9/11 attacks, amounted to less than 20 per cent of the non-natural deaths notified to the FCO (69 out of 370, compared to 102 in road accidents that year).
8. But the nature of terrorism means it is viewed quite differently to other risks. It is worth considering the reasons for this. Researchers for the Department of Health (DoH) investigated why some risks are so much more difficult to manage than others and identified key 'fright factors'. The risks which really worry people tend to:
 - Be involuntary rather than voluntary (eg those accepted as a consequence of smoking, pursuing dangerous sports);
 - Be inequitably distributed;
 - Be inescapable by taking personal precautions;
 - Arise from unfamiliar or novel sources;
 - Result from man-made not natural sources;
 - Threaten a manner of death which arouses particular dread;
 - Damage identifiable rather than anonymous victims;
 - Be poorly understood
 - Be subject to contradictory statements from responsible sources, or (even worse) from the same source.
9. The DoH also identified 'media triggers' which make incidents more likely to take and retain the headlines:
 - Open questions of blame;
 - Alleged secrets and attempted cover-ups;
 - Human interest through identifiable heroes and villains as well as victims;

- Links with existing high profile issues or personalities;
 - Conflict;
 - ‘Signal value’: the story serves as a portent of further ills (‘what next’);
 - Many people are exposed to the risk, even if at low levels (‘it could be you’);
 - Strong visual impact (eg pictures of suffering);
 - Links to crime.
10. Terrorism – especially in unfamiliar settings overseas - combines ‘fright factors’ and ‘media triggers’ like no other risk to travellers. It has uniquely powerful ‘social amplification’ – in sociological terms, acts of terrorism gain significance not so much because of what has happened, but because of what they seem to portend.
11. All terrorists set out to use social amplification to achieve political ends, but Al Qaeda (AQ)’s nature and modus operandi heightens the effect. Rather than being a single organisation, AQ works by reinforcing local Islamic groups across the world: it is generally impossible to predict whether the next attack will be from groups based in Indonesia, Morocco or Turkey – or Hamburg, Lyon or Manchester. AQ grabs headlines by attacking aircraft and iconic buildings, and uses suicide to cause mass casualties. The range of what it considers acceptable targets makes its attacks unpredictable and difficult for individuals or the state to guard against. In developing countries its attacks are specifically directed against westerners, including tourists. All these factors make perceptions of the terrorist threat disproportionate to the actual degree of risk to individuals, or to other risks which do not share the same ‘fright factors’ or ‘media triggers’.

FCO TRAVEL ADVICE

Current Travel Advice

12. The FCO currently provides Travel Advice on 217 countries and territories. Of these, we prescribe (as at 2 March) against all travel to three countries (Burundi, Haiti and Liberia), and to all travel to specific areas of 27 countries. In all these cases the Travel Advice is the result of civil war, rebellion, civil disorder, domestic terrorism or international tension. In no case is the warning based either on the threat from AQ or international terrorism, or on threat assessments derived from intelligence.
13. We prescribe against all but essential travel to a separate, partly overlapping, list of eight countries. In three cases this Travel Advice is based primarily on intelligence-based assessments of the risk from international terrorism (Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Yemen). Similar prescriptions were given and subsequently withdrawn against travel to three further countries during 2003 (Kenya in May/June, Turkey following the Istanbul bombings, and Pakistan). There is a further, again partly overlapping, list of 14 countries in which we prescribe against all but essential travel to specific regions. In none of these

cases is the primary threat from international terrorism (though it is a contributing factor in eg Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Philippines).

Reviews

14. FCO Travel Advice has been subject to extensive internal scrutiny over the last five years. The first comprehensive Review, by a retired FCO official (Christopher Denne), reported in June 1999. Further internal reviews were undertaken in response to 9/11 and in the wake of the Bali bombing in October 2002. More work to refine the process was carried out within the FCO Consular Directorate in the summer of 2003, and new instructions were issued to Posts in September.

Process

15. The result of successive Reviews has been a transformation in the FCO and Whitehall processes for producing Travel Advice. The diagram at Annexe A sets out the decision-making chain. I highlight the following as key changes:

- **Priority:** Travel Advice has an unprecedentedly high and acknowledged priority in the work of the FCO. This is reflected in the constant effort made to keep current. In all, 2,292 amendments were made to FCO Travel Advice during 2003 (a 56 per cent increase on 2002), and Travel Advice for countries of major concern changed frequently during the year (eg 44 amendments for Turkey, 40 for Indonesia; 32 for the Philippines);
- **Top-level involvement:** Ministers and senior officials are involved closely in producing, clearing and updating Travel Advice. All significant changes are approved at Ministerial or FCO Board level. The Director General for Corporate Affairs (DGCA) has FCO Board level responsibility, but other Board members including the Permanent Under Secretary (PUS) and Director General Defence and Intelligence (DG D&I) are also involved regularly. The Foreign Secretary is consulted frequently – Consular Directorate estimate around once a week.

It is very important to the credibility of Travel Advice that it is as up to date as possible. Any delays in reflecting changes already in the public domain (eg other countries' public assessments of the threats to themselves) put this at risk.

It is worth noting in passing that senior attention in London is paralleled in other capitals post 9/11. FCO Posts report active involvement in decision making at Foreign Minister, and sometimes Head of Government, level.

- **Threat assessments:** Since June 2003 the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) has provided a single source for all UK terrorism-related information, working closely with the UK intelligence agencies and Allies, including the US Terrorist Threat Integration Center (TTIC). Travel Advice is one of the key means by which intelligence is converted by the FCO, via JTAC threat

assessments, into information to be placed in the public domain. The system needs to be able to act quickly in turning threat assessments into Travel Advice: there was some fine tuning to this end in the review of Travel Advice procedures in the summer of 2003;

- **Organisational responsibilities:** the key FCO links are now:
 - Counter Terrorism Policy Department (CTPD) provides the operational interface between JTAC and the FCO, and highlight JTAC threat assessments to:
 - FCO geographical departments who have responsibility for the substance of Travel Advice, and for clearing changes as necessary with Ministers and senior officials. Consular Directorate issue regular reminders to departments to keep their Advice up to date. Geographical departments are responsible for ensuring that the local expertise of:
 - FCO Posts is incorporated into the Travel Advice which, once cleared, is passed to:
 - Travel Advice Section in Consular Directorate who have editorial responsibility for controlling quality and consistency and publish the finished product on the website.
 - FCO Security Strategy Unit (SSU), although not themselves part of the process, have a close interest in Travel Advice because of their responsibility for meeting the FCO's duty of care for its own staff.
 - FCO Press Office are normally consulted before Travel Advice is changed, in view of the importance and public sensitivity of the decisions. Press Office have the key role in briefing the media on Travel Advice.

