

Bug Out

Most travelers don't like to think about "what could go wrong" when they are preparing for a journey. The thought of a trip being dangerously interrupted takes most of us out of our comfort zones.

by Fatima Khan

Yet, in today's politically and socially unpredictable world, the chance of an unforeseen event ruining a trip is a hefty reality. Unfortunately, buying emergency assistance and/or evacuation coverage is a precaution that is often ignored.

Consider these recent, real-life events: a gun attack at a complex in Saudi Arabia, a catastrophic tsunami in South Asia, bus crashes in Europe and China, a terrorist strike at a resort in Bali, a sudden war in Lebanon. In all these cases, many travelers were left stranded and unprotected in the midst of rapidly changing and downright precarious circumstances. Many were unable to contact their companies, much less escape the chaos without experiencing personal injury or trauma. On our post-Sept. 11 planet, travel and corporate security departments have an increased responsibility to have a contingency plan in place with clearly defined policies for evacuation of personnel.

Scaled To Your Need

Another company, **Private Jet Services (PJS) Group**, is not an evacuation provider per se. However, its contingency program is designed to support corporate travel managers who don't have the budget to hire additional manpower and outsource contingency planning. "Our contingency program grew out of post 9-11 events, as more and more business travel executives were required to have deliverables such as evacuation planning." While some security companies are its clients, says Greg Raiff, president and CEO of PJS, individual clients who can't afford to fly privately also enlist his company's services.

"We are a logistics company," explains Raiff. "Whether you want to fly 18,000 people to Beijing for the Olympics and ensure a safe way to get them back, or whether you have hundreds of employees stuck in Aruba due to a volcano that just erupted, we can find alternative flying strategies.

"We believe in the inherent safety and security of flying privately over flying commercially, and offer value contracts because of our existing relationships with aircraft providers," he continues.

To enroll in PJS's airlift contingency program, travel agents provide it with basic information on upcoming trips including travel dates, destinations and passenger counts. Multiple contingency programs detailing available aircraft options are presented, and a stand-by agreement is put on file, ready to execute if needed. The contingency program is provided as part of the total trip; if an evacuation is not required, there is no charge.

Local Logistics

The breadth and depth of evacuation services being offered today brings new meaning to the words “be prepared.” Evacuation services have grown from responses to individual emergencies (such as a traveler breaking his leg in Moscow or having a heart attack in southern Turkey) to larger events, including evacuations of entire groups of citizens from a particular country. These larger events require both the resources and logistical expertise to move significant amounts of people simultaneously, safely and quickly.

Many security companies added evacuations to their existing services in response to world events such as hurricanes, power blackouts and political upheaval. A good example of how evacuations have grown and changed in scope is reflected by the work carried out by International SOS, which began operations in 1985 with medical evacuation as the core focus. Three years later it began to develop a full evacuation service. Karina Thomas, group marketing and communications director at International SOS’s London office, explains:

“Our clients’ trust in our evacuation capability led to our undertaking of a major security evacuation from Indonesia in 1988, when 4,000 members were evacuated on 20 chartered aircraft during the civil unrest that followed President Suharto’s resignation. Since then, we have developed a full security assistance and evacuation service.”

The combined support of medical and security professionals has proven invaluable during a crisis, Thomas continues. “During the recent Lebanon crisis, we evacuated 345 clients by road and air using the knowledge and expertise of our medical and security staff. Following the Marriot Hotel bombing in Jakarta in 2003, as well as deploying one of our own dedicated air ambulance jets, we chartered and medically converted a Hercules C130 so that we could evacuate eight critically injured patients to Singapore.”

Plan Ahead, Act Quickly

An evacuation provider should not only have the ability to respond to a crisis, but to anticipate threats or crises and help the client mitigate risk. Control Risks, a leading specialist risk consultancy, began offering evacuation services in addition to its intelligence and threat analysis services almost 20 years ago, during the Iran/Iraq war. According to John Lea, head of evacuation management at Control Risks, “we have not so far been approached by a business looking purely for evacuation services ... far more probable is the client looking to mitigate risk to people and assets.”

