

Crisis Management during Political Unrest: Coordinating Evacuations during Winter Break

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Tags

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Setting

Prison riots, escalating gang violence, and a rapid deterioration of safety conditions leads a South American country to declare a state of emergency and enforce a curfew. At the same time, a university has three distinct programs occurring there with more than fifty students, four faculty leaders, two program partners, and one resident director. There is one spring semester study abroad program with four students in homestays and a resident director, and two faculty-led experiential learning programs during Winter Break—one with a program provider and the other with a volunteer service-learning organization. The person at the university responsible for the safety of international travelers coordinates the response with the trip leaders, program managers, study abroad office, insurance company, on-campus offices, security assistance company, travel agent, and travel committee.

Case

Day One (Monday)

News reports start coming in of ongoing riots in prisons across a South American country. Prison officials and police officers have reportedly been taken hostage. Riots broke out after the leader of a prominent criminal group escaped the previous day during a scheduled transfer to a different prison.

While the capital city and touristic offshore islands had remained suitably safe for educational travel, conditions overall were on a negative trendline; with growing links between local criminal groups, international drug-trafficking routes, and powerful cartels in other countries—particularly along the coastal provinces—with

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the largest coastal town becoming one of the most dangerous cities in the world. As risks from criminal groups increased, there had also been increased political instability and violence (e.g. mayors, officials, and even a presidential candidate assassinated the previous year); a significant downturn in economic conditions since the pandemic; and hydroelectric energy challenges resulting from drought; all of which compounded to create conditions conducive to the outbreak of a more generalized and nation-wide state of unsafe travel conditions.

After learning about the developing situation, the International Travel Risk Coordinator communicated with the study abroad advisor and program managers who had students in the country, and requested an update from the local resident director and on-site faculty trip leaders. Later that evening, the government declared a state of emergency and announced the imposition of a curfew from 11:00pm-05:00am. The Coordinator sent updates to all travelers, the university's travel committee, and had a phone discussion about the situation with the program managers.

Day Two (Tuesday)

Tuesday morning, the resident director and trip leaders were still reporting that the situation remained calm in the capital despite the curfew and prison riots: *"all good here, no sign at all of the prison issue or impact on our itinerary."* At 03:00pm, armed groups in masks took hostages in the newsroom on live TV in the coastal city. The video was shared widely across social media platforms and international news channels. The Coordinator contacted the university's travel insurance and assistance provider to start a new case should a decision be made to initiate an evacuation. An update was sent to the travel committee, program managers, and travelers that the situation was quickly deteriorating to the point where safe educational travel was not viable for the time being. The recommendation was for everyone to consolidate, shelter in place at their current location, and wait for further updates.

At 04:40pm, the President declared an internal armed conflict against criminal groups. Soon thereafter, one of the trip leaders reported that their program partner was now recommending to stop the program and depart early. The Coordinator convened a Zoom meeting with key stakeholders. Both short-term winter programs requested for their groups to be evacuated. The four students on a semester-long study abroad program with a resident director were provided with the option to depart early or continue to shelter-in-place until conditions improved. The resident director reported that the disturbances remained outside the capital city and the students were safe and well-provisioned in their homestays.

The Coordinator gathered copies of everyone's passports from the travel registry and provided them to the security assistance provider to arrange flight departures. One of the programs had used a travel agency for their original flights, so a request was also made with the travel agency, to see which resource could secure flights the soonest. A request was also made through the assistance provider for secure ground transportation to the airport.

Day Three (Wednesday)

At 01:40am, the travel agency reported having flights arranged for the first group for departure on Thursday.

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A message was received around 07:30am from the assistance provider that they were having difficulty arranging flights for the second group, but that they were able to arrange ground transportation. Frustrations began to be voiced about the time it was taking to secure departing flight tickets, and one of the trip leaders reported that several students bought their own flight tickets online. The Coordinator encouraged the trip leaders to do their best to keep everyone together while arrangements were made for the entire group. An emergency meeting was held with the travel committee to discuss options and the cost of arranging a charter flight. It was decided that if flights couldn't be arranged for the second group quickly, a decision would need to be made by the end of the day to pay for a charter flight. The Coordinator communicated with other universities who had students in the country to discuss a potential collaboration on a charter flight for anyone with travelers needing to depart. Between 02:30-04:00pm, the Coordinator fielded calls from six very concerned parents, including one who had seen the video of the hostage taking at the TV station, and who were fearful that they were never going to see their child again.

Throughout the day, coordination occurred with on-campus resources in student affairs and resident life to arrange lodging accommodations and counseling support for returning students. At 04:09pm, the travel agency was able to secure tickets for the second group on two departing flights scheduled for Friday. An update with the itineraries and transportation pickup time was provided to the students, trip leaders, travel committee, program managers, and parents.

Day Four (Thursday)

At 02:35pm, confirmation was received from the secure transportation company that the first group had arrived safely at the airport. An update was provided to their parents. During the day, one semester-long study abroad participant decided to depart early. Flight arrangements were made for the student. The remaining three study abroad students decided to stay in their homestays and complete the semester program with the support of the resident director. Buses were chartered to pick up each returning group at the airport upon arrival in the USA for transportation back to campus.

Day Five (Friday)

The first group returned to campus at 11:30am. They were picked up with vans arranged by campus police for transportation to their dormitories. The Coordinator confirmed each arriving student by checking their name off a roster as they exited the bus. At 02:10pm, confirmation was provided by the secure transportation company that the second group was safe at the airport waiting for departing flights. Updates were sent to everyone. Of the original 33 students in the second group, six made their own flight arrangements and departed early.

Day Six (Saturday)

At 04:30am, the Coordinator met the first arrivals from the second group, and then the final arrivals at 09:30am. Each student and faculty were welcomed back to campus and the full roster was confirmed for 100% accountability. A final update was sent to the travel committee, university leadership, program managers, and university communications office. One of the groups met that evening to hold a religious gathering and group reflection.

Counseling and support resources were provided to all students and staff. The Coordinator took the next Monday off as a rest day. The three students who remained successfully completed their semester-long program without any safety incidents.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What are some indicators to monitor at study abroad destinations for the risk of significant political unrest and criminal violence? What conditions at a location differentiate between political unrest, crime, and protests at a level that is acceptable for educational travel with those that are unacceptable?
- To what extent should university administrators, program managers, and study abroad professionals prepare students during pre-departure orientation for a shelter-in-place or evacuation scenario? How can they best prepare resident directors and trip leaders?
- What methods and technologies could work best for communicating with people across countries during a crisis, given the potentially complicating factors of different time zones, business hours, system shutdowns, and the high level of urgency?
- What leadership methods or group dynamics could be used to keep the group together and prevent some students from making their own flight arrangements, if that is the university's goal? Under what circumstances would keeping the group together be a priority? When might it not be?
- In a similar crisis situation, what kind of communication between the university and the students' parents would be appropriate and ideal? Are there any legal concerns?
- What support resources were essential for the students on the semester-long program to be allowed to remain until conditions improved? Do you think that they should have been required to evacuate early with the students on the short-term programs?
- What could have been done better or differently during this scenario? What went well? What could've gone much worse? Did the university fully meet its duty of care responsibilities?
- What are some self-care methods for people in crisis management positions?