

# **FCO travel advisories: the case for transparency and balance**

A report by Tourism Concern

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## **TourismConcern**

**Campaigning for Ethical and Fairly Traded Tourism**

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# **FCO travel advisories: the case for transparency and balance**

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## **Introduction**

We are all concerned for safety and security for ourselves and for our nearest and dearest, whether at home or abroad. Each of us has different perceptions of what constitutes risk to our persons and property and different preparedness to tolerate it – this is, after all, what keeps the insurance business and stock markets going. To a greater or lesser extent, we look to the advice provided by ‘experts’ and trust that their advice is grounded on sound bases.

When it comes to travelling, it is the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) that issues such advice in relation to risks – real or perceived – to tourists. These risks range from attacks directed at or involving tourists, as recently in Bali, Spain, Kenya and Columbia; health scares such as the outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS); wars, civil unrest, crime and natural disasters etc. Along with other governments, the FCO’s advice is aimed first and foremost at protecting its own citizens. But such warnings can have devastating effects on destinations, particularly those dependant on tourism for their livelihoods and development. As an organisation campaigning for fair and equitable tourism, *Tourism Concern* argues that the legitimate protection of tourists should not be at the expense of hosts in tourism destinations.

The advice issued by the FCO’s Travel Advice Unit (TAU) aims to help British tourists make informed decisions about their travel plans; it is, according to former Foreign Office Minister Baroness Amos, “designed to provide travellers with practical, objective and up-to-date advice about their destination”<sup>1</sup>. This raises questions about how such judgements are made, and just how practical, objective and up-to-date they really are. Government warnings about the potential dangers facing tourists and travellers have undoubtedly increased since the attack on New York on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent ‘war on terrorism’. Such warnings have come under the scrutiny of a variety of stakeholders: tourists, tour operators and agents, tourism organizations, experts and consultants, journalists, and host governments.

This report examines FCO travel advice particularly in comparison to the standards set out in the Crisis and Disaster Management Guidelines issued by the World Tourism Organisation.<sup>2</sup> The report contains case studies outlining some consequences of this advice, and concludes with recommendations for balancing legitimate concern for the safety of travellers with the proper interests of tourist destinations.

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<sup>1</sup> The Debate, *Tourism In Focus*, Tourism Concern, Spring 2003

<sup>2</sup> *Crisis and Disaster Management Guidelines*, World Tourism Organisation, May 2003.  
[www.world-tourism.org/market\\_research/recovery/reports.htm](http://www.world-tourism.org/market_research/recovery/reports.htm)

## World Tourism Organisation On Travel Advisories

The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) is the foremost international body dealing with tourism issues. It reflects the concerns of its 140 member states<sup>3</sup>, as well as a range of organizations and companies working directly in travel, tourism and related sectors.

In May 2003, the Secretary General of the World Tourism Organisation, Francesco Frangialli, called for 'objectiveness and co-operation' in travel advisories from individual countries. While recognising that "governments... must assume their responsibilities in protecting citizens from proven risks", the Secretary General recommends that "restrictions should be no broader than strictly needed to avoid creating additional problems for... tourism which can make such a decisive contribution to social and economic development."<sup>4</sup>

Travel advisories should "avoid hurting the destinations which have experienced negative events", particularly the "lesser developed countries". Not only do such travel advisories have a strong negative impact, but also they "do not serve in the prevention of future terrorist attacks or health problems."<sup>5</sup>

### WTO Crisis and Disaster Management Guidelines

The WTO's guidelines on managing crises and disasters contain specific and pertinent advice in the paragraph entitled: "Stay out of the Travel Advisory War." This states:

*"Travel advisories should be issued in accordance with Article 6 of the WTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism which states: '... governments should issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the tourism industry of host countries and the interests of their own operators.' Travel advisories should be discussed with authorities in the host country and travel professionals before they are issued. Warnings should be limited to specific geographical areas rather than blanket an entire country and be lifted as soon as the situation returns to normal. Avoid retaliatory travel advisories."<sup>6</sup>*

How does the advice issued by the FCO compare to the guideline above?

