

RECALLING PAST CRISES AND EVACUATIONS

Editor's Note: *This past November, we sent an e-mail via AFSANet asking members and their families to share brief vignettes relating to evacuations and life at posts located in danger zones. Some of their responses recount ways Foreign Service personnel have coped with being evacuated (and either returning to post after a long absence or being reassigned), while others offer lessons State and other foreign affairs agencies have learned — or should have — over the years in terms of planning for, executing, and minimizing the disruptions caused by massive drawdowns of personnel and post closings.*

Our thanks to all Foreign Service personnel and family members who shared their experiences. In fact, we received so many thoughtful, moving responses that we will run more next month.

—Steven Alan Honley, Editor



Evacuation from Cairo

In the spring of 1967, Egyptian-Israeli relations deteriorated rapidly. Because of our government's friendship with Israel, anti-American propaganda became ominous, prompting the evacuation of embassy dependents. Three TWA planes were chartered to fly 250 women and children to Athens, giving us just 24 hours to wind up the last four years of our life. I shall never forget the bewildered expression in my 8-year-old son's face when I told him that he would not return to school the next day nor for the rest of the school year; there would be no final exams, no report card and no time to say goodbye to his friends and teachers.

AFSA MEMBERS AND THEIR FAMILIES SHARE STORIES OF EVACUATIONS AND LIFE AT POSTS LOCATED IN DANGER ZONES.

When we arrived at the Athens airport, American army wives welcomed us warmly before buses took us to hotels in a suburb named Kiffissia, where rooms were already ready for all of us. We were well taken care of: Kiffissia was lovely, the people were friendly, there were organized activities for our children, and we promptly received our per diem checks. But we were in limbo, as though suspended in mid-air, without responsibilities or control over anything. Cut off from our husbands, without any news out of Cairo, what had been our home was beyond reach — so were all our belongings, our documents, our children's school records — and our future again was a blank.

On June 5, 1967, the third Arab-Israeli war broke out. On June 11, our exhausted husbands arrived on a chartered Greek boat after their evacuation under harrowing circumstances.

It was a long, hot summer in Athens while we waited for Washington to decide where we were to go from there. How, I wondered, would any of us ever be able to work up confidence and enthusiasm in another post? How could we ever recall, without a sense of frustration and pain, how seriously we had taken our work, believing in its importance when, it seemed that all our efforts, the good will so carefully nurtured, had been ruined overnight?

Later, I often wondered why, no matter how often we had gone through a similar experience, our imagination always failed us so that we could not see that the course of history might reverse itself. Within seven years American-Egyptian relations would be re-established and all our programs rebuilt.

*Maria Bauer
Washington, D.C.*



Evacuation in Slow Motion

Kabul, June 1979 — The ambassador killed in a shoot-out at the Kabul Hotel, February 1979. Deteriorating security situation throughout Afghanistan and around Kabul. Travel outside the city increasingly limited. Nighttime curfews enforced by high-powered searchlights on mountains and soldiers posted at key intersections to detain people out past curfew. Daytime sorties by Soviet MI-24 helicopter gunships and psychological intimidation by low-flying MiG-21s returning over the city to Bagram airbase north of Kabul. Tanks and armored vehicles roaming the city night and day.

Time to go. Limited evacuation of dependents and non-essential personnel. Pack what you can carry onto the aircraft. At the airport, searches by pro-Soviet Afghan police of diplomats' baggage and personal belongings in contravention of Vienna conventions. Ugly scenes before boarding the Indian Airlines 737 for New Delhi. Long stay at the airport before departing on Pan Am flight to Frankfurt. Overnight in Germany, then home to Washington. Left behind: family dog, car, clothes, kitchen and other personal belongings, children's toys and books, and family photos, all entrusted to house servants.

No welcome home from State Department or any other official representative. No counseling about how to apply for temporary allowances. Washington bureaucracy oblivious to emotional and psychological needs of evacuees, especially children. Stiff upper lip prevails when moving through layers of bureaucracy to obtain necessary temporary housing allowance.

Tehran, November 1979 — U.S. diplomats taken hostage. The State Department's response changes profoundly. As one who had worked at Embassy Tehran, I work on special hostage task force helping to inform family members about status of their loved ones. Having just passed through an evacuation process, I relate quickly and empathetically to their many questions. A slow, uphill process as official Washington begins to react to what has happened.

Meanwhile, kids in a new, strange school. Their Kabul friends scattered all around the country and at other overseas missions. No continuity. Local people can't relate to what has happened to us. Have to explain to school principals and teachers children's experiences and needs. Some empathy forthcoming.

Search for a place to live while buying new clothing, household equipment, used car. Three months later the dog arrives; six months later, the car and some household goods. Much has been lost. Submit claims to private insurance company and wait for response. Meanwhile, spend more money to replace lost items. Slowly, life begins to return to normal as circumstances of the immediate situation in northern Virginia take over. Long phone conversations with former Embassy Kabul colleagues. It's good to be out and alive.

