



What do Consular Products Really Mean?

Product of the Research & Information Support Center (RISC)

Summary

Like many other governments around the world, the U.S. Government issues safety and security-related travel information for its citizens living in or traveling to foreign countries. Often, though, OSAC finds that constituents are unclear on the differences among the products issued by the Department of State's Bureau of Consular Affairs—the bureau charged with issuing these products. The following should help clarify the different consular information products so that OSAC constituents can better understand the safety and security-related information for a particular location.

Consular Information Products:

Consular Affairs administers the Consular Information Program to inform the public of safety and security conditions abroad. The current line of consular products includes Travel Warnings, Travel Alerts, the Worldwide Caution, Messages, Security Messages, and Emergency Messages, as well as Country Specific Information. At times the public is not clear as to the difference among these products. Occasionally, there may be overlapping products for the same country, with each issued for a different length of time and for different reasons.

Travel Warnings

A Travel Warning is issued:

“when we want you to consider very carefully whether you should go to a country at all. Examples of reasons for issuing a Travel Warning might include unstable government, civil war, ongoing intense crime or violence, or frequent terrorist attacks. We want you to know the risks of traveling to these places and to strongly consider not going to them at all. Travel Warnings remain in place until the situation changes; some have been in effect for years.”

Long-standing Travel Warnings are updated every six months, or more frequently if necessary. Little may change from one iteration to the next, but OSAC can help decipher the changes that are made and what they may mean to your operations. U.S. Department of State Travel Warnings encompass an entire country, even if the major security issue does not occur nationwide. Current Travel Warnings include:

- [Honduras](#), issued because of a critical level of violence;
- [Syria](#), issued due to the ongoing civil war and critical terror levels; and
- [Chad](#), issued due to problems in its border regions.

Travel Alerts

A Travel Alert is issued:

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.

“for short-term events we think you should know about when planning travel to a country. Examples of reasons for issuing a Travel Alert might include an election season that is bound to have many strikes, demonstrations, or disturbances; a health alert like an outbreak of H1N1; or evidence of an elevated risk of terrorist attacks. When these short-term events are over, we cancel the Travel Alert.”

Current Travel Alerts include:

- [South Pacific](#), issues to inform travelers of the impending tropical cyclone season;
- [Russia & Ukraine](#), issued to alert travelers to ongoing tensions between those countries; and
- [Nigeria](#), issued specifically for election-related issues, whereas a concurrent [Nigeria Travel Warning](#) remains in effect due to terror concerns.

Worldwide Caution

The [Worldwide Caution](#) is a longstanding consular product that provides “information on the continuing threat of terrorist actions and violence against U.S. citizens and interests throughout the world.” According to the current iteration, “recent terrorist attacks, whether by those affiliated with terrorist entities, copycats, or individual perpetrators, serve as a reminder that U.S. citizens need to maintain a high level of vigilance and take appropriate steps to increase their security awareness.” Due to a constantly evolving transnational terror threat, the Worldwide Caution is updated regularly—at least once every six months.

Consular Messages

There are three types of consular messages: Messages, Security Messages, and Emergency Messages. Each of these is issued by a specific embassy or consulate to cover that diplomatic post’s consular district; in a country with multiple posts, a consular district may be a small portion of the country. Regardless of the type of consular message, contact information for the appropriate U.S. diplomatic post will be included at the bottom, including street address, telephonic and electronic contacts, and a 24-hour emergency number.

In practice there is less of a fine line when delineating between the types of consular messages (especially between Emergency and Security Messages), but OSAC constituents can use the following rule of thumb when discerning the meaning behind a message based on increasing severity: “Use your PEN, use your EYES, use your FEET.”



Messages:
Use your **PEN**



Security Messages:
Use Your **EYES**



Emergency Messages:
Use your **FEET**

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.