#### ***1. 'Governments should issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the tourism industry of host countries'***

Following the attacks on New York on 11 September 2001, although the FCO advised 'vigilance', neither the city nor America was subject to travel warnings; on the contrary, both the US and foreign media were full of requests for people to come and visit out of

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<sup>3</sup> The UK Government has not joined the WTO

<sup>4</sup> Francesco Frangialli, *WTO warns against overreaction to SARS*, World Tourism Organization, May 2003

<sup>5</sup> WTO Press and Communications Office, statement 22 September 2003

<sup>6</sup> *Crisis and Disaster Management Guidelines*, World Tourism Organisation, May 2003

solidarity and to stand up against terrorism. Bali, by contrast, a destination infinitely poorer and more in need of tourism, remains 'locked up' by major western governments almost one year after the bombings. In the US, ten times more people were killed than in Bali.

One five-star hotel manager in Bali implies that governments' incentives for not relaxing travel warnings are both political and economic, in that they encourage potential tourists to take their holidays at home.<sup>7</sup> The head of Bali's Tourism Authority, I Gede Pitana, is also quoted as saying that the belief "that the travel advisories are not about security but politics" is shared by a number of officials of various countries.<sup>8</sup>

Representatives of developing countries affected by travel advisories are also unhappy with what they see as 'double standards' and given the lack of consistency and transparency in the FCO's advice, it is hardly surprising that some should detect political rather than solely security motives behind decisions to impose or lift travel warnings. For example, while the US has escaped travel warnings and those issued for Spain are ambiguous at best, Kenyan tourism has been hit hard by the FCO's advisories. Western countries which issue travel advisories are 'unhappy' when such advice is applied to them, such as Indonesia's warning against travel to the US after September 11, and those of some Asian and other countries for the UK at the time of foot-and-mouth disease and racial unrest.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Case study: The Gambia**

Tourism in The Gambia suffered in 1994 when, after 30 years of rule, President Jawara was ousted in an almost violence-free coup d'état by members of the state army on 22 July 1994. The Foreign Office immediately issued advice for British citizens not to travel to The Gambia and, following the advice, several operators cancelled their flights to the country. Although the ban was lifted on 4<sup>th</sup> August, the FCO reissued their ban on 23 November following a failed counter-coup. This was to remain in place until March the following year.

As British tourists make up approximately 60% of incoming tourists to The Gambia, the effect on the economy was devastating. All British tour operators, apart from The Gambia Experience, pulled out of the country leading to the collapse of the winter season in 1994. The number of British tourists fell from 52,000 to 14,000 in the 1994/1995 season leading to hotel closures, mass redundancies and wide scale unemployment<sup>10</sup>.

During the period in which the travel ban was in place, at no point were British expatriates living in The Gambia advised to leave, prompting questions over how serious the threat to British citizens actually was. This led to a debate in the media about whether the FCO advice was actually imposed to pressurize the interim government to return to civilian democratic rule rather than for safety reasons. As one reporter said; "Gambia [was] a test case for Britain's policy of promoting good government and democracy in Africa"<sup>11</sup> and the bargaining tool of the spending power of British tourists certainly aided the implementation of such a policy.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Matthew Brace, *The Road back to Bali*, Geographical 75 (10). October 2003 pp 26-34.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*

<sup>9</sup> Nielsen C (2001), *Tourism and the Media; tourist decision making, information, and communication*, Melbourne, Hospitality Press

<sup>10</sup> *Yearbook of Tourism Statistics 1994-1998 Vol. 1* World Trade Organisation 2000

<sup>11</sup> Richard Dowden, *Britain ends help for junta in Gambia*, The Independent, 13<sup>th</sup> October 1994

After a meeting with the FCO, this view was echoed by the Gambian Minister of Justice, Fafa M'bai: "The Foreign Office's decision was made on political grounds in protest at the new government's stated aim of waiting four years before restoring democracy. The Gambian view is that if the British government was genuinely concerned about instability, it would have already organised a mass evacuation of the 700 expatriate Britons living in the country"<sup>12</sup>