Bruce K. Byers
FSO, retired
Reston, Va.



Living in a Danger Zone

Karachi is the epitome of a "high-threat" post. We face extreme restrictions on where we can go and when, and we have to clear almost everything with the RSO. Still, we probably have some of the best morale of any post in the world, because we take care of each other, plan activities at our residences for all consulate employees, go swimming in the consul general's pool, and get out in town to shop, play sports, and attend parties both with other expats and with Pakistanis. While security consciousness has been pretty much hard-wired into us, we still manage to have a good time. Everyone who comes here on TDY goes away amazed at how fun it is around here. It takes special people to come to a place like Karachi, and I think we make the most of what we have.

Amy Tachco
Economic/Commercial Officer
U.S. Consulate General
Karachi, Pakistan



Evacuation: The Role of Churches

While serving at Embassy Vatican I was called upon to assist Embassy Rome with the evacuation from Tirana, Albania. Busloads of evacuees were brought from Italy's Adriatic coast to Rome, where we set up processing at the Holiday Inn. It soon became clear that evacuees came in two categories: those we could assist with onward movement (American citizens) and those we could not assist further (legal permanent residents and other non-citizens). As some of these latter

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bedded down in the hallways of the Holiday Inn, the hotel staff became agitated. They had leased us space only for processing evacuees and they wanted their hallways back. It was late at night and we had to find somewhere for about two dozen destitute and weary evacuees to sleep.

I'm a seminary graduate with an interest in religion, so at each post I make contact with religious leaders. At about 9 p.m. I called my contacts — Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Mormons and Catholics. These churches took everyone we had. At 4 a.m. we discovered that a South African family had a teenage daughter with a superficial gunshot wound but more than a little psychological trauma. The hotel doctor recommended immediate bed rest. The Methodist minister gladly accommodated the family even at that ungodly hour. And I'll never forget a Maryknoll father serving breakfast to eight hungry bedraggled evacuees in the order's dining room. Churches in Rome played an important role in the Tirana evacuation.

Lessons learned: Get to know religious leaders early

in your tour. If they house evacuees, follow up to make sure the evacuees move on. Thank the leaders officially for their assistance. Have their phone numbers and contact information in your duty book.

Phil Skotte
Deputy Consul General
Budapest, Hungary



What They Care About Most

"Pack the things they care about most." This was the advice my husband gave me as we discussed our family's imminent departure from the scene of a military mutiny in the Central African Republic. It was two in the morning and he was calling from the embassy to give me instructions and the latest news. Eighteen American dependents had been moved into our house because, having once been used to house a Marine contingent, it was considered the safest in the area. Our four children were sharing a bedroom with me and now

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they were camped out around me on the bed and floor. But there was no need to whisper into the phone. Not one of them was sleeping. All evening there had been intermittent gunfire and frequent, piercing message signals from the walkie-talkie on the nightstand. Every embassy family had been given one of these little devices. When we arrived in Bangui for our first African tour, I had been amused by it. But it was now a communication lifeline with the embassy and transmitted information from there and other locations around the city that it might be unwise to miss.

"Pack the things that they care about most," he said. I had packed underwear, clothing, shoes — a practical array of items to which any child would be indifferent, or worse, disappointed to find included in a collection of what might be the sum total of his personal possessions if, as seemed likely, our houses were looted after we departed. "Everybody up," I said, after hanging up the phone. "Mommy needs help with the packing. Go get whatever you would most like to take with you." (The bedrooms had all been assigned to the families staying with us, but this was currently a household of people running on adrenalin, awake, making plans — or just waiting, watchful.)

The clothes were dumped in a pile. Tiny figurines, dolls, a baseball cap, teddy bears, a china tea set replaced them. Our 8-year old daughter entered carrying Lou, a large stuffed pony. From fatigue, exasperation, and pity, too, that our children were faced with this kind of choice, I almost cried. "Sweetie, how can we? ..." Then, a solution came to me. "Get the scissors out of that sewing basket. You and your sister take Lou into the bathroom and put his stuffing in the trash can." Lou was folded flat and packed. So were most of the birthday presents, ordered months in advance, stacked in a corner awaiting the various "big days" that clearly would now not be celebrated as planned. So was my wedding dress.

Later, as I watched four children unpacking and arranging their treasures in a hotel room in Cameroon, the wisdom of my husband's advice, hastily given in the wee hours of a long night, struck me. For all they knew, these childish scraps and bits were the sum total of their worldly goods — but these were the ones that mattered. And that was enough.