- **Presentation:** There is guidance in instructions to FCO Posts and Departments on the need for clear, understandable language, aimed at the needs of the target market, reflecting advice from the Plain English Campaign.

- **Distribution:** the key means by which Travel Advice is publicised are:
 - The internet: hits on the FCO Travel Advice website reflect seasonal variations in the travel market and uncertainties resulting from world events. In March 2003, which saw the start of the Iraq war, the Travel Advice site received 2.3m hits, including 1.6m hits on individual country pages, 104,000 on the 'risk of terrorism' page and 100,000 on 'travellers' tips'. Overall hits on the Travel Advice site were 1.8m in April, 1.3m in May and 876,000 in June and July. The weekly average number of hits for 2003 as a whole was 280,000. Average hit length on the site is estimated by E-media Unit as around 2 to 3 minutes – long enough to read the summary and skim the main text. An important issue is technical resilience: the website has sometimes suffered from unreliability which has resulted in Travel Advice not being available on the internet for periods of up to three days;
 - E-mail and fax: alerts of changes to Travel Advice are sent automatically to 40,000 subscribers, mainly in the travel industry and the travel media;
 - Call centre: since February 2003 the FCO has used MM Group, a commercial call centre operator, to handle telephone queries on Travel

Advice. Between the start of the service and the end of 2003 the call centre answered over 83,000 calls. As with the website, the highest demand came at the time of the Iraq war, with over 2,643 calls answered on 21 March, the day of peak demand. The operators read the Travel Advice posted on the website (and have no access to any additional information). My experience of calling in suggests that the system is a useful addition to the internet-based service. The initial answer directs callers to the web or invites them to hold for an operator. The phone was answered quickly and my questions were answered clearly.

- CEEFAX: A summary of FCO Advice for 36 or so countries is posted on CEEFAX on BBC 2, at an annual cost to the FCO of around £14,000. As a general observation from trying the service, CEEFAX is slow to load and use, provides space for little detail and seems comprehensively outclassed by the internet. There are clear risks that carefully judged Travel Advice messages may be distorted through compression, and the service does not seem to be kept properly up to date (editorial control rests with CEEFAX not with the FCO). I doubt it is worth continuing in its current form. Members of the public without access to the internet should be encouraged to use the Call Centre service (see above).

International comparisons

16. I have compared UK Travel Advice to that provided by other Governments on the internet (all figures updated as at 2 March). FCO Posts have discussed the issues with the Consular authorities in host governments. Key points to emerge are:

Australia

- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) prescribe against all travel to seven countries and against non-essential travel to a further nine.
- DFAT stress on their website that:
 - responsibility for deciding whether or not to travel rests with the individual;
 - they have not adopted a coding system for individual countries because people might then focus on the codes rather than on the content of advice, and the content is more important to individual decision-making;
 - advice provided to Australian citizens is exactly the same as that provided to DFAT's own staff, other Australian government employees and the private sector.

Canada

- The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) provide nine separate categories of warning against travel, ranging from 'Canadians should not travel to these countries and, if there, should depart' to 'Canadian tourists should not travel to the specified regions of these countries'. Seven countries are in the top category; Canadians are warned against all travel to

specified regions of 43 countries, and against travel as tourists to all or part of a further 14 (there are some overlaps in the categories).

- The DFAIT website emphasises pre-departure preparation and offers electronic leaflets giving more detailed information on particular destinations (USA, China) and particular categories of travel (adventure tours, business travel).
- DFAIT say other governments sometimes try to influence the speed with which travel warnings are downgraded.

France

- The Ministère des Affaires étrangères (the Quai) prescribe against all travel to six countries and against all travel to regions of another 17. There is advice against travel 'without strong professional reasons' to five countries and to regions of another 12.
- The Quai acknowledge that balancing the equities involved in producing travel advice can be difficult.
- The Quai take host government capability into account in deciding on travel advice, and deploy Paris-based, cross-government teams to assess local security arrangements where there is uncertainty.
- The Quai pay close attention to UK Travel Advice in areas where we may have access to better information (eg Kenya).

Germany

- The Auswaertiges-Amt (AA) prescribe against travel to eight countries and provide information, including some warnings, on 110.
- Imposing a warning against all travel to a country allows travellers to cancel their visits free of charge. German travel advice is reviewed frequently by German courts in cases brought by tourists.
- The AA say they aim as far as possible to keep their travel advice descriptive, with the responsibility for decisions resting with the user.
- Assessment of host government capability, including the state of local infrastructure, plays an important part in determining travel advice.

New Zealand

- The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) provide a matrix with 3 categories:
 - 'Some risk – exercise caution';
 - 'High risk – consider deferring non-essential travel'
 - 'Extreme risk – we advise against all travel. New Zealanders should leave'.All or part of 30 countries are currently categorised at 'Extreme', 24 at 'High', and 25 (including the UK and US) at 'Some'. A regional warning for South East Asia, issued in May 2003, remains in force.

US

- The State Department issue four categories of consular information:
 - Consular Information Sheets - basic details on health, visas, crime etc;
 - Travel Warnings – recommendations to avoid particular countries. 27 are currently in force;
 - Public Announcements – time-limited information about terrorist threats and other relatively short term conditions. 15 are currently in force;
 - Warden messages for US expatriates.
- Messages issued through Consular Information Sheets have a lower profile than Travel Warnings or Public Announcements.
- The US Government is obliged by the post-Lockerbie Aviation Security Improvement Act to warn of credible, specific, non-counterable threats to aviation, and the principles have been adopted by the State Department in dealing with terrorist threats. The Act also enforces a ‘no double standard’ policy: restrictions on official travel. Embassy staff draw-downs must be publicised.

Comment

17. It is clear that other governments face the same dilemmas as ourselves in trying to produce timely and useful travel advice. There are some basic similarities:

- All provide a mix of information, warnings and prescription against travel;
- All distinguish between different forms of travel, broadly reflecting the FCO distinction between ‘essential’ and ‘non-essential’ (though some in a more nuanced way).

18. But practices vary widely, especially:

- the degree to which travel advice takes into account intelligence-based threat assessments;
- the processes by which intelligence-based information and travel advice are joined up (the UK process emerges relatively well from this comparison);
- the degree to which changes in assessments of terrorist threats are reflected directly in public information;
- the degree to which those operating the system acknowledge the influence of wider political and economic factors and top-level political influence;
- the attitude to host government capabilities;
- the variety of local legal and political factors (court challenges, specific legislative requirements) in shaping the context of decision-making;
- the formats used to present information and the degree of detail provided.

19. These differences are reflected in wide variations in the actual advice issued by governments. There is broad commonality on the most ‘difficult’ countries, such as Burundi and Liberia. But an examination of travel advice on the internet shows many cases where interpretation and prescription is significantly different. As examples: Australia, New Zealand and the US continue to prescribe against non-essential travel to Kenya, unlike France, Germany and the

UK, UK, US, Australian and New Zealand travel advice prescribes against all non-essential travel to Indonesia; French and German travel advice does not prescribe against travel to Bali. France is alone in issuing a current prescription against non-essential travel to regions of Tanzania and Macedonia.