### **Case study: Spain**

Despite the fact that ETA renewed its threat to Spanish tourism installations early this year, and issued statements to both the British and Spanish embassies and to tour operators **explicitly** warning tourists to stay away, the FCO's web site is ambiguous on the situation:

*"In recent attacks, there have not been mass casualties. But given this active campaign and the millions of tourists who visit Spain each year, and although the security forces have had considerable success in arresting ETA terrorist groups, there is a chance that visitors will be caught up in further attacks in tourist areas. Warnings may not always be given or a bomb could explode prematurely."*

Given the content and tone of such advice, which seems to be so protective of the Spanish tourism industry, it is hardly surprising that developing countries should suspect political motivation – and colonial attitudes – behind warnings issued in their regard.

## ***2. 'Governments should issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the...interests of their own operators'***

While the FCO has a clear responsibility to British tourists, its advice is often inconsistent with that of other governments and risks damaging the interests of British tour operators. Although the FCO web site does include links to the sites of governments of other countries, including Australia, the US, Canada, New Zealand, France, Germany and The Netherlands, this often serves merely to underline inconsistencies. The latter two, and particularly security-conscious Japan, have expressed doubts regarding the high level of UK travel advice. One example is in regard to Bali, where these governments "are happy for their tour operators to take clients to the mainly Hindu island."<sup>13</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find that "holidaymakers are confused by apparent inconsistencies in FCO travel advice".<sup>14</sup> Whereas the USA has raised its terrorist alert for Bali from 'high' to 'elevated' (from yellow to orange), it does not suggest that it is unsafe for travellers.

Indeed, although tourists cannot buy tours to Bali from THG Tours in the UK, tour operators within the same TUI group in Germany can send their customers to Bali. According to the managing director of Bali Tours & Travel, tourists from many different European countries as well as South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Japan, are continuing to visit Bali. The UK Indonesian Embassy spokesman says; "Our government hopes... that the British government will... reassess their travel advice in line with other European countries."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Helen Conway, *Call for UK to reverse advice*, Travel Weekly, June 1994

<sup>13</sup> *Back 2 Bali* press release, July 2003

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

### Case study: India

The historically contested region of Jammu and Kashmir on the border of India and Pakistan became a focal point for FCO Travel Advice in 2002 when the situation escalated, exacerbated by the fact that both countries had nuclear capabilities. The Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, flew to the region for talks during the 2002 crisis and issued a statement on 31 May stating: “[Before] I said that, while the situation between India and Pakistan was dangerous, war was not inevitable. That remains my view...[but] as a precautionary measure, I have therefore decided to amend our travel advice to India.”<sup>16</sup> The FCO subsequently released a warning advising indefinitely against all travel to Kashmir and India, and urging all British nationals living in India to consider leaving. The travel advice was lifted on 22 July despite the fact that the situation continued to escalate until September when both countries began to test nuclear missiles. Peace talks began in May 2003 but ongoing violence in the area has marred any hope of an immediate solution.

Currently, the FCO web site advises “against all travel in the immediate vicinity of the border with Pakistan”. Its advice goes even further in telling British citizens to “be aware of travel agents who will try to convince you that it is safe to travel to Jammu or Kashmir. Despite increased official promotion of Kashmir as a tourist centre, tensions remain high there. No matter how convincing the agents appear to be, their advice should not be followed.”<sup>17</sup>

Tour operators and others question why the FCO imposed a travel ban during the crisis but lifted the advice while the situation was still out of control. According to one Indian tour operator: <sup>18</sup>

*“Many of us felt that the travel advice was too harsh as the ‘evidence’ simply did not wash; the level of war tension in the Kashmir border was basically decided by the West. The Indian government and our tourism industry did try to convince the UK government that the travel advice was not fair or true to what is a still an ongoing situation with Pakistan regardless of Western media attention. As a result and with the advent of the Internet, everyone was monitoring the web site for any change in the travel advice warning and it did not seem to be meaningfully updated through the weeks”.*

He also points out that local operators are convinced that many British tourists would have travelled to India despite the travel advice if they had been able to get travel insurance, without which many would not risk it. “The net result”, according to this tour operator, is that “our most important clients cancelled their tour for October 2002 a month ahead of confirmation and on the very next day the travel advice warning was lifted. The UK is still our biggest in-bound foreign market, it is a reminder of our economic dependency on the West”.