As part of the information analysis and management process, a range of possible scenarios should be presented to enable sound risk planning. Prior to the commencement of war in Iraq, International SOS had been monitoring the situation in the Middle East for many months, recalls Thomas. “During that time, we planned various scenarios based on the numbers of clients in the region and carried out evacuations accordingly. In one case, we chartered a Boeing 737 and even had it ready on standby.”

The quality of intelligence is critical at this stage. Although assessing the situation at a local level is important, all historical, demographic and political factors should be taken into account. A client can then rest assured that as many variables as possible have been included in the contingency plan.

In an emergency situation, response time is key. When a crisis hits, it is too late to be discussing details, costs and alternatives (often, calling an emergency assistance provider is a company’s contingency plan). The faster an assistance provider’s resources kick into gear, the more successful an evacuation can be.

The relationship between emergency assistance companies and providers on-the-ground should be in place long before any individual crisis occurs. “You can no longer send someone to a high threat area without some contingency plan in case something goes wrong,” says Steve Kellner, director of the intelligence division at the Houston-based global risk management firm ASI Group (formerly Air Security International).

ASI Group also was recently involved in evacuating personnel from Lebanon. “On our end, we have to have solid relationships with ground providers to succeed with an evacuation. This includes relationships with wide body aircraft charter firms in order to do mass evacuations,” he says.

Contracts & Costs

Of course, evacuation costs are dependant on client needs. Some of the elements that can impact the pricing of a contract are the number of travelers a company has in the field, the duration, frequency and location of their trips.

As ASI Group's Kellner explains, contracts are structured differently -- some are "reactive" (clients call the assistance provider to respond to the emergency). Others are "proactive" (the assistance provider is involved in every stage of the emergency, from building the evacuation plan to executing it).

Sometimes, membership services for clients provide for medical and security assistance. Evacuation and repatriation are included in the service and clients can either choose to take membership where the cost of evacuation is included, or they can choose to pay for evacuations on a case-by-case basis. Expatriate populations, with or without their families, can be covered.

What about individual travelers whose companies do not subscribe to an evacuation provider? Some assistance providers offer programs that can be purchased to provide the same services and paid evacuations, with an additional insurance component that pays for overseas medical expenses that may not be covered by the subscriber's domestic medical insurer or HMO. At MEDEX, the cost for such a program is generally \$4 per day or less.

But how do corporate travel and security departments gauge the competence of the multiple evacuation vendors who exist today? According to Bruce Kirby, president and CEO of MEDEX Assistance and its parent company MEDEX Global Group, there are several key attributes to look for:

- 24/7 accessibility from virtually anywhere in the world.
- multi-lingual staff (including licensed and practicing physicians and security resources on the ground) to communicate with local medical and security authorities.
- a strong ability to quickly provide clients with quality intelligence, crisis and contingency plans that are crafted specific to their traveling populations.
- a strong presence of pre-screened, local resources in areas where a client may be going or sending its employees.

It is important to remember that many insurance providers sell supplemental policies that cover either individual emergency medical treatment in a foreign country or individual medical evacuation, but not both. Other security companies and assistance providers sell only corporate "political security evacuation" (PSE). This is why customizing a program to a client's needs is important. "Emergency services should not be pre-packaged," contends Kirby. "Not all companies have the same types of travelers, involve the same personnel in emergency situations or require the same emergency services."

Emergency situations are inevitable. There will always be natural disasters, as well as man-made ones. Even the potential for wide-scale medical disasters, such as a pandemic, exists.

It is not just the fluid and cross-border nature of global terrorism that we have to face. Sometimes, if an international business is perceived as supporting some government action in a foreign country, such as when local armed militants stormed the Chevron oil production platform in Nigeria in September 2005, an evacuation of the workforce becomes prudent. These real-life scenarios affirm the need for an evacuation strategy, which is a critical element of an effective corporate crisis management plan.