STAKEHOLDER VIEWS

20. FCO Travel Advice has an impact on a wide variety of stakeholders: the UK travel and insurance industries and their customers; independent British travellers; UK businesses operating overseas. It also directly affects the governments and citizens of countries, many of them developing, which depend on tourism for their livelihoods. I have discussed the issues directly with many stakeholders, received input from FCO Posts, and received many written contributions from all these categories.
21. Attitudes vary widely. But two basic points are clear:
- Different groups of stakeholders have mutually contradictory desiderata. There is no one approach which will please all the people all the time;
 - What most stakeholders most want is a definitive judgement on whether travel is safe. We can seldom provide this.

UK Travel/Tourism Industry

22. The main UK travel/ tourism industry representative bodies are broadly positive about FCO Travel Advice and recent changes to it. The Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA), the largest group with 830 members including the major tour operators, said in a written contribution: *'We like your advice. Generally we find it easy to understand, and we have found the FCO to be very responsive when things need to be clarified'*. The Federation of Tour Operators (FTO), representing the ten largest tour operators (who collectively are licensed to carry 16.4 million customers annually) said *'travel advice has become increasingly clear and user friendly'*. The Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO), a group of 150 mainly smaller specialist companies, described *'a noticeable improvement in the quality of advice'*.
23. Travel/ tourism industry representatives made the following points:
- The travel industry values FCO Travel Advice as a clear basis for its own decision-making. ABTA said: *'we need the FCO to take a clear line. Not to do so would result in a loss of the common approach that our industry takes when customer safety is threatened'*;
 - The commercial impact of Travel Advice on the travel industry can be substantial (though not always easy to quantify);
 - The travel industry operates in real time and needs to take decisions very fast;
 - Travel Advice often has an impact which lasts well beyond the period for which it is imposed. Charter schedules need to be drawn up months in advance, and have a knock on effect on forward planning, eg in drawing up winter brochures. A large independent UK long-haul operator gave me the example of

UK charters to Kenya, which were not reinstated after the bans on flights to Nairobi and Mombassa were lifted in June and September 2003, and will not be provided in 2004;

- The industry welcomes contact with the FCO, both in London and in Posts, and recognises the greater efforts in this direction now being made by FCO Consular Directorate (which include, but go wider than, discussion of Travel Advice).
24. Among industry representatives, the smaller operators most affected by specific country prescriptions (eg on Kenya in 2003) were most critical of Travel Advice. Their main charges include:
- inconsistency (some assume that the reasons for apparent inconsistencies are political);
 - lack of precision (not reflecting varying conditions within countries);
 - ambiguity (some of the prescriptive language is seen as over-nuanced);
 - unintended consequences (eg when UK airlines suspend flights, UK nationals have to fly on third world carriers, exposing them to a range of different, arguably higher, risks).

UK Travel Insurance Industry

25. Decision-making in the travel industry is closely linked to the cover provided for companies and individual clients by the travel insurance industry. I received a written contribution from the Association of British Insurers (ABI), the trade body for the UK's insurers which represents around 400 companies who between them provide around 94% of insurance business in the UK. I also discussed the issues with industry practitioners and received written input from Lloyds of London, reflecting the views of individual members of the market.
26. All insurance is based on an assessment of risk from which insurers calculate premiums to charge their policyholders. Insurers in any field like to use clear external reference points in calculating risks (eg Government flood warnings). The ABI describe FCO Travel Advice as integral to the current operation of travel insurance because it fulfils the need for an external reference point in a clear and unambiguous way. They said *'FCO advice for travellers is excellent and has long been used by insurers as the definitive reference to assess risks in foreign territories. If someone travels against the advice of FCO then their policy will not be valid and assistance will not be forthcoming. Informed judgements by the FCO provide a robust, simple trigger for insurers and enable them to operate a consistent approach across the whole insurance market, reflected in the terms and conditions of most travel insurance policies'*.
27. The industry argues that existing Travel Advice benefits consumers and that change might risk consumer confusion and a reduction in protection provided to travellers. The ABI said: *'Members are concerned that the FCO may wish to move away from providing definitive advice as to whether to travel to a territory or not and move to a provision of information on the risks on which travellers make their own decision whether to travel or not.'*

ABI's immediate concern is that the risks will not have changed but the FCO will not be advising against travel so travellers may not be in breach of their policy and have cover, albeit against the spirit of the cover. This may encourage travellers to make trips that they would not have previously undertaken had the advice been definitive. Travel insurers would also incur additional costs as a result.

Medium term concerns are that in the absence of definitive FCO advice to travel or not, travellers will have to revert to their insurer to determine whether they are covered or not. Insurers will be inconsistent in their assessment of the acceptability or otherwise of travel to specific territories leading to confusion of consumers.

Insurers would have to introduce risk assessment methods, which would undoubtedly incur costs. Those costs would be passed on to consumers in higher premiums for cover and potentially reduce the availability of the product.

The introduction of a more complex form of territory risk exposure underwriting assessment by insurers would make access to travel insurance far more complex and reduce traveller's take up of travel insurance. The current availability of the product may be greatly reduced. FCO may incur additional expense in being the insurer of last resort for distressed travellers not having insurance protection.

The ABI members of the Travel Insurance Committee recommend that the FCO continues to provide specific advice to travellers by territory as to whether it is safe to travel'.

28. It is clear from the above why FCO Travel Advice suits the insurance industry by, in effect, transferring the responsibility for key decisions to the FCO. However, the insurance practitioners I spoke to said the industry is fast-moving, competitive and highly commercial in its approach. They were in no doubt that if the FCO ceased to provide direct advice on risk, the underwriters would find alternative reference points. But they did not dispute ABI's key point that the results – less consistency in payout and increased underwriting costs – would be unwelcome to consumers, and might result in fewer travellers taking out insurance.
29. Two other general travel insurance issues are worth noting:
- Practitioners stressed that business conditions have been difficult in the travel insurance industry. Premiums for UK travellers to North America fell by half after 9/11. SARS, impacting unexpectedly on large long haul destinations like Canada and Hong Kong, caused big pay-outs. And non-underwriting income and company capital reserves across the insurance industry have been hit by the fall in world stock markets since 2000. So insurers are unlikely to welcome any change by the FCO which would make their jobs more difficult and put their margins under further pressure;

- Terrorism-related events are now excluded from nearly all UK travel insurance policies: travellers who are otherwise properly insured do not have cover against losses caused by terrorism. This could leave HMG in the potential position of being, in effect, the insurer of last resort for terrorism overseas. The bills could be substantial (if, for example, a terrorist incident left a large number of UK nationals in intensive care in US hospitals).

