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Crisis Management in Africa



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API: What is a crisis for an Embassy in Africa?

Crisis management is a major feature of modern diplomacy. There have always been crises, such as earthquakes, political upheavals (I was on duty in the Foreign Office the weekend the Berlin Wall fell), and of course terrorist attacks, but with the new millennium they somehow became more immediate, with instant communications, social media, and the speed with which fellow citizens could travel to the spot. Two in particular challenged our Government response – the Bali bombing of 2002 and the Tsunami of 2004. We learnt a lot. I managed the response to a bombing in Marrakesh in 2011, played a small role in the Mali crisis of 2012, led a lock down during disorder in Kinshasa in 2015 and was Ambassador in South Sudan when Juba descended into violence, though in the last case it was my brilliant Deputy Rich Croker who led the operation in the first few days when I could not get back into the country.

API: What are the main challenges of crisis management for the leader on the spot?

My guess is that what applies to Embassies applies to companies, NGOs and any organisations. Above all it is essential for the leader to learn how to go operational. Crises cannot be handled by the normal reflective and measure processes. You have to be able to react in the first minute; you have to have a robust and multi-purpose emergency plan and have exercised it; you have to divide up multiple roles, to deploy, communicate and (often overlooked) get hold of resource – always by starting off going big as it is easier to scale down than up. It is vital to look after your team, make sure they are rested and fed; and, as crisis leader, that you stand back from the detail of the operation so as to oversee it, resource it, and set the pace. You are usually blindsided by something unpredictable. It is about being ready, not being clever. And a particular requirement for an Ambassador is to communicate. This is no moment for debates about the needs of the press versus the needs of UK citizens. You have to do both at the same time, while keeping both separate.

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API: Tell us about civil disorder crises. What challenges do they throw up?

In some crises in Africa the state itself is, or feels itself, under threat. This could be street violence through to civil war. It probably means that you are getting limited information or help from the local authorities. Your priority is to keep people safe and indoors. Street violence in Kinshasa in early 2015 led to us locking down. It was after a time not safe to get people to and from the airport. Evacuation would only have been an extreme option given the difficulty of extraction. And there were large communities of fellow European citizens, which meant coordinated action was essential. The crises in Juba in 2013 and 2016 were different again. Large scale fighting broke out between the two leading Government factions. The UK helped extract most staff and citizens of other countries in both cases. We worked closely with our US colleagues in particular to ensure protection by the authorities. We reduced our team from 25 international staff to four and relied on heroic local South Sudanese staff. The risk was of crossfire in two very tense situations.

API: How do you forewarn and communicate with UK visitors and businesses?

Each post is different but it is essential that emergency planning includes outreach to UK citizens. This is not simple, given the turnover of company staff and an uncertain number of tourists passing through, and the individual's right to travel, whether or not Government travel advice advises against. Old fashioned systems of registering with the Embassy, though they are useful, do not begin to address modern social media culture, which of course can also be a huge asset in emergencies. The best systems empower wardens who volunteer to make contact with fellow citizens. Of course, in difficult countries most foreign residents or visitors are aware of the risk and think to check in through social media and websites. All companies and organisations with a presence in any country with a political or natural threat should have emergency plans which link with their Government's embassy.

API: How do you work with host Governments and partners?

It needs a lot of time and imagination. The local authorities have duties and their sovereignty must be respected. In emergencies the first casualty is accurate information from the authorities – it is often denial. In cases where communication breaks down, foreign governments have to act with care and transparency. It is vital to take account of each other so as to avoid duplication and confusion. Diplomats naturally talk to each other so this usually works. We also know perfectly well that next time round we will need our colleagues; helping is not an act of generosity but necessity. But that is not to be ungrateful. I and my colleagues in Juba will never be able to repay the instinctive and unquestioning generosity of our US colleagues who protected our team, or my European colleagues in Kinshasa without whom we would not have been properly informed about what was going on.

API: Should we reconsider being in dangerous countries?

There is a tendency wrongly to characterize African countries as by nature unstable. Only a few regularly pose the risks above, though, as can be seen in the news, upheaval can produce a threatening situation, and lack of resources can exacerbate the effects of a natural disaster. Companies, Embassies and other organisations should plan carefully. Often these are countries we are and should be supporting. Their people deserve the world's attention and presence. It is also quite right that international business encourages these frontier markets. So when things go wrong, and we suddenly have to prioritise the safety of our citizens and employees, we should

not lose sight of the country and people we are there to work with and live with. An Ambassador will deeply regret being evacuated. And a company loses not just money but future links, and in some cases trust, by having to close. So in the event of crisis we should be ready to react but keep in mind the long term implications of disengaging.

API: Do you have any advice for companies?

Have an emergency plan. Keep it up to date and practise it. It must be to hand, on your desktop or mobile, and all your team need to train on it. Keep it simple – it's the first few steps, the division of responsibilities (with deputies) and the first few minutes which count. Communicate back home quickly and with your Embassy. Ask for and, when you can, offer help. Set a battle rhythm with regular reviews and contingency planning for the next steps. Plan for the worst - it almost always turns out better.

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