### ***3. ‘Travel advisories should be discussed with authorities in the host countries...before they are issued’***

The FCO’s web site contains neither information about the process nor the extent of their consultation with host countries or about how travel warnings are issued or lifted. As far as we are able to ascertain, the TAU’s advice is based on information received from two types of sources, intelligence-based and non-intelligence-based. While the first are of their very nature secretive and unaccountable, the second type does indicate some consultation with host countries – albeit through the medium of British overseas posts. UK embassies and consulates are assumed to have local contacts and knowledge on issues concerning crime, local laws and natural disasters etc. However, little is known

<sup>16</sup> Staff and agencies, *Britons urged to consider leaving India*, The Guardian, 31<sup>st</sup> May 2002

<sup>17</sup> [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)

<sup>18</sup> The operator does not want to be named

about the nature of these local contacts nor the procedures by which such contacts are consulted or engaged in dialogue about the impact of travel advisories on their tourism industry. Without such transparent and consistent consultation, the extent of the knowledge of overseas posts remains in doubt.

While it is understandable that short-term travel warnings issued in response to intelligence advice is confidential, those based on information from overseas posts must be balanced against their potential impact on destinations. Officials in developing countries complain that they are not consulted – not talked to, but talked *at* – about the advice, and regard this lack of consultation as part of an old colonial attitude concerned to protect visitors but with scant regard to the harm done to destinations. Such unbalanced advice risks destabilising the governments of those countries where tourism is vital, providing a ‘victory’ to the perpetrators of the violence and adding destination communities to the list of victims.

**Intelligence-based and non-intelligence based sources:**

For the major part, intelligence-based sources inform advice related to the ‘war on terrorism’. The Counter Terrorism Policy Department (CTPD) informs the FCO’s geographical departments and its overseas posts of any threats and takes the lead on action. Ministers are contacted if the proposed changes to the travel advice will impact on significant numbers of British tourists. They are also informed if it is proposed **not** to change the travel advice but if there is a clear risk of parliamentary criticism should British citizens be injured or killed in an incident which might have been allowed for by changing the travel advice.

Non-intelligence sources provide information from overseas posts - consulates and embassies – which review their travel advice monthly, and are required to fill in a form every three months advising desk officers in the UK whether changes are necessary or not. Desk officers are also supposed to keep in touch with overseas posts and ask about changes. Posts communicate their recommendations for simple changes related to local circumstances to the TAU, which passes them to the desk officer for agreement; they are then put on the web site. Where such changes involve policy, the TAU will contact the desk officer who either has it cleared by the Head of Department or submits it to Ministers via the Director of Information. Ministers are contacted if the proposed changes will either impact on a significant number of British citizens or if opinion is divided over the action to be taken, or if, despite significant development in the situation, there is a recommendation for no action.

In contrast to the opaqueness of the FCO’s advisory procedures, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is rather more transparent. The section “Travel Advice Explained FAQ” covers seven categories explaining who produces the advice, where the information comes from, the scales of advisory assessment, what the advice means, how current it is, whether further travel advice is provided, and how travellers can monitor developments. In regard to sources of information, the DFAT lists: overseas posts, the travelling public, intelligence (particularly Australian), and consultation with the US, UK, Canadian and New Zealand governments. The information provided is “as current as we can make it” and each travel advisory is “reviewed on a quarterly basis and updated as appropriate.” It offers electronic subscriptions to those interested in receiving updates on the travel advice for a particular country.



### **Case study: Kenya**

Kenya is a popular tourist destination for British tourists, with around 150,000 annual visits. In August 1998, a terrorist attack on the United States' Embassy in Nairobi killed 232 people. It was four years before another attack followed, this time on an Israeli-owned hotel near Mombasa and the unsuccessful attempt to shoot down an Israeli charter plane on the same day.