Parliament

30. The Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC) and Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) take a close interest in FCO Travel Advice, and were critical of some aspects of it in the wake of the Bali bombing. This Review was announced in a written statement to Parliament on 10 December 2003. On 18 December FCO Travel Advice was raised during a meeting between the FCO Directors for International Security and Consular Affairs and the ISC. The Chairman (Ann Taylor MP) and other members were positive about recent changes. Alan Howarth MP said the quality of Travel Advice had been transformed in the year since the Bali bombing, and he described recent FCO Travel Advice on Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia as models of their kind: clear, concise and in everyday language.

Direct user feedback

31. During December 2003 and January 2004 FCO Travel Advice Section invited FCO website users to submit comments on the service. 285 responses were received, some after the user survey had been highlighted in the Daily Telegraph.
 - 84 per cent of respondents were using the service for personal travel; 16 per cent for business travel;
 - 81 per cent of users viewed the service positively, some very much so (user comments included: *'a great service'*, *'sensible tone and clear details'*, *'it does exactly what we want'*, *'most informative of all English-speaking government websites'*).
 - The 19 per cent who were critical made a variety of points: some said the information on each country was too long, while others asked for more detail on local laws and visa requirements, or Travel Advice aimed at specific groups of travellers (backpackers, businessmen). Respondents also asked for a clearer distinction between terrorist and other risks, for more statistics on relative risks and for more specific information on the level of risk within individual countries.

UK business

32. I discussed the needs of UK business with the Chairman of the CBI's overseas security committee, with the Head of Group Security at a major UK financial company, and with UKTI [the FCO/DTI trade and inward investment promotion organisation, UK Trade and Investment (UKTI)]. I received written contributions from others including the Welsh Assembly Government. FCO

posts reported views from travelling businessmen and expatriate business communities.

33. Major multinational UK companies work globally in an increasingly borderless environment. The threats to UK multinationals are similarly seamless: corruption, organised crime and terrorism, many operating across national borders. FCO Travel Advice is only one element in the sophisticated approach to risk management adopted by large companies in taking overseas security decisions: often they know more than we do about threats in specific industries and regions. They use a wide variety of sources including other countries' travel advice and private advice from consultants such as Control Risks Group (who produce their own city and country risk reports). FCO Travel Advice probably has a greater impact on companies below the top tier, who have less ability to assess and manage risks themselves.
34. There are three main ways in which FCO Travel Advice has an impact on UK business:
- as an influence on business travel from the UK;
 - as a deterrent to travel to potential markets through prescription against 'non-essential' travel;
 - in affecting UK company operations based overseas.

Business travel

35. Travel from the UK is essential to the work of major companies. The CBI said FCO Travel Advice had improved '*by light years*' in recent years and now provides a good service to business users. Security management staff in a major UK financial company said they found FCO Travel Advice useful, especially the summaries. They respected the fact that the UK issues fewer prescriptions against travel than some other countries and said they took our Travel Advice more seriously as a result. The Wales International Team, working with Welsh exporters, said they found FCO Travel Advice '*helpful and sufficient to make informed judgements about travel plans*'.

Business travel to destinations where FCO advise against 'non-essential travel'

36. The FCO currently prescribes against 'all but essential travel' to several countries regarded by UKTI, as potentially attractive to UK exporters. The list includes Afghanistan, Algeria, Angola, Indonesia, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It is impossible to quantify how much potential business has been lost as a result of deterring commercial visitors. Some Posts in affected countries (eg Algiers, Riyadh) suggest the total is likely to be significant, especially in places where business depends on developing personal relationships. It is likely that deterring commercial travel has the most significant effect on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) who do not have a resident presence. Apart from lost commercial opportunities, deterring UK company activity in countries like Afghanistan and Iraq undermines the prospects for achieving HMG's wider political and economic objectives.

37. UKTI have therefore proposed to Ministers a case-by-case procedure to allow them to support commercial activity (missions, events etc) in countries to which the FCO prescribes against non-essential travel. The main elements are a proper assessment by the FCO of the risks involved, the taking of reasonable steps to ensure the safety of participants, including making them aware of the risks, and then asking participants to acknowledge (perhaps in writing) their acceptance of the risks.
38. This procedure seems to me a reasonable one for activity directly sponsored by UKTI. The key question is whether the principles – of risks carefully assessed and managed - could serve as a basis for a wider approach to business travel to difficult destinations. Existing procedure by some companies already does so. I was told that one UK multinational uses FCO Travel Advice as a trigger to modify corporate procedures: if the FCO prescribes against travel to a country, company staff planning to travel there are instructed to check with the country manager whether their journey is necessary. If the visit goes ahead, risk management procedures (eg checks on hotels) are put in place. New FCO/CBI arrangements (see below) could play a role in helping to promote such practices.

UK business operating overseas

39. In many cases the overseas subsidiaries of UK multinationals are deeply integrated into local business scenes, and operate effectively as domestic businesses. FCO Travel Advice is only one among many factors in making decisions on responding to threats. However, there were two key issues on which Posts and companies saw Travel Advice as having a negative impact:
- UK residents (many with strong economic and personal stakes in their home countries) generally take little notice of FCO Travel Advice, even though in many places they are likely to be at greater risk than business visitors (who are more likely to be deterred – see above). Posts assess that FCO Travel Advice is at risk of losing credibility with UK expatriates. The risk is of a double negative: undermining relations with host governments without adding to the safety of British nationals (but forcing them to pay more for insurance cover). And the effect on both groups is even worse if the allegation is made that prescription is driven by wider political motives.
 - FCO Travel Advice is one factor making it difficult for major UK companies to recruit good quality international staff to serve in affected countries. Their business is suffering as a result.

Security Information Service for Business Overseas (SISBO)

40. The answers to some of the issues relating to business and Travel Advice may lie with the Security Information Service for Business Overseas (SISBO), a joint FCO/CBI initiative launched by Mike O'Brien, FCO/DTI Minister of State, and Digby Jones, CBI Director-General, on 17 October 2003. SISBO responds to long standing CBI requests for better information from HMG about security risks to business, including terrorism, corruption and crime. The CBI

were particularly keen for companies to receive a more consistent service from the FCO in Posts and in London. A UK multinational told me that although their local relationships with FCO posts are often excellent, it can be difficult to identify the right focal points for dialogue in London.

