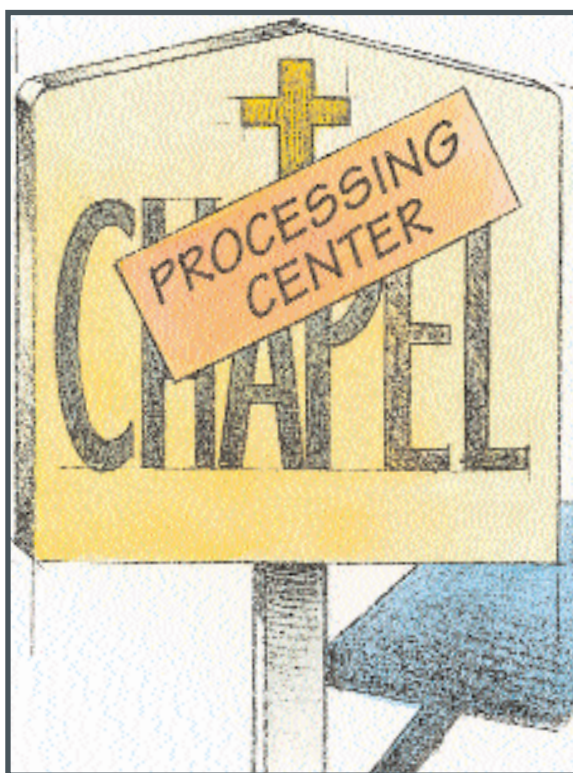


RESPONDING TO CRISES ABROAD: THE CONSULAR AFFAIRS ROLE



Russell Charpentier

CONSULAR OFFICERS TRAIN AND PARTICIPATE IN CRISIS MANAGEMENT EXERCISES. BUT NOTHING CAN PREPARE THEM FOR SOME THINGS THEY WILL FACE, AS THESE STORIES SHOW.

BY BARBARA ENSSLIN

American schoolchildren are trapped in a politically torn West African country amid chaos and bloodshed. Savage bombings at two popular nightclubs in Asia leave an unknown number of Americans dead or injured. Rebels storm a Moscow theater and hold the audience hostage — including an unknown number of American tourists. Then there are plane crashes, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods. Americans are caught daily in danger zones beyond our shores. They may be your parents, children, relatives or friends.

Not simply headlines in the morning news, these scenarios have become a chilling reality to the many Foreign

Service and Civil Service consular officers of the Department of State who are called upon to deal with mass casualty, crisis, and rescue operations. Every year, approximately one thousand Foreign Service consular officers, along with their Civil Service and Foreign National counterparts, issue seven million passports, six million visas, and provide consular services for some four million

Americans residing abroad, and for millions of American travelers. These same consular officers also cope with plane crashes, hijackings, natural disasters, civil disorders, and political unrest. They take disaster preparedness training, and participate in crisis management exercises, but nothing can prepare them for some of the things they will face, as these stories of consular officers at work during the recent crises in Indonesia and Cote d'Ivoire underline.

Bali: 20 Days and a Lifetime

The 20 days Tom Daniels, a first-tour consular officer assigned to the U.S. consulate in Surabaya, spent in Bali, Indonesia, changed his life forever. Shortly after midnight on Sunday, Oct. 13, 2002, powerful bombs exploded at the popular Sari Club in Denpasar, Bali, killing 183 people and injuring 326 others. More would die from their injuries

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over the next few days. Among the dead were seven Americans.

The Department of State immediately updated its Indonesia travel warning to include information about the terrorist attacks, warning Americans to depart Indonesia, and urging others to defer travel there. Within a few short hours, the department also set into motion a full-scale operation in Washington D.C. to support

rescue efforts, and to provide consular services to American citizen victims and their families. The Consular Affairs Bureau activated the Office of Overseas Citizens Services Call Center to respond to general information calls from the public around the clock. The Call Center handled over 1,500 calls within the first few days of the crisis. As part of the crisis monitoring group in the Ops Center, CA established Task Force 2 to deal with public inquiries from friends and relatives, public officials, media and other interested groups. The consular officers working round the clock in Washington provided a continuous lifeline to the officers in the field who were coping with the crisis. Meanwhile, Embassy Jakarta began to evacuate official Americans.

