



Foreign &  
Commonwealth Office

# Consular Work

Annual Review 2000

*I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for the wonderful way you helped us to repatriate my daughter.*

*Your staff have been very efficient, helpful and unfailingly patient. They have answered all my queries for information and always returned my telephone calls. It is nice to know that there are still people who make so much effort when the norm appears not to bother at all.*



**Serving British nationals 24 hours a day, worldwide**

*Thank you very much. Your timely and sincere support has enabled our mother to come to us from India. This was not possible without your help.*

*Our family's problems were considerably reduced by your calm, efficient and understanding actions. My whole family wishes to join me in offering heartfelt thanks for your invaluable help in locating John in Almeria and aiding our son and daughter in bringing him back to receive medical attention in England.*

# Introduction

The British are a nation of travellers. And every year, more of them travel to more places than ever before. So it is not surprising that a small number get into trouble. Some get arrested. Some fall ill. Some get mugged. Whatever it is that has happened, they are a long way from home in a foreign country, and they look to our consular staff for help.

This review gives a snapshot of the work our consular staff have been doing over the past year. And it gives a glimpse of how that work will develop over the next few years.

British nationals have high expectations of their consular staff. They want sympathetic, practical assistance, given without regard to race, colour or creed. It is an expectation we are proud to meet. This report tells how.

'I am committed to ensuring the consular service British people receive abroad is second to none.'

**Tony Blair**

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Cover photograph by Marie Hilley shows Barry Davidson, Vice Consul, Kathmandu helping an injured British backpacker.

# Facts & Figures

Early in the morning of 6 April, the British High Commission in Lilongwe received a telephone call: three British nationals had been missing on Lake Malawi in a small boat since the evening of 4 April. The lake is over 560 km long and 80 km wide, with strong currents and winds, concealed rocks, and hippos that are a danger to small boats. So there was extreme concern for those missing, particularly as one of the party was 79 and frail.

Family and friends of the missing people immediately mounted searches using planes and boats. The High Commission meanwhile sought help from the Malawian Army and Police and made contact with consular staff in Tanzania and Mozambique, who asked the local authorities to mount searches along their lakeshores.

The air search lasted some ten days and involved four planes. No wreckage was found and there was no sign of a beached boat. By this stage, family and friends feared the worst.

Then, at 0900 on 20 April, the Consul in Lilongwe received a message: the party were in Tanzania. Their small boat had drifted over 320 km and been discovered the day before by local villagers. The villagers helped them to catch a boat to Malawi. The Consul and a doctor met the party. They seemed in good spirits but weak, having spent two weeks without food and existing only on water from the lake. The Consul helped them aboard an Army helicopter, which ferried them to a waiting Army plane for transfer to hospital in Lilongwe.

## Consular Services for 1999/2000

In 1999/2000 our staff spent 740 man years on consular work, of which 84 were in the UK.

The cost of consular services in 1999/2000 was around £49.1 million.

In that period, our consular staff:

- provided consular assistance and advice to over 45,000 British travellers
- issued or amended 382,463 full British passports
- issued 10,074 Emergency passports
- registered 6,650 births and 400 deaths
- made 6,938 prison visits.

‘Consular work is a key part of the FCO’s mission. It is foreign policy directly in the service of the British people.’

**Robin Cook**

## Visits Abroad

UK residents made an estimated 53.6 million trips overseas in 1999.

Top Destinations	Number of Visitors
France	14,700,000
Spain	12,000,000
Italy	4,100,000
USA	3,600,000
Irish Republic	3,300,000
Greece	2,400,000
Portugal	2,000,000
Germany	1,600,000
Turkey	1,600,000

## Deaths of British Nationals Overseas

In 1999/2000 2,418 British nationals died overseas. Of these 1,993 died of natural causes and 425 died of non-natural causes:

Cause of Death	USA	France	Spain	Rest of the World
Murder	4	1	3	27
Rail accidents	0	1	0	0
Road accidents	14	13	52	124
Accidents from balcony	0	0	13	4
Suicide	6	10	10	31
Accidents at sea (swimming)	2	5	17	27
Accidents at sea (not swimming)	1	0	3	17
Air accidents	3	0	3	21
Skiing/mountaineering	1	4	1	7
Natural causes	66	47	752	1,128
Total death cases	97	81	854	1,386

## British Communities

An estimated 15 million British nationals live abroad. The top 5 countries are:

Australia	5.2 million
Hong Kong	3.6 million
Canada	3.3 million
Spain	0.7 million
South Africa	0.6 million

Consular Division's Protection Section were notified of 495 serious crimes against British nationals overseas:

Robberies	190
Assaults	120
Rape	117
Homicide	35
Abduction	29
Terrorist Action	4

# Child Abduction

In February 2000, Ben, 5, and Lynne, 7, flew to Malaysia with their parents to see their father's relatives. Ben and Lynne were left with their aunt in Malaysia while their father took their mother on a short trip to Thailand. It was only on the plane that their mother realised she had been tricked. The plane was bound not for Bangkok, but back to London.

