



Understanding the Consular Travel Advisory System



Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

Overview

The U.S. Department of State has long issued messaging for the purpose of helping U.S. citizen travelers abroad make the right decisions to keep themselves safe and secure. Some of these were for short-term issues, and others explained longer-term, systemic issues affecting the security environment in a particular country or even across an entire region. Many in the private sector use these products to help formulate security plans for their personnel or facilities positioned abroad, or to govern their policies for international travel.

That system has now changed, and many of the products travelers have come to know (such as Travel Warnings and Emergency Messages) are being reformatted, rethought, and simplified. This report will help OSAC constituents better understand this new system and what it means to their travelers and interests abroad. Although many organizations who incorporate consular messaging into security tripwires may have to edit their in-house security policies, OSAC assesses that these changes will help the private sector and travelers alike make more informed decisions when it comes to their security abroad.

The New Consular Travel Advisory System

The State Department's Bureau of Consular Affairs (CA) on January 10 launched improvements to public safety and security messaging that will make it easier for U.S. citizens to access clear, timely, and reliable information about every country in the world. CA has replaced its former countrywide products, Travel Warnings and Travel Alerts, with a single "Travel Advisory" for each country. Each Travel Advisory for every country around the world will be paired with a level of advice based on one of four tiers.

- 1 Exercise normal precautions
- 2 Exercise increased caution
- 3 Reconsider travel
- 4 Do not travel

Every country will have a Travel Advisory, providing tiered levels of advice ranging from Levels 1-4. Further country-specific details such as entry/exit requirements, local laws and customs, health conditions, transportation, and other relevant topics will accompany these levels and be available on the same country page. The four levels of advice are:

- **Level 1 - Exercise Normal Precautions:** This is the lowest advisory level for safety and security risk. There is some risk in any international travel. Conditions in other countries may differ from those in the United States and may change at any time.

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- **Level 2 - Exercise Increased Caution:** Be aware of heightened risks to safety and security. The Department of State provides additional advice for travelers in these areas in the Travel Advisory. Conditions in any country may change at any time.
- **Level 3 - Reconsider Travel:** Avoid travel due to serious risks to safety and security. The Department of State provides additional advice for travelers in these areas in the Travel Advisory. Conditions in any country may change at any time.
- **Level 4 - Do Not Travel:** This is the highest advisory level due to greater likelihood of life-threatening risks. During an emergency, the U.S. Government may have very limited ability to provide assistance. The Department of State advises that U.S. citizens not travel to the country or leave as soon as it is safe to do so. The Department of State provides additional advice for travelers in these areas in the Travel Advisory. Conditions in any country may change at any time.

Travel Advisories at Levels 2-4 will contain clear reasons for the level assigned, using established risk indicators, and offer specific advice to those who choose to travel there. These are:

- **C – Crime:** Widespread violent or organized crime is present in areas of the country. Local law enforcement may have limited ability to respond to serious crimes.
- **T – Terrorism:** Terrorist attacks have occurred and/or specific threats against civilians, groups, or other targets may exist.
- **U – Civil Unrest:** Political, economic, religious, and/or ethnic instability exists and may cause violence, major disruptions, and/or safety risks.
- **H – Health:** Health risks, including current disease outbreaks or a crisis that disrupts a country's medical infrastructure, are present. The issuance of a Centers for Disease Control Travel Notice may be a factor.
- **N - Natural Disaster:** A natural disaster, or its aftermath, poses danger.
- **E - Time-limited Event:** Short-term event, such as elections, sporting events, or other incidents that may pose safety risks.
- **O – Other:** There are potential risks not covered by previous risk indicators. Read the country's Travel Advisory for details.

Not only will Travel Advisories follow a consistent format and use plain language to help travelers find and use important security information, but the four standard levels of advice will be accompanied by clear, actionable steps U.S. citizens should take to help ensure their safety.

Additionally, although CA will issue an overall Travel Advisory level for each country, varying levels of advice may apply to specific locations or areas within a country. After all, the security environment is not always level nationwide – especially in larger or less stable countries. For instance, CA may advise U.S. citizens to exercise increased caution in a country (Level 2), but to reconsider travel to a particular area within that country (Level 3).



In addition, U.S. embassies and consulates around the world will now issue “Alerts,” a single system to replace the former Emergency Messages and Security Messages. Alerts will be labeled according to their issue: Security Alert; Health Alert; Weather Alert; or Demonstration Alert.

Where Can I Find the New Advisories?

While the nomenclature and formatting is changing, the locations generally are not, with the exception that travelers can now access all safety and security information for any given country on a single page. All Travel Advisories (formerly Travel Warnings and Alerts) will still be found on individual [country pages](#), along with the new Alerts (formerly Emergency and Security Messages). Alerts will also be found on individual embassy and consulate websites, which themselves have all been updated over the last year. Updated Travel Advisories or newly issued Alerts will also be sent via the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program \(STEP\)](#) to all enrollees.

And as always, any Travel Advisories or Alerts issued in Washington or around the world will be posted to the [OSAC website](#), and will be viewable without an OSAC password to the general public. OSAC will also maintain the entire archival database of messaging dating back nearly a decade; many constituents use this database as a way to research how the security environment in a given location may have changed over a certain period of time. Finally, those subscribed to [OSAC newsletters](#) will receive word of any Travel Advisory updates or newly-issued Alerts in the newsletter distributed immediately following their release.

What If I Have Other Questions?

Many questions are answered on the [CA International Travel webpage](#), which includes a link to [CA FAQs](#). These include how the overall level for a country is determined, how often Travel Advisory levels will be reviewed, and whether the Department of State considers political considerations or the potential economic impact on a country when deciding its tier level.

As always, representatives of U.S. private-sector organizations are able to contact OSAC directly to assess the potential impact of security issues abroad on their organization and its interests abroad. OSAC constituents and those eligible for constituency can find contact information on the [OSAC Contact Us webpage](#).