Thousands of miles from Washington and a lifetime of experience away, Tom Daniels confronted the after-effects of the bombing in the most direct way imaginable. He was searching for dead and injured Americans among the rubble and devastation, assisting relatives of American citizens presumed dead or missing, and dealing with Indonesian authorities, Congressional inquirers and the public.

Early Sunday morning, Tom received a call from Phil Antweiler, the consul general in Surabaya, advising him of the bombing. Soon, Tom was in the office, coordinating efforts to have the American casualties, who needed treatment, medically evacuated to Singapore or Australia. He returned home about 10 p.m. to work with Task Force 2 in Washington for most of the night, compiling missing persons lists and trying to find out which Americans had been injured but not yet evacuated.

On Monday, Oct. 14, Tom left Surabaya for Bali on the first flight, accompanied by one consular assistant, to organize the search efforts for missing American citizens. Bali Consular Agent Andy Toth, three FSN employees,

and American personnel from Embassy Jakarta, Assistant Regional Security Officer Timothy Dumas and Consular Officer Danielle Garbe, assisted Tom in the post-bombing efforts in Bali.

On Tuesday morning Tom executed the first Consular Report of Death for a resident American woman. Tuesday afternoon, he visited Sanglah Hospital Morgue for the first time. He was struck by the bomb's devastation. There were no cold storage containers and most of the dead were lined up in body bags on the grass and on the sidewalk behind the morgue. Other bodies had been taken inside the morgue for examination. It was impossible for him to count them. Although Tom had seen bodies in the "no man's land" of Bosnia, nothing had prepared him for this. He began the search for more Americans among the dead.

By the end of the week another American victim was identified. Tom had spent dozens of hours finding her, identifying the body, processing for her release from the morgue, and staying with her father while she was cremated. He grew very close to the American victim's father in those few days as he watched him suffer the pains of mourning. The week had also brought Tom close to five other families who called or e-mailed trying to learn the status of their loved ones, presumed dead. Concurrently, Linda McFadyen and Kerry Holmes-DeHaven, Tom's counterparts in the East Asia Pacific Division of American Citizens Services, maintained daily contact with the families of the victims.

The Emotional Toll

After the second week in Bali, psychiatrists from Main State and the Regional Medical Officer began calling Tom regularly, concerned about Tom's and others' exposure to the blood and carnage. In Washington, Linda, Kerry and their colleagues could also feel the emotional toll. They worked around the clock talking to the devastated families. Tom says he was too exhausted to be kept up by the graphic and vivid images of the bodies and the destruction, but he did lose sleep when he took the endless rounds of calls from the victims' families and from colleagues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs. These calls normally came between 9 p.m. and 12 a.m., every night. Tom says he came to expect them, and also to depend on them, calling Linda and Kerry his "true counselors." He shared with them the progress of the day, and they shared together their hopes for the next.

In addition to the support of consular officers from Washington, CA tapped specialized victim funding resources in the Justice Department to significantly expand the scope of U.S. government assistance to American victims and their families, and is now working with DOJ to ensure a coordinated, rapid response to the needs of future victims of terrorism overseas. CA persuaded the DOJ's Office for Victims of Crime to activate the International Terrorism Victim Compensation Program, authorized by Congress in 2000 but not implemented until now. The ITVCP was created to compensate U.S. citizen victims of terrorism overseas for expenses such as medical treatment, mental health, loss of support, funerals, and burials. CA also worked with the FBI's Office of Victim Assistance and with state crime victim compensation programs to obtain emergency assistance. CA arranged funds to pay the cost of returning the remains of the U.S. citizens killed in Bali as well as to pay for hotel bills and meals for the family of one Bali burn victim.