It was clear that the abduction had been long planned. Their father had put the house in England up for sale and his parents had found a school for Ben and Lynne in Malaysia. Ben and Lynne kept asking their mother on the telephone: when was she coming to take them home?

Their mother hired a solicitor and Ben and Lynne were made wards of the UK court. She telephoned Consular Division to ask for help in getting the order recognised in Malaysia, and getting Ben and Lynne home.

The FCO got the order legalised in London and sent the papers to Malaysia. Consular staff in London contacted the British High Commission in Malaysia who were ready to help sort out any problems with the children's passports, while Ben and Lynne's mother travelled to Malaysia to collect them. The threat of the order was enough to persuade the father to hand over the children's passports to their mother. The solicitor has said how grateful she was for all the help and advice Consular Division gave her and the children's mother. Ben and Lynne are now safely home in England and back at school.

Having a child abducted overseas is a parent's worst nightmare. Sadly, every year it is a nightmare that comes true for the parents of over three hundred British children. The FCO is committed to providing every support to those parents and their children:

- we ensure that all our consular staff give the maximum possible advice and practical support to the parents of abducted children. Even though they cannot send abducted children home, our staff can ensure that the parents of those children do not feel that they are on their own
- we are working with other countries to improve the Hague Convention. In spring 2001 there will be a review of how the Convention works. We will use it to make it an even stronger tool for the victims of child abduction
- we are negotiating new arrangements with countries that are not part of the Hague Convention, to give practical benefits to British parents whose children are abducted to those countries – vital benefits like visiting rights



- we work with a wide range of partners, from the courts and the Lord Chancellor's Department to *reunite*, the support group for parents. We all have the common aim of helping the parents of abducted children.

**A total of 300 abduction cases were reported to Consular Division and *reunite* for the period 1999/2000.**

Baroness Scotland with Dame Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, President of the Family Law Division and Lord Justice Thorpe at the FCO's Child Abduction Conference on 1 December 1999.



# Forced Marriages

Every year our staff help around a hundred young British nationals who have been forced into marriage by their families. And we know that for every case we see there are others that we do not. The victims are often held against their will. Some are abused. Forced marriages are a major abuse of British nationals' human rights.

The FCO is determined to do everything it can to help the victims of forced marriage:

- we are working closely with human rights organisations, lawyers and local authorities – both in the UK and overseas – to build a network of practical support for the victims
- we are talking to community organisations in the UK. The vast majority of Britain's minority ethnic communities oppose forced marriage – we need to work with them to ensure that this message is heard
- together with the Home Office, we are preparing a comprehensive action plan on the overseas dimension of forced marriage. This will set out numerous practical measures for us to do more, from putting together an easy guide to the local laws, to publicity campaigns in the UK so young people know where to turn for help if they find themselves in this position
- we are working with the police in the UK and overseas, to strengthen international co-operation on the issue and share best practice.

Our staff helped 107 victims of forced marriage cases:

Pakistan	76
Bangladesh	22
India	9



## Case study

Every week our consular staff help young British nationals escape forced marriages overseas. Between April and June, for example, the High Commission in Islamabad has successfully helped nine young British nationals, including one man, to return to the UK.

But not every case is as simple as it seems:

We were told about X by her husband in the UK. He told us that she was being held against her will in the village of her family, as they disapproved of her marriage. We were concerned about her safety, so we did not try to contact her directly. Instead our staff used their contacts at the highest level to have her family instructed to bring her in front of a court. But when she appeared she told the court that she was remaining of her own free will, that she was happy and did not wish to return to the UK as her marriage had broken down. Our Consul asked the Judge for permission to talk to her alone. In private X vehemently confirmed everything she had told the court. She added that in the longer term she hoped to remarry locally and that she would invite the Consul to the wedding.