41. There are three main elements to SISBO:
 - New arrangements abroad: FCO posts have received clearer guidance on what to offer UK companies and been instructed to nominate a security risk coordinator;
 - Establishment of a contact point in the FCO Economic Policy Department (EcPol) to filter UK enquiries/ liaise with Posts;
 - Establishment of regular fora in the UK for discussion of overseas security and two-way sharing of information (the first meeting takes place in April and the CBI plan to offer four per year).
42. There is no suggestion that SISBO can give business Travel Advice which is different from that being offered to other UK users, or preferential treatment: the CBI accept that it has to be complementary to the main FCO Travel Advice. The aim is to give UK businesses more information which is directly relevant to their needs. The CBI say the main beneficiaries are likely to be SMEs who, as noted above, do not have large-scale in-house security structures. They plan to use SISBO to spread best practice, allow SMEs to benefit from links to large companies, and help develop the UK corporate sector's overall ability to manage risk. The scheme is in its early days, but the CBI are enthusiastic about its potential.
43. It is worth noting that the US State Department already has well developed arrangements for sharing security-related information with American business abroad through the Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), established in 1985. OSAC Country Councils bring US companies, expatriate staff and business travellers into a closer and more organised relationship than yet exists between the FCO and the UK private sector. Some British companies see OSAC as a model for our own arrangements.

The UK media

44. The UK media have an important intermediary role in magnifying the impact of FCO Travel Advice. At times of crisis the mainstream media highlight, and sometimes distort, changes in Travel Advice. The specialist travel media follow FCO Travel Advice closely. All I spoke to said the service had improved, and some were very positive (*'the best source of impartial advice on safety and security issues and something all consumers should consult'*). There was wide acknowledgement of the difficulty of the balances to be struck by the FCO in providing Travel Advice.
45. Among critics, the main complaints were a perceived tendency to focus on terrorism at the expense of the real hazards facing travellers (FCO Travel Advice on Kenya was cited in this regard, with the hazards of the roads seen as

insufficiently weighted against the potential dangers of terrorism). Some asked for more detail on the relative risks within countries, and suggested that prescribing against travel to whole countries was too blunt in its effect. And there was a suggestion that the tone of FCO Travel Advice is influenced by political considerations (eg the description of the US – but not France or Spain, which receive more visitors - as a ‘hugely popular’ destination for British nationals).

Countries on the receiving end of FCO Travel Advice

46. UK Travel Advice undoubtedly has a major impact on destination countries. The imposition of a prescription against non-essential travel means that insurers will no longer cover travel to that destination, and will pay out for cancellation. However, detailed work by FCO Economic Policy Department (EcPol) suggests that it is difficult to isolate the effects of changes in Travel Advice, whether from the FCO or other governments, from the underlying situation, often highly publicised, which resulted in the advice being issued.
47. It is clear that the impact of terrorism on tourism is highly significant. Not surprisingly, prolonged terrorist campaigns are much more damaging than one-off incidents. Where an incident is perceived as isolated, it normally precipitates a sharp fall in arrivals followed by a slow but steady recovery. While terrorism can clearly be devastating for the afflicted region, its impact on the wider economy is less clear-cut. Countries with otherwise good prospects for economic stability, and the UK commercial interests located there, have normally responded robustly to the economic fall-out from terrorism.
48. As to the impact of Travel Advice itself, EcPol’s work suggests that only the strongest forms of FCO Travel Advice appear to have a persistent impact on UK tourist arrivals. Evidence indicates that the imposition of these strictest forms of prescriptive Travel Advice following a major incident can slow down an economic recovery, in the tourism sector in particular. However, while it may cause sector-specific damage, especially in the tourism sector, the effect of Travel Advice on *aggregate* UK commercial interests is barely perceptible, viewed across a sample of affected countries.
49. In the aggregate, and over a long time frame, the impact of both terrorism and FCO Travel Advice (and that of other countries) appears to be much less significant than wider questions of economic stability and the overall investment climate.
50. Nonetheless, individual countries have been affected significantly by terrorism, and the Travel Advice which has been issued as a result. For example:
 - Indonesia: Following the Bali bombing, UK visitors to Indonesia fell from 190,000 in 2001 to 37,000 in the first 6 months of 2003.

- Jordan: tourism has been affected mainly by the second intifada in the Occupied Territories. UK visitors have fallen from 37,000 in 2000 to 21,000 in 2003. Overall visitors to Petra (a good index for overall tourism) have fallen from 390,000 in 2000 to 100,000 in 2003.
- Kenya: a prescription against non-essential travel was imposed in May and June 2003. I received written inputs on this from a variety of groups, including the African Travel and Tourism Association, the Kenya Tourism Federation (KTF), the Kenya Association of Hotelkeepers and Caterers and the Kenya Association of Tour Operators.

The Kenyan Foreign Minister, citing the KTF, publicly estimated the cost to Kenya of the UK prescription at \$1m per day. UK visitors fell from 28,000 in 2002 to 15,000 in 2003, and the Kenyan Government estimated the total loss as £108m (1.6% GDP). The KTF say that 10,000 workers have been laid off in coastal hotels.

- Yemen: Overall tourist numbers have fallen from 50,000 in 1998 to 3,000 in 2003
51. Destination countries have a good deal of support among the UK media and from NGOs such as Tourism Concern.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

52. Travel Advice is a complex issue with an abundance of competing equities, stakeholders and options. I offer below some conclusions and suggestions, in four broad areas:
- The process by which Whitehall and the FCO produce Travel Advice. I do not think major change is necessary, but it is important for its continuing credibility that Travel Advice can be updated quickly;
 - The product: options for formatting and presenting Travel Advice, plus some ideas for improvement;
 - The context: suggestions for framing the issue in a more balanced way;
 - Risk management: drawing on HMG's best practice guidelines.

Process

53. I conclude the following on the process by which the FCO produces Travel Advice:
- Recent procedural changes have resulted in a much improved Travel Advice service: more consistent (across regions and world-wide), standardised in format, clearer in presentation, and kept up to date.
 - The priority given by the FCO collectively to the production of Travel Advice is, rightly, very high.
 - The process by which Travel Advice is produced within HMG is an effective one. JTAC has an essential role in providing a single source of information on

terrorist threats. JTAC threat assessments are a huge improvement over previous arrangements as a basis for Travel Advice.

- Processes for handling Travel Advice within the FCO work well. CTPD has a vital function as the main FCO link with JTAC which it performs effectively;
- Given the importance of the website as the primary channel for distribution of Travel Advice to the public, improved technical resilience is essential to providing an acceptable service. FCO E-Media Unit must have the resources they need to ensure that they can meet these requirements on behalf of Consular Directorate.
- ‘Ownership’ of Travel Advice in FCO London geographical departments has improved consistency and presentation, and reflects the need to respond quickly to highly classified, time-critical JTAC assessments: it would be much harder to do this if ‘ownership’ was devolved back to Posts.
- But it is essential that the process between Posts and Departments is as seamless as possible in order to gain as much advantage as possible from posts’ local expertise: in the days of instant secure communication there is no excuse for this not happening.
- I think this is a better option than the suggestion made by one FCO Post of a short descriptive passage authored in London, with a link to more detailed information provided by Posts. In my view this would put at risk the greater consistency which has been achieved since the FCO was criticised on this point by MPs after the Bali bombing.
- Regular direct contacts between UK and US producers of Travel Advice (and to a lesser extent those of other analogous government) have been very helpful and need to be maintained.