Tom Daniels will forever be connected to the victims and their families, and to Bali. Despite the long hours and newfound sense of vulnerability to terrorism, Tom, formerly an attorney, says: "This is why I joined the Foreign Service — to make a difference. I knew that anyone could file divorces and bankruptcies, but not everyone could really make a difference in the world unless they were willing to sacrifice a little. I would not trade these last 20 days in Bali for anything. These days are as formative to me as the year I spent in Bosnia with the Army. In Bosnia I was just another sergeant; here I was the U.S. diplomat on the scene. I was the person to whom the desperate turned for help. This was why I came to Indonesia — I have no doubt."

Facing the Fire in Cote d'Ivoire

A month earlier, I myself and another group of consular officers had been tested in Cote d'Ivoire. Consular officer Deborah Sisbarro had just arrived in Abidjan and was completing the second week of a relatively normal temporary duty stint to fill a staffing gap. Her husband and baby were in the U.S., so she stayed busy processing Diversity Visa applications — for the worldwide immigrant visa lottery conducted annually — by day and catching up on leisure reading at night in her small apartment near the embassy. On Sept. 18, 2002, she went to bed thinking about the looming DV deadline and about how her mystery novel would turn out.

Deborah woke up at 3:30 a.m. to radio reports from the embassy of explosions and machine-gun fire in various parts of the city. The area near her apartment was relatively quiet, except for about 15 minutes of gunfire, which was enough to cause her to gather up her sheets and radio and try to sleep in the hall, away from the windows. But she heard report after report of gunfire in the residential areas where many of the American employees lived. At 4:30 a.m. the Regional Security Officer came over the internal radio with his announcement/warning; the first thing that flashed through her head was the words “No Double Standard.” The U.S. government’s “no double standard” policy governs the dissemination of threat information on any matter concerning the safety and security of Americans traveling or residing abroad to *all* Americans, not just U.S. government employees and their families. Deborah requested permission to leave the apartment so she could begin carrying out one of the most vital responsibilities of any consular officer: the protection of American citizens overseas — in this case the 3,000 private American residents and visitors in Cote d’Ivoire.

Having spent barely two weeks on the ground, Abidjan’s sole consular officer was not familiar with the embassy’s American citizen warden system, a system that varies from post to post but is designed to disseminate messages to the American community as quickly and as broadly as possible. The consular associate who normally managed the warden system was on Rest & Recuperation travel. Fortunately, American Consular Assistant Sharon Belding had an old list of wardens with her at home. With active fire in the background, Sharon offered to contact American wardens in Abidjan. Deborah placed a quick call through the State Department Operations Center to a reassuring consular duty officer in Washington, then attempted to reach all the American wardens outside the city — many of whom she would come to know well during the arduous days ahead. The first warden she tried to reach had left the country, and the next one had resigned in July; despite these setbacks they persisted and contacted as many people as they could. Through these conversations, it

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became apparent that the two greatest areas of concern were the rebel-held towns of Bouake and Korohogo, where 300 Americans were trapped, many of them children at the International Christian Academy.

Richard Buangan had just recently left his first Foreign Service assignment in Cote d’Ivoire, and was barely two weeks into his consular assignment in Paris when he was recalled to

Abidjan. I was detoured to Abidjan from a short personal visit in Paris. We arrived in Abidjan to assist the consular rescue efforts, accompanied on our Air France flight by American Special Forces of the European Command, along with their French military counterparts, who were all pouring in to deal with the emerging crisis. Our lives would become inextricably interwoven over the next 10 days as we shared MREs, cold crusts of pizza, and a common mission: to get Americans, French, and other foreign nationals out of harm’s way.

Activating the Warden System

Upon arrival, Richard left for the central part of the country with a military contingent. Deb threw a few things into a borrowed duffel bag to head out with a receiving team to Yamoussoukro, and I began to set up a command center in the embassy consular section. Because others had to get to safety by curfew, I spent the first few nights alone in the empty consular section continuing the daunting task of locating more Americans, reaching wardens, briefing Washington, getting reports from colleagues on the ground, writing new warden messages, and providing policy guidance to my new friends in the field. One night Sharon, the consular assistant, and her husband Dean, a Seabee assigned to Embassy Abidjan, stayed all night to help me get out an urgent warden message, catching a couple hours of rest in sleeping bags on the floor of the consul’s office. Like most nights since my arrival, I slipped through curfew, accompanied by two embassy guards, to my hotel across the street from the embassy to shower, change and catch an hour’s nap.

