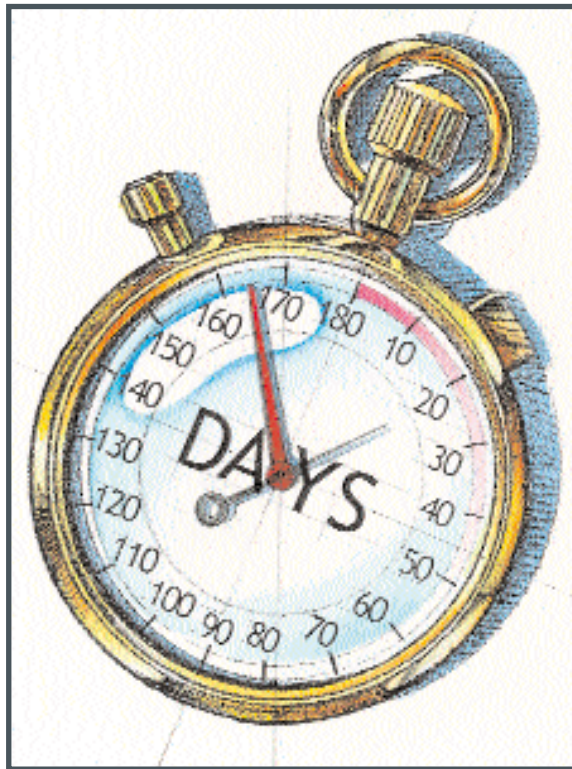


# EVACUATIONS 101



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NO MATTER THE LOCATION, THE NUMBER OF AMERICANS, OR THE TYPE OF CRISIS, THE GROUND RULES FOR EVACUATING EMBASSY PERSONNEL ARE BASICALLY THE SAME.

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BY MIKKELA THOMPSON

For employees of Embassy Caracas, the Christmas holidays were a jumble of suitcases, hotel rooms and uncertainty, as the post upgraded from authorized to ordered departure on Dec. 20, 2002. The list of posts that have been evacuated or drawn down since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks is a long one, encompassing posts as diverse as Islamabad, Abidjan, Sanaa and Jakarta, to name but a few. In just the last six months of 2002, there have been three monitoring groups set up in the Ops Center for post drawdowns. At this writing, there are five posts under ordered departure.

Some of these facilities were closed or downsized for just a few days or weeks, while others have been operating for

months with minimal staffing and no dependents. Yet no matter where an embassy or consulate is located, how many official (and private) Americans are there, or the nature of the crisis underlying the decision to evacuate personnel, the ground rules are basically the same.

Of course, some posts are inherently more prone to evacuation and closure than others. For example, our embassy and three consulates in Pakistan have been evacuated twice recently: first after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and then in March 2002 following the Protestant International Church bombing and other terrorist acts. In the first case, the decision to draw down staffing was slow in coming, perhaps reflecting reluctance to remove families from what had traditionally been one of the more comfortable, family-friendly posts in the region (thanks largely to good schools) as well as uncertainties surrounding the full extent of al-Qaida's reach and the perceived need to show confidence in President Pervez Musharraf's regime by maintaining a strong U.S. presence.

But in the latter crisis (which occurred only a short time after families were allowed to return to Pakistan), the "reaction from the 7th floor was swift and profound," according to one evacuee who asked not to be identified. Almost as soon as U.S. Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin recommended authorized departure, the department approved it, and quickly upgraded to ordered evacuation.

### **The Basic Drill**

As that example suggests, the initiative for requesting a drawdown in staffing or a complete evacuation comes from the chief of mission, based on reporting and recommendations from the country team. Such a request generally cites a number of "trip wires," such as demonstrations, tank movements, and credible threats received by mail or phone. In some cases, State may send monitors to investigate the situation before deciding whether to evacuate; for example, the Diplomatic Security Bureau may send extra regional security officers to assess the danger posed by mob violence.

There are two different categories of evacuation status:

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## ***When the under secretary for management approves the evacuation status, the "180-day clock" starts ticking.***

"authorized departure" and "ordered departure/ordered evacuation." An authorized departure permits "non-essential" or "non-emergency" employees and all family members the option of departing from post; this gives the chief of mission greater flexibility and avoids any negative connotation that might be attached to use of the term "evacuation." Under an "ordered evacuation" all family members and all

except "emergency" employees must leave post.

Once the chief of mission sends in the request for evacuation status — for either "authorized" or "ordered" departure of personnel — the regional bureau is responsible for drafting a decision memo for the under secretary of management's signature. This memo contains an "effective date" reflecting the severity of the crisis in the host country, and is accompanied by press guidance, an instructional cable to the field and a general travel warning. The regional bureau can push the memo if they feel strongly about it, but must clear it with all affected bureaus. There can even be split memos, reflecting different policy priorities within different parts of State; for example, there may be concern that reducing the U.S. presence in a volatile country may signal a lack of confidence in the host government that could have larger repercussions. Such disagreement is rare but does happen.

When the under secretary approves the evacuation status, the "180-day clock" starts ticking. The evacuation status is reviewed every 30 days by the under secretary for management, up to a maximum of 180 days. The subsistence expense allowance is available to evacuees during that period. (Domestic partners and other "members of household" are not considered "eligible family members" and do not receive any official assistance with evacuations.) According to the Standardized Regulations, an employee must be returned to the post of assignment or reassigned to another post not later than 180 days after the evacuation order has been issued. During the evacuation period employees are expected to be available for temporary assignments within the department or elsewhere, and these assignments are handled by the regional bureau.