54. In sum, I do not think the internal FCO process needs to be changed, though it will always be important to keep a critical eye open for possible fine tuning. But:

- It will be very important to maintain and develop effective continuing arrangements for handling Travel Advice as the structure of FCO geographical directorates changes under the FCO Strategy (the proposal for Travel Advice units within the new geographical directorate structure might be a good way to do this);
- It is essential to its credibility that Travel Advice can be updated quickly, including to reflect events already in the public domain. FCO Departments, and the FCO Response Centre out of hours, should normally make rapid provisional factual changes in response to events as soon as they are aware of them.
- It is essential that this provisional response is followed up as soon as possible with properly considered changes to Travel Advice if applicable, consulting Ministers as necessary. Evening and weekend cover arrangements must allow this to happen effectively.

55. One process issue which has been raised is whether FCO Board responsibility should stay with DGCA. It is true that DGD&I is more closely involved with the intelligence material and attends the Cabinet Office meetings at which many of the key crisis decisions are made. However, I think this argument is outweighed by two factors:

- DGCA is responsible for public services, of which Travel Advice is much the most visible to the general public;
- The website is published and maintained in Consular Directorate, which is physically located close to DGCA. Given the time-critical nature of Travel Advice there are operational advantages to maintaining this arrangement.

Product

56. I was asked to consider what should be the balance in our Travel Advice between information, warning and advice (ie between description of risks in particular countries and prescription of action in response). There are at least six options in presenting Travel Advice:

a. No Travel Advice at all

Advantages

- We would avoid the political and economic issues raised by the status quo;
- We would avoid the (limited) possibility of legal liability;
- Resources could be re-deployed to achieve other FCO objectives

Disadvantages

- Travel Advice is the main service provided directly by the FCO to the UK public – giving it up would be a retrograde step, especially at a time when all Government Departments are under pressure to improve their service to the public;
- Travel Advice provides a public good by helping to avoid potentially confusing differences in travel industry and travel insurance products;
- Significant UK stakeholders (especially the travel and insurance industries, and their customers) would miss it;
- We would lose our main intervention point with travellers (more of whom might then get into trouble and need consular help);
- We would remain under pressure in Parliament and elsewhere to reveal prescriptions and warnings being given to our own staff;
- All the main analogous governments continue to offer travel advice. Our nationals would be getting advice from sources outside our control.

b. Generic but not country-specific information (ie key messages on insurance, health)

Advantages

- As above, but with the benefit of retaining some service to the public and an intervention point;

Disadvantages

- A site giving generic travel advice would be unlikely to attract many visitors.

c. *Information* only (ie presenting facts, leaving users to make their own decisions and never prescribing action)

Advantages

- We would avoid having to make difficult judgements;
- And the consequences to destination countries of prescribing avoidance of travel;
- Factual information (eg consular statistics) could help re-focus travellers on the relative risks to them overseas; users would have to take responsibility for their own actions;
- UK companies could do more business in difficult markets

Disadvantages

- If we did not prescribe, more Britons would travel to dangerous areas (and get into trouble and need expensive Consular help);
- The travel and travel insurance industries would argue that their needs were not being met. Their response to emergencies would be less co-ordinated.

d. Prescription on non-terrorist threats (coups, civil unrest, natural disasters)/ information only on all intelligence-based threats (ie international terrorism)

Advantages

- We would be offering prescriptions against travel on the basis of visible, quantifiable risks, which we and our posts can assess and monitor;
- We could no longer be accused of over-reacting to nebulous intelligence, with collateral economic/ political damage in developing countries;
- Less prescription could be balanced by more useful information (eg through links to the planned Security Service website on terrorism threats/ counter measures).

Disadvantages

- Difficult to defend non-issuing of prescriptions against travel if confronted by highly specific threat intelligence, especially given the difficulty of using such intelligence in public;
- The policy would be hard to defend if the threat proved accurate and UK lives were lost;
- Unfavourable comparisons might be made to the service offered by other governments.

e. Continuing to prescribe against travel based on non-terrorist threats (coups, civil unrest, natural disasters), but confining such prescriptions in the case of intelligence-based terrorist threats to situations of extreme and imminent danger – ie if the threat was sufficiently specific, large-scale or endemic to affect British nationals severely.

British nationals would be expected to make up their own minds in all other circumstances on the basis of *information* on the risks. We would still issue *warnings* of imminent attacks ('we believe terrorists are in the final

stages of planning attacks'), but without prescribing action except in the conditions outlined in the paragraph above.

Advantages

- We would minimise (over)reaction to nebulous intelligence-based information, with collateral economic/ political damage in developing countries;
- Should be acceptable to some major UK stakeholders. Travel industry representatives have told me they could probably accept Travel Advice along these lines;
- Prescriptions, when issued, would be more credible because rarer. As above, could be supplemented by more useful information.

Disadvantages

- Difficult subjective judgements would still have to be made on the basis of limited information;
- We might find ourselves deciding not to prescribe in the face of a major threat of terrorist action which subsequently took place;
- We would undoubtedly find ourselves not prescribing against travel in situations where other governments were doing so.

f. The status quo

Advantages

- We have a good deal of flexibility, with the option of issuing information, warnings or prescribing against travel as we judge fit.
- Some of the most influential stakeholders are happy as things are.

Disadvantages

- Prescriptions in our Travel Advice are often ignored by resident communities and those most at risk, eroding its overall credibility;
- Travel Advice is deterring UK companies from doing business in important markets;
- People in destination countries are being harmed on the basis of very limited intelligence-based information.
- The imposition of prescription against non-essential travel in the wake of a terrorist attack risks undermining co-operation with the affected government at a time when it may be of critical importance.

57. Of these options:

- I would discount a. and b.. Although we are not obliged to provide Travel Advice, I do not think the FCO can or should withdraw from offering this service to the public. Nor should we restrict ourselves to offering generic advice Bowdlerised to the point of uselessness.
- Under Option c., we would risk more travellers getting into more trouble for reasons unconnected to international terrorism. The travel/ tourism and travel insurance industries would find the service less useful;

- Option d. is attractive in theory and could be applied consistently, but refusing to offer any intelligence-based prescription at all would be difficult to sustain in practice;
- I think option e. is more attractive. Issuing prescriptions only in response to severe and imminent threats would help meet the problem of over-reaction on the basis of intelligence and could help re-focus attention on bigger risks to UK travellers. But consistent application would still present difficult decisions;
- Option f., the status quo, has the advantage of flexibility but the disadvantages of eroding credibility and wide collateral damage.

