

BUSINESS AS USUAL, EVACUATION & EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN

A coup in Myanmar. Another round of unrest in Haiti. For international staff and travelers working in or headed to locations prone to unrest, it's natural to think about how to depart if the environment deteriorates. But evacuation is only one point on the spectrum of responses to deteriorating security environments, and one that may not be possible due to conditions on the ground, as in Myanmar, where airports and borders were closed. Moreover, evacuation is typically only an option for international personnel, while most organizations are staffed largely by host country nationals.

As security situations deteriorate, it's critical that teams "chew gum and walk" at the same time – i.e., adjust operations for the immediate environment while actively planning for contingencies, such as sheltering in place, evacuation and office shut down. Some things to consider:

Monitor the situation and assess risks

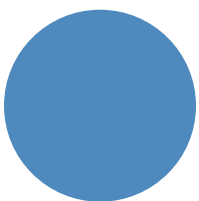
- Watch events closely using local and international media, security assistance services, official sources, such as the US Embassy and local networks. Be especially aware of any changes in the environment that may expose team members to risk. Assistance companies, like International SOS, AIG Travel Guard, Healix International, and others provide ongoing updates and analysis during periods of increased tension or instability along with advice about contingencies, such as shelter in place and evacuation preparation.
- Increase communication check-ins and updates

– both within the team on the ground and between the country office and the headquarters. Increased check-ins keep everyone updated about the situation and help leadership make informed decisions in a timely manner.

- Develop triggers or trip wires to facilitate decision making. Particularly in slower developing situations, it's easy to normalize changes in the risk environment. Establishing clear triggers (presence of military at checkpoints, reduction in international flights, etc.) that prompt action or review of plans to reduce the chance of becoming complacent.

Adjust and develop plans to mitigate risks

- Restrict travel within and to the country. Personnel are often most exposed to risks while traveling overland, so reducing in-country (or even in-city) movement is a critical mitigation measure. With fewer international travelers on the ground, an organization has less exposure to developing risks and requires fewer resources, should an evacuation become necessary.
- Reduce time in the office. Local national team members often travel the furthest from home to the office, potentially exposing them to increased risks during periods of instability. Allowing personnel to work from home or vary the times they come into the office many reduce that exposure. The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted many organizations to strengthen the ability to have personnel work from home.



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Plan for contingencies

- Prepare to shelter in place for an extended period of time (at least 72 hours, but more where possible) with appropriate supplies on hand.
- Work with assistance companies to begin evacuation planning; understand capabilities and options and what steps the organization and individuals can take to streamline evacuation, should that become necessary.
- Consider how programs and operations will be managed in the absence of international personnel (if any are on the ground) and depending on developments in the environment.
- Review any special needs for local staff to maintain personal safety (avoid going to the office, returning to hometowns, pay advances, etc.). Some orgs may want to plan for shutting down in the event that it is necessary. Again, planning for something does not mean it will happen.

In conclusion

As with so many (most) things in life these days, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted response to deteriorating security environments. On the plus side, many organizations have become more adept at remote operations, enabling teams to work from home and reducing the risk of being caught in unrest or violence. Similarly, many organizations have fewer international personnel on the ground, which may reduce challenges related to evacuation. On the flip side, COVID-19 related travel restrictions may limit departure destinations. For example, Thailand requires a Certificate of Entry that includes a medical certificate issued no more than 72 hours prior to travel stating a traveler is “fit to fly,” i.e., tests negative for COVID-19.

Evacuation is an important part of any organization’s response to unfolding security situations – but it’s

only one option of many. Given the uncertainty of many deteriorating environments, it’s crucial for organizations to adjust to current conditions while planning for worst case scenarios – even when they don’t seem likely to occur.



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