After 180 days, if the security situation looks like it won't improve, the department may elect to further downsize or even close the post, though such a drastic move is rare. More commonly, it is designated an "unaccompanied" post

and tours are reduced to one year. Significantly, one of the recent additions to the Family Liaison Office list of evacuation resources is titled, “Long Distance Relationships and Separated Tours: When Couples Live Apart.”

### **Vive la Différence?**

According to one recent evacuee, the authorized departure category should be abolished outright because it just adds more chaos and contention to what is already an inherently stressful situation. In this FSO’s view, leaving it up to posts to identify how many, and which, people will leave “voluntarily” not only puts pressure on “non-essential” employees who do not want to leave their colleagues; it also leaves some staff feeling that their jobs are seen as less important, which can hurt morale — a problem that a change of usage from “essential” to “emergency” has not alleviated.

This officer also points out that the department sometimes applies pressure to get posts to send as many people home as possible, so that what is supposed to be an authorized, voluntary departure is actually an ordered one. As a result, the process can end up being a numbers game, in which Washington may force the embassy to cut all sections by the same proportion to achieve an arbitrary staffing ceiling even if that leaves them too weak to do their jobs.

Based on the chief of mission’s recommendation, non-essential employees and eligible family members can be evacuated anywhere, either back to the U.S. or to a regional “safe haven.” Each employee identifies his or her safe haven — an alternate place of residence in the event of an evacuation — in advance, based on personal and family considerations. Problems may arise, however, with safe havens outside the continental U.S., because in that case the evacuee has no diplomatic accreditation and sometimes must arrive without a visa. Evacuees returning to Washington are greeted by staff from the Family Liaison Office at the airport, where they receive the information “Welcome” packet, with advice and crucial contact information. FLO also holds town meetings and maintains regular e-mail contact with evacuated employees for the duration of the evacuation.

### **“Children Home from the War”**

The State Department may be quite efficient at evacuating Foreign Service personnel, but what happens to

them upon their return to Washington is often much less organized.

Of course, the very fact that evacuees are theoretically only going to be away from post for 30 days complicates the task of what to do with them. All evacuees are encouraged to consult their career development counselors to explore their options. However, it is the regional bureau that decides whether the returnees work for the task force, are given temporary jobs somewhere in the bureau (or occasionally in another part of the building), or are sent out to another post to cover staffing gaps. (Support staff are particularly likely to be sent back overseas.) Other options are for them to enroll in training courses or to take annual or sick leave. They may also take R&R or home leave, though that can cause additional administrative headaches.

Each bureau is basically free to “recycle” evacuees as it sees fit, though there is a general recognition that the employees are, as one personnel officer described it, “children home from the war” and therefore need special handling to minimize the disruption and stress they are already experiencing. However, it seems clear that some bureaus make more of an effort than others to match temporary duties to what the employees were doing in the field, or at least to find them substantive responsibilities rather than “make-work.” The degree to which evacuees’ preferences are taken into account in the process also varies.

For example, Consular Affairs (appropriately enough) enjoys a reputation for “taking care of their own.” And the assignments officer for one geographic bureau (who asked not to be identified) finds jobs for the returned evacuees by e-mailing every office and post to find out what type of skills and experience they need and then matching officers to those specs.

The timing of the evacuation also plays a role in determining what happens to returnees. If they are near the end of their tour (the transfer cycle begins in May) then they may be given a bridge assignment or go early to their next post. Or if employees have special skills, such as hard languages, they can be reassigned to fill a gap.

Wherever the employees work, the bureau post management officer will generally take care of their time-and-attendance cards and other administrative support; however, some posts insist on retaining responsibility for those functions even though the employee is physically in Washington.

### Marking Time

Initially, being evacuated can actually be nice in some respects. Compared to the grueling days they were likely working at post because of the crisis, some evacuees enjoy having a regular schedule and reconnecting with families, friends and colleagues. And being back in the department even temporarily gives officers a chance to network and work on lining up an onward assignment. This is particularly true when the crisis passes and everyone is able to go back to post after the initial 30 days.

But if it doesn't, the novelty of being Stateside can rapidly wear off. As one official acknowledges, "It doesn't help to keep people in limbo. They need to return to a stable professional position. The family needs a stable environment, too."

During the evacuation period, some allowance is made for officers to "swap" if one needs to leave post for 30 days, with an evacuee returning to give a colleague the opportunity to decompress. However, this is not always a smooth process. For example, one member of a tandem couple who had returned to Washington with their young daugh-

ter was sent a cable instructing her to return to post for 30 days. As happy as she was at the prospect of rejoining her husband, she was dismayed that their child was not even acknowledged on her travel orders. As she put it, "Was I supposed to abandon her?!" Accordingly, while she was willing to die for her country, the FSO refused to return to post without her daughter, thereby putting her career at risk and prolonging the separation from her husband.

At the same time, it should be noted that some officers (particularly single ones) are eager to accept a temporary assignment to a danger post to advance their careers.

Being prepared is undoubtedly the best way to minimize the disruptiveness of an evacuation. The FLO Web page, at <http://state.gov/m/dghr/flo/c1991.htm>, contains an extensive list of very helpful documents, links and contact information. But no matter how well-prepared you are, an evacuation is neither pretty nor easy. In general, it seems that State does a reasonably good job of minimizing the stress both for employees and their families. However, effective employment of officers during their time in limbo needs more attention. ■

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