Elizabeth Laeuchli
Budapest, Hungary



A Convoy Through the Congo

It was July 9, 1960, in Elisabethville, Republic of the Congo. At the consulate, we issued a recommendation to all American citizens that they should leave immediately. Consul Bill Canup and I (the vice consul) prepared our own families to drive south in a motor convoy to the Copper Belt in Northern Rhodesia. The previous night we had received advice from our Belgian army contacts that there would shortly be a conflict between two factions of the Force Publique (the local Congo army). One was supporting the current elected governor of Katanga province, and the other was supporting the defeated candidate, who was connected to Patrice Lumumba, about to be prime minister in Leopoldville.

The convoy departed in good time. Several hours later, as darkness came to the town, we could hear gunfire coming from the direction of the barracks. This lasted until the following morning, when a strange calm came over the city. We had warned everyone not to move about during this time. However, we learned that the Italian vice consul, looking for Italian citizens, had been stopped at a roadblock and shot. Then we learned that the pro-Lumumba group of soldiers had surrendered and were being shipped off to Kasai province, from whence they came. At the request of the provincial government, Belgian troops flew in, and that seemed to calm things down, at least temporarily. We brought our families back from Northern Rhodesia, safe and sound. Later the U.N. arrived, but that is another story.

By the way, July 9 is my birthday, and Bill Canup and I cracked open a bottle of champagne to celebrate my reaching the advanced age of 32.

John A. Anderegg
Program Officer
East Asian and Pacific Programs
Department of State



Evacuation from Mogadishu

In December 1990 the decision was made to evacuate all dependents and non-essential staff from Mogadishu, Somalia. The first effort utilized an Air Kenya flight; unfortunately, a smaller plane than expected arrived at the airport, so our families were left behind. Air Somalia was the second choice, but the plane could not get started. A Saudi flight came, but

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again engine problems prevented us from using that for the mission. After importing spare parts we finally were able to get everyone off the ground on the Somali plane. These attempts covered the better part of two days, shuttling everyone back and forth from the embassy to the airport, occasionally under fire, always under threat.

When the second plane refused to start, we pulled the Ground Power Unit from the hanger to assist; unfortunately, the batteries had been stolen. Two land rovers were connected to the GPU to jump-start it — still no-go. Finally, a small propeller plane backed up to the front of the 707, hoping to use the prop wash to spin the turbines. Again nothing, but it was interesting to see the efforts to jump-start a Boeing.

Our Marine security guards came through for us by providing needed shelter, food and companionship for our children, easing the stress of the moment for us parents. When the flight finally reached the first safe haven, Frankfurt, the consulate's Community Liaison

Officer met the group and organized the onward trip to the U.S. She also worked with the USO to provide winter coats for the freezing refugees.

Other parts of the evacuation were also noteworthy, but this episode really stands out in our memories.

Jim Maher
Regional Financial Management Officer
Florida Regional Center



A Pre-Foreign Service Evacuation

I was not yet a Foreign Service officer (as I am now) when I found myself in N'Djamena, Chad on a United Nations consulting assignment in December 1990. Upon arrival in the capital, I registered my presence as an American citizen with the embassy. On a Thursday, I was notified through the warden system that there would be a meeting at the embassy that night. In the meeting, we were told that a rebel group had captured a town several hundred miles to the east of the capital

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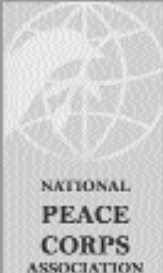
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and were planning, over the next several weeks or months, to advance on the capital. We were assured, however, that there was no immediate danger because the rebels were far away and that government forces were still in control of the capital, as well as of several other towns between the rebel-captured town and the capital. Because I was planning to leave the country in two days, I took these assurances at face value and put any thought of danger out of my mind.

The next day, however, the president and most high-ranking government officials fled the country. This left the capital in a state of anarchy. Soldiers, police and others with arms went on a looting and pillaging rampage. I was stuck in a hotel that had no effective security. On several occasions I saw groups of armed men drive by the hotel slowly, fairly obviously reconnoitering to see whether the hotel was a vulnerable target. As it happened, the back of the hotel was separated by a fence from a river that formed the border with Cameroon. Fearing the worst, I managed to cut a hole in the fence and was planning to swim across the river if necessary.

This dire contingency became unnecessary, however, when the French Foreign Legion came to the rescue! Early Saturday morning, armed men wearing the Foreign Legion berets I had seen previously only in movies took up stations on the ground, on the roof, and behind trees of the hotel. Later that day, all foreign passport holders were evacuated to the nearby French air base. From there we were flown in groups, courtesy of Air France, to Paris. The injured, along with women, children and families, were evacuated first, those of us without families in Chad last. I spent two nights sleeping on a warehouse floor but enjoyed the French food and wine the base provided.

On Monday morning, shortly before I departed on the last plane of evacuees, the rebels passed by the base on their way into N'Djamena. They were, ironically, a welcome sight, because they would at least represent some authority in a city that had had none for three days.