58. I therefore recommend that option e. should be considered as the basis for a revised approach to Travel Advice. We must continue to stress that we provide Travel Advice, including prescriptions against travel in extreme circumstances, in an effort to allow British travellers to be as informed as possible about conditions in a country before and during their travels. But the ultimate decision on whether to travel (or continue travelling) is for the individual concerned. The FCO cannot accept any liability for that decision.

Publicising threat levels, assessing local capability

59. Under my terms of reference, I was asked to consider two specific issues relating to Travel Advice:

- **How do we link threat level assessments and public information?**

Some overseas governments make a direct link between the two. Stakeholders in the UK government are clear that we should not because:

- JTAC work on the basis that their threat assessments reflect only the available intelligence, not any assessment of possible consequences flowing from that analysis. They are clear that they need a 'firewall': automatic conversion of threat levels to public information would risk bringing into the assessment process wider issues which it is the responsibility of the FCO, the Home Office and other users to manage;
- Travel Advice which automatically reflected every update in threat assessments would change frequently, potentially undermining its credibility.

- **How far should we take into consideration the capabilities of host governments in reaching decisions on Travel Advice?**

My view is that the capability of host governments must be an integral part of the assessment of the overall risk presented to UK nationals by the threat of terrorism in particular countries. Work with the Kenyan authorities to improve airport security at Nairobi was one of the key factors behind the lifting of UK advice against non-essential travel in June 2003.

Presentational changes

60. Whichever option Ministers decide to take on the overall basis of Travel Advice, some relatively straightforward editorial/ presentational changes could increase its impact and effectiveness. I suggest:

- **The summary:** this is vital to the impact of Travel Advice. Many stakeholders have told me that they get no further into the text. There is still a wide variety in presentation and emphasis between the way FCO Travel Advice for different countries appears. I suggest that the summary should always:
 - consist of five/six **bullet points**;
 - contain at least one bullet on the terrorist threat;
 - in the remainder, focus as objectively as possible on the main risks to travellers. The order in which risks and precautions are described could be guided by the statistics on actual consular incidents in that country for the previous year (road accidents, robberies, drowning etc).
 - include a standard final bullet point reminding travellers of the need for medical and travel insurance.
- **Key consular statistics** (number of visitors, causes of death, robberies, assaults etc) should, where available, be presented in a box for each country entry as a way of highlighting the relative scale of risks;
- **Ambiguity** (eg references to ‘major cities’) should be avoided;
- **Public commitment to ‘no double standards’:** Travel Advice should always make explicit the instructions being given to staff by HMG on travel, staff draw-downs etc (which would also make clear situations where staff withdrawals were limiting an FCO Post’s ability to offer Consular assistance);
- **Warnings should be lowered as soon as possible:** this is essential for the continuing credibility of Travel Advice. Automatic ratcheting down should become the norm except where there is strong positive evidence to the contrary;
- **Out of date/overtaken information** should be removed: this requires a continuous effort between all involved. A form of ‘sunset clause’ (automatic removal of material beyond a given date) might help focus the attention of FCO departments;

- **Assessment of the public impact must be an integral part of the process:** poorly explained changes to Travel Advice risk giving the impression of weak organisation. Changes to Travel Advice should be made promptly and announced during working hours if possible: changes made unnecessarily late in the day can have an exaggerated impact on media and public. FCO Press Office should be closely involved in the decision as to how (or whether) changes of Advice are announced. And the needs of the media should be central to planning of FCO involvement in major events likely to affect Travel Advice (Olympics, football competitions etc).

Risk management: framing the issue

61. The steps above would give greater impact to what is already a much better product. To build on the gains which have been made, I think the FCO could do more to shift the terms of the debate and develop understanding among our stakeholders of the key Travel Advice issues.
62. A good starting point would be to incorporate into our handling of Travel Advice some of the principles for improved risk handling set out by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit in its report: 'Risk: Improving Government's Capability to Handle Risk and Uncertainty' (published on 20 November 2002). The Strategy Unit identified some of the key challenges: *'Rising public expectations for governments to manage risks are set against a backdrop of declining trust in institutions, declining deference and increased activism around specific risk issues, with messages amplified by the news media... The public expects government to be more open about risk issues – they seek reassurance from government but are sceptical of what they are told unless they can clearly see it is not influenced by vested interests. They want openness and independent advice'*.
63. The Strategy Unit suggest that to improve risk management *'Departments should make earning and maintaining public trust a priority in order to help them advise the public about the risks they may face. There should be more openness and transparency, [and] wider engagement of stakeholders and the public... Underlying principles for handling and communicating on risk to the public should be publicised for consultation'*. Government handling of risks should be *'more open, particularly in cases of uncertainty, and more transparent about the processes it has used to reach its decisions'*.
64. Openness is, of course, more difficult when dealing with intelligence-based threats. There are several linked issues:
 - We cannot expose much of our evidence because of the need to protect sources. We have to ask stakeholders to take our word based on their trust in us. But there is not much trust to draw on, for reasons which include Parliamentary and press criticism of the FCO in the wake of the Bali bombing;

- The public has exaggerated expectations about how much the intelligence agencies, and HMG collectively, know about the terrorist threat - a point made by senior officials in the security field. JTAC acknowledge that their threat assessments are not an exact science but judgements based invariably on incomplete information.
 - Because the public think HMG collectively know more than we do, they assume that failings are due not to the limitations of our intelligence capability, but to our being incompetent or worse.
65. Against this background, how can the FCO adopt improved risk management principles in the case of Travel Advice? The Prime Minister said in his introduction to the Strategy Unit recommendations: *‘Over the last few years we have radically changed our approach to risk. Bodies like the Food Standards Agency, the Human Genetics Commission and the Monetary Policy Committee have shown that more open processes, based on evidence, are more effective at handling risks and winning public confidence than secrecy’.*
66. A fully fledged arm’s length body for Travel Advice is unlikely to be practical or desirable. But it might be possible to achieve some of the same effect other ways:
- **Being more open about the Whitehall processes** which underlie Travel Advice, highlighting the expertise which different parts of the system bring to bear through the Cabinet Office, FCO Posts, JTAC, the Department for Transport etc.
 - **Establishing a focal point in London for systematic consideration of threats and risk management overseas, working with stakeholders inside and outside government.** Such a body could formalise the existing practices by which Travel Advice decisions are reached. Its remit could include:
 - Travel Advice;
 - FCO post security;
 - Working with SISBO to improve private sector risk management, including ways to allow more flexible business travel to difficult destinations;
 - Active risk management measures in destination countries (eg airport security)
 - Assess host government capability, and ways this could be improved;
 - As part of the above, consider borrowing from the French model and developing cross government assessment teams.
67. Public trust could also be enhanced through the following:
- **The Foreign Secretary or another senior figure in Government could set out clearly in public in a high profile way some of the dilemmas and challenges raised by Travel Advice.** Key themes could include:
 - An open acknowledgement of the limits to intelligence capability (research on risk management conducted for the DoH by MORI concluded that *‘the*

public is more tolerant of uncertainty openly admitted than is often supposed’).