# Prisoners

Case study

The Vice Consul in Quito went to Northern Ecuador when a mother and grandmother were imprisoned on drugs charges. Both women were Chilean nationals resident in the UK; but with them was their 3-month-old baby daughter and granddaughter, who was British.

**Dilemma** – what to do with a three-month-old baby, whose mother and grandmother are in filthy conditions in prison and who has no one in Ecuador to care for her?  
**Answer** – the British Embassy takes custody.

Legal papers were drawn up, giving temporary custody of the baby to the Embassy, and allowing her to travel to UK. The DSS made enquiries into who would care for the baby. No one suitable was found. That left social services. At the eleventh hour, the airline said that the baby was too young to be escorted by an airline official. The Vice Consul agreed to take her.

The baby was cared for until her departure by the Vice Consul and her family, with much love and attention from all the Embassy staff. On arrival in UK, she was handed over to social services, in whose care she will remain until she can be reunited with her family.

Vice Consul, Pamela Tarif, with her family and the baby.



On 13 July 2000 there were 2,780 British nationals in prison overseas. Helping them is one of our key duties. We cannot get them out of jail. We do not make a judgement about their guilt or innocence. We have two main objectives:

- to protect their human rights
- to look after their welfare.

Doing this is a mammoth task. In some countries, where the judicial systems are reliable and the jails of a high standard, it is relatively easy.

In others, it can be very difficult indeed. All over the world, our staff are raising the cases of British nationals with local authorities, ensuring they get proper medical treatment, visiting prisons, and helping the families of prisoners.



We are constantly looking for new ways to help British prisoners overseas. And we have an ambitious programme of reform:

- this year we set up a dedicated Prisoners Unit in London to co-ordinate this work
- we have a close alliance with Prisoners Abroad, the charity working to help British prisoners overseas
- we have set up a series of projects to provide practical assistance to British prisoners and their families, like producing 'survival guides' to foreign prisons, and a health project to help our staff identify medical problems early on
- we have targeted 13 countries for Prisoner Transfer Agreements, so our prisoners will be able to serve their sentences in the UK
- we are working with human rights organisations and others to explore ways in which we can do more to ensure the rights of our prisoners are respected and due process under law is observed.

'I want every distressed British national who walks through any of our consular doors around the world to be met with understanding, patience and sympathy.'

**Baroness Scotland**

	Total number of prisoners	Number that are drugs related	Number of British women in prison
USA	586	139	84
Spain	302	184	21
France	260	143	16
Germany	141	39	12
Australia	121	53	9
Thailand	121	78	4
Jamaica	96	80	42
South Africa	84	16	6
Belgium	62	34	5
Netherlands	57	25	2
Rest of the World	950	339	99

# Crisis Management

## Mission to Mecca

Diary by Haroon Suleman, member of the Hajj delegation.

The Hajj is a pilgrimage to Mecca performed by thousands of Muslims each year. Every Muslim should try and do the Hajj at least once.

In March 2000 Britain made history by becoming the first historically Christian country to send an official delegation to the Hajj. I was honoured to be part of the delegation. Our primary objective was to help the 30,000 British pilgrims when they got into trouble:

25 February 2000: Arrive in Saudi with Ahmed Azam and Sean Keeling. First thing to note is the extreme heat and humidity! We join forces with six delegation members chosen from the British Muslim community, four of whom are doctors.

26 February 2000 to 11 March 2000: Spent two weeks at the airport, welcoming British pilgrims. The Saudis have built a special 'Hajj terminal' to accommodate the 2.5 million pilgrims who arrive this month! We introduce ourselves and offer advice to the new arrivals. However, the problems are many – lost luggage, incomplete documentation and visa problems. We work 22-hour shifts, stealing two hours sleep in the car when we can. But it's worth it.

12-20 March 2000: We remain with the pilgrims as they perform the rites of Hajj. Our services are stretched to the limit, with over 2,000 patients who need medical treatment. The four doctors work 16-hour shifts. The passport and ID problems continue in force. 18 British pilgrims die – about the norm.

26 March 2000: Arrive back in the UK. At last, time to unwind and catch up on some sleep! Despite all the hard work and difficulties, can't wait to go back and do it all again....

Part of our job is planning for the worst. Sometimes the worst happens – in May this year, we evacuated 442 British and other entitled nationals from Sierra Leone.