By the way, if you are going to be evacuated somewhere, Paris ain't a bad choice!

*Craig Olson
Third Secretary
Narcotics Affairs Section
United States Embassy
Bogota, Colombia*



Hardship and Heartbreak of Evacuation

Our arrival in Addis Ababa in September 1998 was preceded by an outbreak in June of hostilities between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Although hostilities had eased, tensions were high as talk of “trip wires” and “draw-downs” were bandied about the embassy community. These were new terms to me, despite two previous tours as a Foreign Service spouse.

The emotional toll on family members during this time was great. Several had their bags packed by the door, several said, “I won’t go until I’m forced to go.” Others, like me, looked to our CLO and administrative section for guidance. Plans for the holidays were tentative and functions had to be kept small and informal. By January 1969, as hostilities once again flared, an evacuation was called and I found myself headed home to Seattle with our two young children.

Three families left post the night we left. Despite our efforts to keep the children informed of the situation, yet mindful of not scaring them, our 6-year-old son somehow didn’t get the message that Daddy, the information program officer and an “essential” employee, was not going. “Hey, come on, Dad!” he called as we walked through Customs. I will never forget the look of shock and sadness that came over his face when it hit him that Daddy wasn’t coming. I believe now that he went into a state of shock, because our usually talkative and happy little boy literally didn’t speak for five days after we landed in Seattle.

Within a week it became apparent that I would need to enroll the kids in school. The local public schools had only one opening for the children: across town, class sizes were large and no busing was available. Rather than stay in separate lodging, I chose to enroll the kids in a small private school in the neighborhood and live with my parents. It was the best decision for us as the school was understanding of our situation, it was nearby and our allowance just managed to pay the tuition. Thankfully, my parents didn’t charge us board and room. I did have to buy a vehicle, however, which was a bit of a financial strain. I would have much preferred to have found public schooling and separate lodging; returning home to live with my parents at the age of 40 isn’t exactly what I — or they — had in mind, but it was the best solution for a bad situation at the time.

The evacuation was lifted after 60 days, but because the children were settled into the new school and I had enrolled in a computer course at a local community college, we chose to stay in Seattle until the end of the school year. Others returned to post, but for our family it was a better decision to stay where we were.

In retrospect, I now wish we had gone to Washington, D.C., where I could have had the support of the Foreign Service “family.” I have since learned that the FLO office is very helpful to evacuees, but being across the country made it difficult to utilize their services. Others I have spoken with talk about the support structure at some of the local long-term hotels, where evacuees from posts all over the world can gather for emotional support and share information. Should we ever experience an evacuation again, I would unhesitantly choose D.C. as my home base.

Katherine McGifford

DCM OMS

Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso



Evacuation Isn't Always Awful

Arriving in Tunis shortly after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990, we knew our days in Tunisia were numbered. We dropped our bags at our new house and headed straight to Carthage with our two budding historians, aged 6 and 9, and during the next five months saw as much of the country as we could before the inevitable.

We prepared ourselves by talking about what might happen — to each other, to others at post, in letters to friends. We included the children in our discussions, not necessarily using “language they could understand.” Children, by virtue of being children, live in a world they don't understand, and are generally comfortable with their ignorance — provided their parents seem confident in their ability to cope effectively with their own partial understanding.

We never fully unpacked, which made getting ready to depart easy. Although we didn't settle in physically, we did emotionally. The school was small and nurturing; the

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community warm and welcoming. We needed each other, so friendships formed quickly — and were cemented when we were reunited back in the U.S.

Air freight was simple. I insisted on essentials — all the Legos, all the Playmobiles, our most important books and music, things that would make our exile homier. We didn't anticipate moving back into our house, but our property manager had had the foresight to rent it to four Moroccan students, who returned home just as we returned to the U.S. So we camped out in our own home. We rented a table and chairs, TV and video, borrowed air mattresses and slept on the floor. The kids' Legos and Playmobiles filled the house. I loved having no furniture — cleaning was so simple!

The children returned to the school they'd left in

***I insisted on essentials —
all the Legos, all the
Playmobiles, books and
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make our exile homier.***

June. I anticipated an easy readjustment for our daughter, a more difficult one for our son. Adele, however, couldn't get into the same class as her best friend — a tragedy for a fourth-grader — while Max was welcomed into his first-grade classroom by the nurturing student teacher he'd had in kindergarten. The best friend still lived next door, however, and loved playing in our

empty house after school.

When the evacuation was lifted my husband returned to Tunisia for a few months, until we were reassigned to Morocco. The children and I spent what amounted to an extended vacation at home. Not bad; not bad at all!

Kathy Uphaus is a freelance writer and the editor of The Jute Newsletter in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where her husband Charles works for USAID. ■

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