The FCO released a statement the following day, 29 November 2002, amending their travel advice to include: "We believe that Kenya is one of a number of countries in East Africa where there may be an increased terrorist threat. UK nationals in Kenya should be vigilant, particularly in public places frequented by foreigners such as hotels, restaurants and shopping malls"<sup>19</sup>. However, the advice was not extended to an outright ban and had a negligible effect on the numbers of British tourists to Kenya in that period.

Inconsistencies in the UK's travel advice became clear when it emerged that the Australian government had received the same intelligence regarding possible attacks in Kenya two weeks earlier, and had changed their travel advice to warn against all travel to the destination because of "possible terrorist attacks against western interests". This provoked questions as to why the British Government had neither passed on the intelligence it had received, nor changed its advice to reflect the possible threat.

The Kenyan tourism industry continued to flourish until the terrorist threats of this year. Despite any actual attack, the FCO's statement on 15 May 2003 echoed the Kenyan Government's warning of a possible threat on the basis of intelligence: "There is a credible terrorist threat to Western interests in Kenya. We are therefore advising British nationals against non-essential travel to Kenya. British airlines were advised on 15 May to suspend flights to and from Kenya."<sup>20</sup>

Although the advice against all non-essential travel to Kenya was lifted a little over a month later (on 26 June), the ban on flights to Mombasa wasn't lifted until 4 September. The damage to Kenyan tourism was immense, not only in terms of a drop in tourists but also to the image of the country as a safe destination. As the CEO of the Kenya Association of Tour Operators, Fred Kaigua, states "Kenya's tourism was worst affected by the adverse travel advisories issued by both British and American Governments in May 2003. There was a general decline of tourists to Kenya by 18.2 per cent in the third quarter of 2003 after the ban compared to the same period in 2002. Specifically, these ensuing events seriously affected the UK's perception about Kenya. As a result, the number of Britons visiting Kenya declined by 38.5 per cent in the third quarter of 2003 after the ban compared to the same period in 2002."<sup>21</sup>

### ***4. 'Travel advisories should be discussed with... travel professionals before they are issued'***

The apparent lack of consultation between the FCO and travel professionals either at home or abroad often results in inadequate and unbalanced travel advice. Following a review in January 2003 by the Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), a consultation was undertaken between them, the FCO, the Foreign Affairs Committee (FAC), the Federation of Tour Operators (FTO), the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA), relatives of the Bali victims and members of the public. Subsequently, the FAC published

<sup>19</sup> FCO statement released 28 November 2002

<sup>20</sup> FCO statement released 15 May 2003

<sup>21</sup> Fred Kaigua, CEO Kenya Association of Tour Operators (KATO) statement 29 September 2003

a report<sup>22</sup> that included a section on “Protecting British Citizens from International Terrorism.” It recommended that the FCO revise all its travel advisories to “give a higher profile to the question of terrorism and the likelihood of terrorist attacks”, to make guidelines more user-friendly, and to provide links to travel advice from other governments.

Despite this one-off consultation with travel professionals, there is little evidence that this has been followed by procedures to set up on-going dialogue with stakeholders either in host countries, or indeed within the UK.

Such lack of consultation leads to inconsistencies between the foreign office and tour operators. For example the FCO issued a warning to tourists to Tanzania and Zanzibar in January 2003, based on “information that an international terrorist group may be planning an attack...”<sup>23</sup> However, the FCO did not give specific details of the threat and did not advise British tourists either to leave or not to go. Most British and Tanzanian tour operators continued with their normal bookings, feeling “unsure about the usefulness of the FCO advice.” The spokesman for Exodus describes advice given on travel to Tanzania as “over-cautious” and “a cut-and-paste job”.

Neither is there evidence of on-going consultation between the FCO and insurance companies in regard to travel and tourism. Individual travellers are not covered for travel to a country against which the FCO has issued a travel advisory, which is the benchmark used by insurance companies for policy decisions. In addition, tour companies cannot get insurance indemnity for destinations against which the FCO has issued a travel warning. They are therefore directly affected and are forced to cancel or reschedule tours or reimburse their customers. Both tour operators and travel insurers need to be brought into a consultative process with the FCO so as to avoid the application or extension of warnings beyond what can be regarded as reasonable.