The key is to be prepared:

- we have a standing crisis management cell in Consular Division in London. The cell can be reinforced at any time, and keeps close links with the Ministry of Defence and the UK military's Permanent Joint Headquarters
- we also have an emergency response team on 24-hour call, so we can answer the floods of concerned public callers that come with every crisis
- we keep up-to-date contingency plans for 95 countries, so that wherever trouble occurs we are ready to deal with it
- in many countries we have a network of volunteer community wardens, so that we can contact all our nationals quickly and effectively. In countries, where communications are unreliable, we have set up our own radio networks.

Consular Division's Jim Collins accompanying evacuees from Sierra Leone at Dakar airport.



Haroon Suleman (right) with Ahmed Azam.

# Travel Advice

We currently produce travel advice notices for over 160 countries. Our system is regarded as a model around the world.

When we write the travel advice, the safety of British nationals is the only concern. We do not allow political, economic or diplomatic considerations to influence them.

Its sole purpose is to help British nationals abroad avoid trouble.

Each week we get 55,000 hits on the FCO's Travel Advice web-page.

We are continually looking at ways of improving the quality of our travel advice:

- in February 1999 we held a seminar for the travel industry
- an independent review of the travel advice service was carried out as a result. Its recommendations are now being implemented.

Travel advice is available on the FCO's website ([www.fco.gov.uk/travel](http://www.fco.gov.uk/travel)), and on BBC2 Ceefax from page 470. It can also be obtained from travel agents, and by fax (020 7238 4545) or telephone (020 7238 4703).

## Number of travel advice notices issued

1997	857
1998	1052
1999	1409



## Case study

The British Consulate General (BCG) in Brisbane was asked to track down a backpacker whose father had died unexpectedly. The only information they had been given was that he might be hitchhiking somewhere between Adelaide and Darwin (a distance of over 3,000 km). The BCG contacted the police and post offices, as well as all the backpacker hostels without success.

His family was able to check his UK bank transactions, which placed him at Alice Springs, but he still could not be located.

As a last resort BCG contacted the various coach operators and was able to find him en route from Alice Springs to King's Canyon. He was booked in to the only hotel in King's Canyon. The hotel duty manager met the coach and asked the backpacker to get in touch with his family.

The BCG also helped change his travel arrangements to get him home in time for his father's funeral.



Later in the year, the Consul General, Steve Hiscock, visited this remote area and thanked the hotel staff for all their help.

# Other Things We Do

## Manage the Consular Network

The Resource Management section in Consular Division is the engine of the global operation. It ensures that the right staff and resources are available around the world to do our job.

## Nationality Determination and Passport Issuing

Last year our consulates issued 382,463 passports. But often it is not just a question of producing the document itself. Every year our consular staff have to determine whether thousands of applicants qualify as British nationals. Most applications are straightforward. But some cases are extremely complex and require an in-depth knowledge of Britain's complex nationality laws. Our consular staff in Post are backed up by a team of experts in London.

## Notarise

British nationals overseas rely on our consulates for their official documents – not just their passports, but their birth, marriage and death certificates as well. Every year our Posts issue some 8,000 official documents of this sort.

## Legalise

The Legalisation Office is the only FCO public office in the UK. Last year a total of 159,107 legalisation certificates were issued. 26,088 letters and 46,624 documents were received by post. 36,048 personal callers were dealt with.



## Publicise

We do not just help British nationals once they are in trouble. We try to help them stay out of trouble as well. We produce a range of leaflets designed to do just that, including a checklist for travellers before they go, and dos and don'ts leaflets for individual countries. For Euro 2000 we produced a credit card-sized leaflet with useful information and contact numbers. This year we are planning a major campaign to persuade British holidaymakers to take travel insurance before they go.

## Claim

Hundreds of British nationals lost property because of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. As a condition of the peace, Iraq has to make good those losses. Consular Division is responsible for distributing their reparations. Last financial year, 3,701 claimants received a total of £20.5 million. This represents a rise of 892 per cent over 1998.

## Train

We depend on our staff. So we need to make sure they have the skills they need. Last year, our team of trainers ran 7 courses in London and 11 around the world, keeping those skills fresh and ensuring staff know the priorities and concerns of our Ministers.

## Appoint

A key part of the consular network are the 257 Honorary Consuls. They cover the areas where we do not have full consulates, and provide vital help for British nationals who get into trouble overseas.