- Perspective on the comparative risks abroad from terrorism and other causes;
 - An explanation of our approach to Travel Advice (especially if Ministers had decided on a new approach – perhaps linked to a re-launch of the Travel Advice/ Know Before You Go (KBYG) campaign);
 - Read-across to the wider Government approach to terrorism: the need for the public to be ‘alert but not alarmed’ in the UK and overseas.
- **The messages above could form the basis of a sustained campaign**, perhaps as part of the new FCO Consular Strategy and the re-branding of KBYG.
 - **We need to develop and maximise mutually beneficial links between the FCO’s on-line Travel Advice and the new Security Service terrorism website** highlighting the practical protective security steps people can take to make themselves safer overseas. Making these links operational would require close co-operation (perhaps via a small co-located team on the JTAC model).
 - **We should be more systematic in briefing key stakeholders.**
 - Consular Directorate has already expanded its engagement on Travel Advice and other issues with the UK travel industry (ABTA, AITO) and other stakeholders such as Tourism Concern. This should be expanded;
 - As part of this, Consular Directorate could establish a Travel Advice users’ panel or Standing Advisory Council to formalise engagement with NGOs, destination governments, the travel industry, terrorist victims and their families and other stakeholders. UK Visas and the Passport Office already run groups along these lines. We would need to be clear in doing so that responsibility for the substance of Travel Advice would remain with the FCO, and that we could not compromise our operational ability to move quickly to change Travel Advice when necessary;
 - The travel media are key multipliers for the core Travel Advice messages and should be briefed regularly (eg through informal lunches);
 - Parliamentary briefing on Travel Advice, especially of the FAC and ISC, pays dividends and should be undertaken more systematically;
 - As far as possible, host governments need to be informed in advance of changes to Travel Advice and the underlying reasoning;
 - Heads of Post need to be willing to engage with stakeholders locally over Travel Advice: this happened to good effect in India in 2002.
 - **Working with UK business**
 - SISBO has got off to a good start but sustained effort will be needed to maximise its value and ensure it delivers what its industry stakeholders want.
 - Ideally, it should help companies develop their own improved risk management strategies, in order to allow business visitors to make necessary visits in reasonable safety to destinations where the FCO prescribes against non-essential travel;

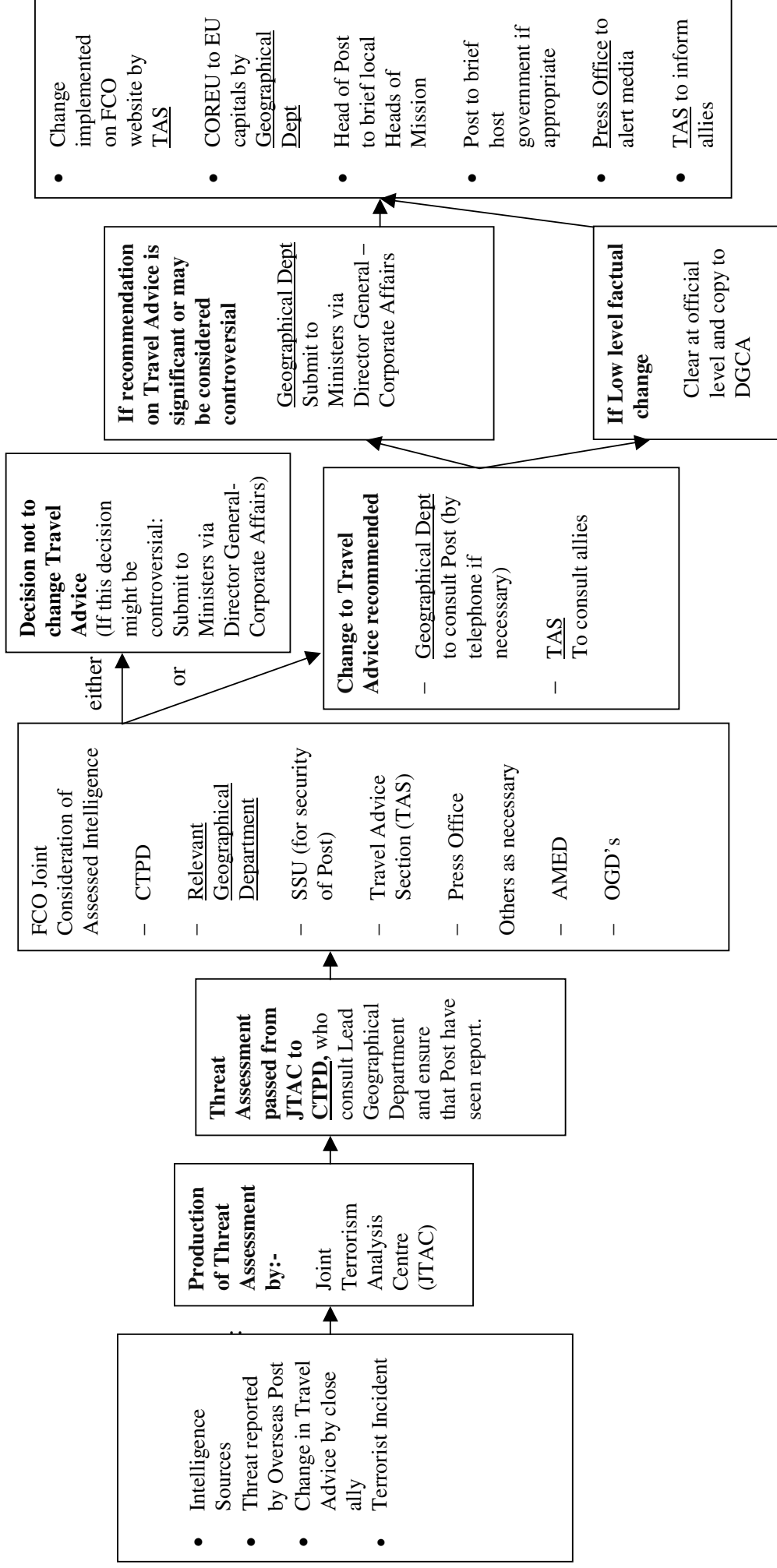
- The development (and extension?) of the UKTI waiver scheme should be a priority.

Robert Chatterton Dickson
FCO Travel Advice Reviewer

March 2004

ANNEX - THE ASSESSMENT OF INTELLIGENCE LEADING TO CHANGES IN TRAVEL ADVICE

(Action Lead shown by underlined> Department at each stage)





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