Consultation with stakeholders in the tourism industry not only appears to be absent, but is lacking with other UK government departments, sections and policies directly or indirectly concerned with travel and tourism. These include the FCO’s Know Before You Go campaign (KBYG), the Environmental Policy Department (EPD), the Department for International Development (DFID), the Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). This lack of ‘joined-up-government’ not only results in internal contradictions and inconsistencies but in unwarranted damage to the tourism industry of host destinations.

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<sup>22</sup> FAC report, “Foreign Policy Aspects of the War against Terrorism” July 2003  
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmfaaff.htm>

<sup>23</sup> *Tourists confused by warning of terrorist attacks in Tanzania*, Daily Telegraph, 18 January 2003

## Joined-Up Government?

### *The Know Before You Go campaign:*

The KBYG campaign has over 140 partners - UK travel-related companies and organisations. The campaign aims to help "British nationals to stay safe when travelling overseas": it encourages them to check the FCO web site; take out adequate travel insurance; avoid drugs, illegal behaviour, and taking foolhardy risks with their safety, possessions and money; to know about what a British Consul can and cannot do to help; and find out and follow local laws and customs.<sup>24</sup>

Any advice that urges tourists to respect local cultures is to be welcomed, since ignorance of or indifference to local laws and customs often causes ill feeling. By encouraging tourists to be more responsible, the KBYG campaign goes some way to counterbalancing much of the tone and content of the rest of the FCO's advice which emphasises that **you**, tourists and travellers, should take precautions against attacks perpetrated on you by **them**, locals or others. However, this two-way relationship is not spelled out as it might be. Elsewhere on the FCO's web site, if you search for it, there is a section on 'sustainable tourism' with a valuable three-page document with sound guidelines on how to "make a difference when you travel". Although the piece does appear under the 'Know Before You Go' logo, it is not listed under the main travel menu. Such marginalization is either by omission or commission – i.e. either poor maintenance of the web site or entered only as an afterthought.

The code of conduct in this section urges tourists to ensure that "the impact you have on local communities and the environment is positive and sustainable." It correctly points out that "many local people in tourist destinations depend on an income from tourism" and that "the way in which you behave and spend your money can affect their livelihoods and well being". However, even here, it omits to draw out the implications, namely that the way in which you behave may, in turn, influence local peoples' attitudes, reactions, and behaviour towards you. Whilst it is undoubtedly important to remind tourists that "many destinations have very different cultures to our own", and that "behaviour that is acceptable in the UK may cause offence overseas", the consequences of such behaviour and tourists' responsibility to avoid causing offence should be made more explicit and, again should be clearly linked into the more general FCO advice.<sup>25</sup>

### *Environmental Policy Document:*

The Environmental Policy Department (EPD) has 'links' with the both the Consular Department (CD) and the KBYG campaign, although it has no role in decision-making processes concerning Travel Advice. EPD has worked with the CD and the Travel Foundation to put some bullet points related to issues of sustainable tourism onto the KBYG web site. It is also working with The Foundation and some country destinations to add advice on sustainable tourism to country web pages. EPD has produced a strategy on sustainable tourism which aims to join-up government actions across government Departments.

### *Department for International Development:*

In not taking into account the implications of its advice on tourism destinations, the FCO contradicts the development work carried out by other government departments. One such is the Department for International Development (DFID), which strongly advocates sustainable development in general, and sustainable and pro-poor tourism as a means of reducing poverty and furthering development. Here again, in warning against travel to certain destinations without sufficient consultation, the FCO's advice is inconsistent with, and harmful to DFID's development strategy.