A British holidaymaker collapsed in Cape Town and was taken to a local hospital. The only ID he possessed was his passport, a receipt from a Namibian travel agency and a return air ticket for the UK. The hospital advised that the man would be unfit to travel for some time but they desperately needed to talk to his GP or specialist in the UK before they could treat him, as his condition was unknown and described as very serious.

The Vice Consul interviewed the man in hospital – he was very confused and could not remember anything about his arrival in Cape Town except that he had checked into a small hotel or bed and breakfast 'somewhere' near the city centre. He admitted that he had been receiving specialist treatment for his illness in the UK but was unable to provide any contact numbers for doctors. He insisted that the information was all in his luggage.

After arranging with the airline to defer the man's return ticket the Consular Section began a search for his hotel – and there are several hundred such hostels in Cape Town! After a lot of detective work, the Vice Consul found the man's hotel and luggage. He was able to contact the GP and put him in touch with the local specialist.

The Consular section dealt with the holiday insurance company in the UK, arranging a money transfer on the man's behalf, and visited him twice daily in hospital. Three weeks later he was well enough to return home.

# The Future

Over the next two years the FCO's consular services will undergo radical changes. If we get them right, they will mean better and faster service for our customers; better value for the taxpayer; and more rewarding, less bureaucratic work for our staff.

## A Global Database

Consular staff presently spend much of their time sharing information. If a family in London rings up about a daughter in Kenya, Consular Division will fax a question to the High Commission in Nairobi. The High Commission will fax the answer back. Chasing information internally takes up a huge amount of time.

We plan to introduce a global database, so that all our staff have access to all information, wherever they are in the world. Desk officers in London will be able to find the details of a case in Israel as easily as the Consul in Tel Aviv. A consular assistant in Manila will be able to search the register of British nationals in Jakarta.

## Sharing Best Practice

All over the world our staff are coming up with new and better ways of working. The High Commission in Canberra has experimented with on-line consular services. The Embassy in Egypt provides targeted advice on the legal implications for British nationals marrying locals. The Embassy in Indonesia has radically re-shaped its contingency planning, making full use of the internet. We need to pull these innovations together – if all our consulates benefit from all the ideas being tried out, it would transform what we do.

So we will be drawing up a Consular Handbook. Writing it will involve a massive consultation of our staff, asking them what they think about what we do and how we could do it better. The result will be clearly written, easy to use practical advice available on the FCO intranet.

## Contact Centres

We already offer the public an emergency 24-hour service, 7 days a week. We also need to make information easily available by phone and e-mail on questions such as entitlement to British nationality, renewing passports abroad, or registering with the nearest consulate. We aim to combine this with providing information on other FCO services, such as visas. To do this, we will set up contact centres using the latest web technology, out-sourced where necessary.

## Managing Our Own Resources

Over the next two years we will be reforming the way consular work is resourced. We will know better how much we are spending on which activities. We will get the maximum value-for-money out of all the time staff spend on consular work. We will work out our own budgets within the framework of the FCO's overall plans, and set our own priorities. The result should be a consular service worldwide that can put staff and resources where they are most needed, and shift resources more easily to priorities.

## Driving Forward Policy

In the past year the Policy Section in Consular Division has doubled in size. This means we have the brainpower and time we need to develop new policy to meet changing times and priorities. We are looking at the links between consular work and human rights policy, exploring how we can do more to protect the rights of British nationals on trial overseas. We are seeing what more we can do to help the victims of child abductions and forced marriages. We are building partnerships across government, and developing dialogues with minority communities throughout the UK. We do not yet know where all this will take us. The one thing we can be sure of is that in a few years' time consular work will look very different.

*Thank you for all your help and support. I am happy to be home and enjoying the warm love and support from my wonderful family.*

*Thank you so much for your help, support and advice in dealing with the worries and trauma to ensure Gabriella's safety and well being. She is making progress every day.*

I want to thank you from the bottom  
of my heart for the wonderful way you  
helped us to repatriate my daughter  
Marisa. We all got home safely.

She is now going to live and work  
in Ireland with her boyfriend and his  
parents. She will learn a lot of  
skills and be in the countryside, and  
I feel this is the best of possible openings  
for her right now.

She is in  
very good health, and well in touch with  
herself. This is a great blessing. Finigan  
crossed, she is out of danger, and so is he. They  
were ready to come home.

It was so good to meet you, and to  
have your warm and understanding support.  
I wonder what a variety of situations you  
must handle every day with that emphasis  
of practical caring. THANK YOU. And  
all my very best wishes to you —