The stories that we heard from frantic Americans, clinging to the phone lines in the middle of the night,

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were similar to those that Deb reported: “I remember talking to one American, as he, his wife and their three girls huddled in their hallway. I could hear the shooting and firing in the background. They had no water or electricity and bullets were lodging in the walls of their home. Some of the Americans had corpses in their yards. And I had to keep telling them to remain where they were, that we were working on it. We were trying to get them out. And they were scared, disillusioned and frustrated.”

A collection of anecdotal information was mounting, and the staff worked to locate and map out every American in the country, to maintain contact, and to pass this information to their potential rescuers and to Washington.

As the government forces began engaging the rebels, Americans were caught in the middle as the situation intensified. Our Yamoussoukro warden recommended that if we were getting the children out, we should use the New Tribes Mission compound as a processing point in “Yam,” as we came to know the city. An incredible, generous group of people, they turned over their walled school compound to the rescue operation. Deb, along with a number of American embassy colleagues from other sections, two consular FSNs, and consular associate Ginette Stevens, moved all the tables and chairs from the five or so buildings to the side, and, with the bedding they had gathered up, created sleeping space for 200. Marty, the embassy community liaison officer went out to buy bread, cheese, jam, cookies, and drinks so that the incoming group would have something to eat and drink.

They then set up a processing center in the chapel. The first Americans and other foreign nationals began arriving at 2 a.m., while I was on a satellite call with Deb. Together, we cried tears of relief. First, the Special Forces doctor spoke with each person, then the Canadians spoke with their consul and the Americans with us. By 5 a.m., we had accounted for all but two people.

Meanwhile, in the Ops Center...

Back in Washington, consular crisis teams were mobilized to staff an emergency operation all day and all night. The Operations Center Task Force walls were plastered with maps and satellite images of Cote d’Ivoire. On one map, a Peace Corps representative tracked each Peace Corps Volunteer with a post-it note. The consular affairs

representative maintained another map with post-it notes showing private Americans. Simultaneously, consular officers, as well as French and American forces on the ground in Cote d’Ivoire, maintained similar maps to track the escape of hundreds of Americans in the country.

As groups of Americans made their way south, or were liberated by French and American forces, the post-it notes were gradually moved southwards on the map to Abidjan or to Accra (Ghana), where many were evacuated to safety. When word came from our embassy in Abidjan that another group had escaped from the danger zones, a loud whoop of joy sounded from the seventh floor of the Department of State. While specially trained consular officers in Task Force 2 dealt with the barrage of calls from the American public worried about loved ones, constituents and employees on the ground in Cote d’Ivoire, the consular affairs representative provided information to callers ranging from the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the Red Cross, and provided policy guidance to the consul who was about to board a C-131 with the U.S. military in an effort to evacuate Americans from the town of Bouake.

The Bouake rescue mission continued for two days. But that was just the beginning of what would be a series of rescue operations in a half-dozen towns. The first group of Americans in Bouake was liberated when French troops, in coordination with American personnel, negotiated with the rebels a “laissez-passer,” a period of unimpeded safe passage under protection of armed protective forces along the route from Bouake to Yamoussoukro. Future operations involved rescue in C-130s, processing in Yam, then onward evacuation to Accra, where Regional Consular Officer Andre Goodfriend, on emergency TDY in Ghana to support the Cote d’Ivoire Americans, was waiting to receive and assist them with onward travel.

Consular staff on the ground in Cote d’Ivoire virtually dodged bullets and survived on little or no food, and without standard personal hygiene items. They were mosquito-bitten and exhausted, running on sheer determination to do their jobs. Their names, and the names of all the others in Washington, Cote d’Ivoire, Ghana, and at neighboring missions who supported the evacuation for several weeks, are far too numerous to list here. This story, fortunately, had a happy ending for the hundreds of Americans who escaped danger. ■