<sup>24</sup> Know Before You Go campaign pack, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, October 2002

<sup>25</sup> During their trial for the bombings of the Sari Club and Paddy's Bar in Kuta, Bali, some of the accused declared that "they considered them places of vice with lots of foreigners." Matthew Brace, *The Road Back to Bali*, Geographical 75 (10). October 2003 pp 26-34

*Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP):*

The FCO is part of the GCPP established in 2001 to link up the knowledge and resources of the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and DFID. One of the GCPP's rationales is that "preventing conflict is both better and more cost-effective than resolving it" and that this is vital in order to "promote international security and stability, protect human rights and reduce poverty." As already pointed out, the FCO's travel advisories not only play into the hands of terrorists but do little to prevent violence. On the contrary, by inflicting harm on destinations and potentially destabilising their governments, violence may be the unintended outcome. Again, these aims are in contradiction to travel advisories that minimise their likely impacts on poor destinations.

*UN Millennium Development Goals<sup>26</sup>:*

All 191 member states of the United Nations – including the UK - are pledged to meet the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by the year 2015. Included amongst its eight main aims are the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, and environmental sustainability. In not sufficiently taking into account the impact of its travel advisories on destinations, the FCO risks contradicting the UK government's commitment to the MDG. Tourism has long been advocated as an economic activity that can be a 'passport to development'. Indeed, the UN Secretary General stresses the "need to provide viable alternatives for economic activity" in order to pursue development aims in general and as one way of preventing violent conflict<sup>27</sup>.

***5. 'Warnings should be limited to specific geographical areas rather than blanket an entire country'***

It is clear that providing travel warnings is an unenviable task, a balancing act in which the FCO is damned if they do and damned if they don't. Indeed, on its web site (under the heading "Risks of Terrorism"), the FCO admits that the "provision of the Travel Advice often involves difficult judgements" and that if it were to "warn against travel to all countries in which there is a risk of terrorists operating", this would include a large proportion of the world. However, as the WTO points out, such warnings should be as geographically specific as possible and have only the most minimal affect on other parts of the destination country in question and on the region as a whole. Negative travel advice in relation to the Bali bombings and to the SARS epidemic, have had blanket repercussions on whole areas of the Asia-Pacific region.

Both inconsistency and the domino-effect of travel warnings is exemplified by the case of Morocco. After a series of suicide bomb attacks in Morocco in May 2002, the FCO *did not* advise against travel to the country, although it stated "there is a clear terrorist threat." At the same time, it issued warnings of such a threat in six East African countries – Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Tanzania and Uganda. The executive director of the Royal African Society, Richard Dowden,<sup>28</sup> said that the terror warnings did not seem credible. He is quoted as saying: "the idea that all these countries bunched together, covering a vast area could suddenly become a threat like this from absolutely nowhere is just not believable, and may have been issued by politicians worried by the 'Bali factor'. Mr Dowden stated that he himself would not think twice about going to any of the countries on the list – places which were trying to flight terrorism and needed to see overseas visitors.

<sup>26</sup> [www.un.org/millenniumgoals](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals)

<sup>27</sup> *Implementation of UN Millennium Declaration, report of the UN Secretary General*, 2 September 2003

<sup>28</sup> *Morocco travel advice*, BBC News, 17 May 2003 [www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk)

**Case study: Jordan**

Nowhere is the knock-on effect of far-reaching FCO travel advice seen more clearly than in Jordan. Home to the spectacular ancient site of Petra, Jordan receives nearly one and a half million visitors annually, yet the country shares borders with Israel, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia and has suffered greatly due to conflict and reduced tourism within the region.

The summary that precedes each individual country advice section on the FCO web site is the most easily accessible part of the information presented. In the case of Jordan, this summary even describes the threat to the country in regional terms: "There is a high threat to British individuals and organisations in the region as demonstrated by the terrorist attacks in Riyadh on 13 May. Reactions to developments in Iraq and on the Middle East Peace Process might be expressed through acts of violence against British nationals and organizations"<sup>29</sup>. Furthermore, while it is true that there have been attacks on American targets, there have been no recent incidents against British targets in Jordan.

The WTO guidelines (see above) recommend that "warnings should be limited to specific geographical areas rather than blanket an entire country". Clearly, this applies even more so to the coverage of entire regions. Due to conflicts in neighbouring countries tourism to Jordan, which was steadily rising in 2000, has seen a fall in comparison to the same period in previous years.