- Messages: “Use Your Pen.” Messages for U.S. Citizens, as they are formally named, are typically administrative notices that give U.S. citizens in-country information of a more general nature. A Message might be issued to remind voters about the deadline for voter registration, or so citizens can plan ahead to get a new passport or record a birth abroad. If a Message is issued for your location, **“use your pen”** by noting anything that might affect you directly; check your documentation to see if it needs updating, ensure you remember any of the changed information for the next time you will need to avail yourself of the consulate’s services. Recent Messages issued by posts around the world include:
 - [Caracas](#), issued to inform U.S. citizens of new entry requirements to Venezuela;
 - [Monrovia](#), issued to announce lifting of the Ebola-related state of emergency; and
 - [Dakar](#), issued to inform regional travel restrictions due to fears of Ebola.
- Security Messages: “Use Your Eyes.” Security Messages for U.S. Citizens are the most common, as they are issued for day-to-day security-related issues. A Security Message will be issued to advise citizens of potential protests, usually with the reminder that even demonstrations planned to be peaceful could devolve into violent encounters. A Security Message will also be issued to notify drivers of closed roads, flyers of airport difficulties, or hikers of forest fires. If a Security Message is issued for your location, **“use your eyes”** by being more aware of your surroundings, paying attention to local media reporting, and watching for any changes in the security situation compared to what occurs on a normal day. Recent Security Messages issued by posts around the world include:
 - [Cairo](#), issued due to an uptick of threats related to an economic conference;
 - [Port-au-Prince](#), issued to warn drivers of potential strike-related roadblocks; and
 - [Jerusalem](#), issued to inform about a recent but concluded violent attack.
- Emergency Messages: “Use Your Feet.” Emergency Messages for U.S. Citizens are used infrequently, so as to highlight their importance when they are issued. Emergency Messages denote imminent threats and ongoing problems. An Emergency Message will be issued to help keep U.S. citizens out of harm’s way, to notify where major natural disasters are occurring, how to mitigate damages, where to access aid, and/or how to avoid the affected region altogether. An Emergency Message will tell you what places to avoid and what measures to take during violence. If an Emergency Message is issued for your location, **“use your feet”** and consider leaving your location if it is safe, or avoid visiting a location where it is not. Recent Emergency Messages issued by posts around the world include:
 - [Antananarivo](#), issued to warn about flooding and landslides around the country;
 - [Kabul](#), issued due to an imminent threat to areas visited by U.S. citizens; and
 - [Sanaa](#), issued after cessation of consular services altogether in Yemen.
- What About “Warden Messages?” The Department of State no longer uses the term “Warden Message”, which was a reference to the air raid wardens who guarded the coast and alerted the public to danger during World War II. The State Department currently uses the term “warden” to refer to individuals, usually but not always U.S. citizens resident in the host country, who volunteer to facilitate communication between the U.S. embassy/consulate and the U.S. citizen expatriate community.

There are still locations where consulates keep warden networks active in case of a breakdown in electronic communication. However, nearly all communication from consulates is done electronically. Likewise, other monikers for messaging — such as Demonstration Notices or Security Notices -- may exist in certain locations; these, too, are obsolete and should be considered Security Messages.

Country Specific Information

Similar to [OSAC's Crime & Safety Reports](#), the State Department provides [Country Specific Information](#) for every country around the world. Travelers will find the location of the U.S. embassy and any consular offices, entry requirements, crime and security information, health and medical considerations, drug penalties, localized hot spots, and more. Combined, the two products are excellent primers for travelers abroad; OSAC recommends taking printed copies of each along with them to read prior to arrival in country, whether as an introduction for first-timers or as a refresher for seasoned travelers. These reports are not available on OSAC.gov.

How can I Read Consular Products?

Travel Warnings, Travel Alerts, and the Worldwide Caution are available on the main website for the [Bureau of Consular Affairs](#). Consular messages are nearly always available on the website for the [embassy or consulate](#) issuing the message; sometimes there may be a time lag between when the message is disseminated and when it is posted due to logistical constraints. Travelers and those living abroad are urged to enroll with the [Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, or "STEP,"](#) which will not only give the appropriate diplomatic post(s) your information for easier communication should an emergency arise, but will put you on a distribution list to receive any related messaging during your travel.

[OSAC.gov](#) is the only U.S. government website with the full complement of security-related consular products, including archives, all in one place. A search will allow any user — registered or otherwise — to access the last five years' worth of [Travel Warnings](#), [Travel Alerts](#), [Worldwide Cautions](#), and [messaging](#). Additionally, OSAC constituents can contact OSAC staff to ask about newly-issued messages. We can help you understand why a product was issued, why language may have been changed, and what is going on in-country and/or regionally that might have had a bearing on the message being disseminated from post.

OSAC Contact Information:

- Main switchboard: 1.571.345.2223
- Duty officer for after-hours emergencies: 1.202.309.5056
- OSAC Research & Analysis Unit:
 - East Asia & the Pacific: OSACeap@state.gov
 - Europe & Eurasia: OSACeur@state.gov
 - Middle East & North Africa: OSACnea@state.gov
 - South & Central Asia: OSACsca@state.gov
 - Sub-Saharan Africa: OSACaf@state.gov
 - Western Hemisphere: OSACwha@state.gov
 - Cyber Threats & Information Security: OSACcyber@state.gov
 - Diseases & Pandemics: OSAChealth@state.gov

The contents of this (U) presentation in no way represent the policies, views, or attitudes of the United States Department of State, or the United States Government, except as otherwise noted (e.g., travel advisories, public statements). The presentation was compiled from various open sources and (U) embassy reporting. Please note that all OSAC products are for internal U.S. private sector security purposes only. Publishing or otherwise distributing OSAC-derived information in a manner inconsistent with this policy may result in the discontinuation of OSAC support.