



How Much Can American Travelers Overseas Rely On The U.S. State Department For Help In A Crisis?

According to the U.S. State Department Web site, consular personnel at U.S. embassies and consulates are on call 24 hours a day to provide emergency assistance to Americans traveling abroad. But when Raj and Alyssa Kamruddin recently called for help, they found it in very short supply. The young couple from Illinois were in Mumbai during the November terrorist attacks and were desperate for guidance on what to do. "When I called the consulate, I was told, 'We don't have any information. Stay in your room and keep watching TV,'" recalls Alyssa. Twelve hours later, the couple checked the Web site of the U.S. embassy in Delhi and found nothing related to the attack. Hours after the Western press began reporting on the violence in Mumbai, a photograph of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was still the top news item on the embassy's Web site. And although Alyssa had registered her travel plans on the State Department's site (travel.registration.state.gov), she never received any e-mails related to the Mumbai attack.

"In these situations, we work to provide all necessary assistance to American citizens as quickly as possible," said Karen Kirchgasser, a spokesperson for the U.S. State Department, adding that a travel alert was issued on November 27, the day after the attacks began, and that "the U.S. consulate in Mumbai remained open and provided emergency services for American citizens, including issuing emergency passports, visiting hospitals, and responding to Americans in distress."

But American travelers stuck in Thailand in November, when civil unrest closed Bangkok's airports and stranded some 300,000 foreigners, felt similarly underserved by the U.S. government. Kevin and Lois Salmon, of Salt Lake City, who were scheduled to fly home from Bangkok on Thanksgiving, phoned the State Department numbers broadcast on local TV news stations but couldn't get through. Meanwhile, back in Utah their son, Bryant, called the State Department on their behalf only to be told that his parents would have to find their own way home. "We were hoping for some guidance on the safest way out of the country," says Kevin. "Instead, we got no information whatsoever." Britain's Foreign and Commonwealth Office sent text messages to those who had registered with the office, reporting that several airlines had added flights at an airport 90 miles from Bangkok. Ten countries—including China, the Philippines, and Spain—sent planes to the same airport to evacuate their citizens; neither the United States nor Great Britain sent aircraft. The U.S. State Department maintains that the local embassy's consular staff worked around the clock, directing Americans to resources for lodging, adjusting travel arrangements, and supplying prescription medicines.

When it comes to trip planning, the State Department Web site (travel.state.gov) does provide valuable safety information on foreign destinations, and U.S. embassies will often answer e-mail queries about safety risks in the countries they serve. U.S. embassy and consular staff will also replace lost passports, provide emergency loans, visit Americans incarcerated overseas, and help U.S. citizens obtain medical assistance in emergencies.

All American citizens traveling abroad should register with the State Department, but to increase your chances of staying well informed about your destination in the event of an emergency, consider registering with those countries that have speedier track records in issuing travel alerts.