**6. 'Warnings should be... lifted as soon as the situation returns to normal'**

Travel warnings that remain in force well after incidents have taken place do severe damage to both the image and tourism industry of a destination, which may take years to repair and involve costly advertising campaigns which developing countries can barely afford. Those campaigning for the resumption of tourism to Bali have all pointed out that in July 2003, the FCO was still advising against travel to any part of Indonesia, even though "there have been no problems on the island [Bali] for over six months...". The chairman of the Pacific Asia Tourism Association (PATA) urges "all governments to take a realistic view of their advice on travel to Bali and recognise the immense efforts being made there to safeguard tourists." Kevin Ingram, chairman of the UK tour company Tomas Hannah and Associates, would be happy to take groups back to Bali now, but "this can only happen if the Foreign Office changes its current advice for the island and removes the shackles."<sup>30</sup>

**Case study: Bali**

The bombings in the southern Balinese town of Kuta on 12 October 2002 had a devastating effect on tourism – almost 40,000 people left, most of them young Australians. Within a week, Bali's hotel occupancy had fallen from around 70 percent to 20 percent.<sup>31</sup> The economic impact on

<sup>29</sup> [www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)

<sup>30</sup> Back 2 Bali press release, July 2003

<sup>31</sup> Thamrin Bachrie, The Debate, *Tourism In Focus*, Issue 46, Tourism Concern, Spring 2003 p. 9

Bali's lifeblood was devastating: according to Governor Beratha<sup>32</sup>, "tourism provides 38 percent of jobs and more than half its income." The World Bank estimated that the blow to tourism, foreign investments and growth would hit Indonesians hard, and in February 2002 almost 15 percent of its 215 million people were destitute.<sup>33</sup> The knock-on effect of the downturn in tourism, according to the chairman of PATA, is "not just the hotels and ground handlers" but also the "artists, the shop-keepers, the farmers and their families."<sup>34</sup> An estimated 150,000 workers in the tourism industry are threatened with unemployment, including the island's 90,000 handicraft makers who are now contemplating their 'last orders'.<sup>35</sup> Aside from the impact of these attacks, of the average £40 per day spent by tourists, it is estimated that only £8 is returned to the Balinese.

The 'Back to Bali' campaign aims to regain consumer confidence nationally and internationally. It was launched by the UK Indonesian Embassy, the national airline Garuda, and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in Jakarta. While recognising that governments have "the right to inform their nationals" of dangers they may encounter abroad, Thamrin Bachrie, the ministry's deputy Minister of Marketing and International Relations, argues that such advice "should be strictly proportionate to the gravity of the situations encountered and confined to the geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen." Equally important is that "such advice should be qualified or cancelled as soon as a return to normality permits."<sup>36</sup> It is not only the Indonesians who are supporting the Back-to-Bali campaign: tour operators, airlines and the Pacific Area Travel Association (PATA) are pressing for a change in FCO advice on travel to Bali.

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<sup>32</sup> Matthew Brace, *'The Road Back to Bali'*, *Geographical* 75 (10). October 2003 pp 26-34

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> Tim Robinson, Back 2 Bali campaign, Press Release July 2003

<sup>35</sup> *Learning to surf in Bali*, Channel 4, 12 Sept 2003

<sup>36</sup> Thamrin Bachrie, *op.cit*

## Conclusion

It is clear that the travel advice and warnings issued by the FCO are unsatisfactory on a number of counts. While correctly aiming to protect British citizens travelling abroad, its over-cautious, non-transparent and inconsistent approach causes severe damage to host countries dependent on tourism for their development. Tourism stakeholders in both the UK and in these countries – all of whom want and need to see tourists properly protected – nevertheless complain about inadequacies in the FCO's advice, the lack of consultation, and the consequent harm to their business.

Many within the tourism industry would like to see arbitrary travel advisories regulated and monitored by “an international system” which is less “subject to abuse.”<sup>37</sup> Detecting a political bias in foreign office travel advice, some tour operators argue for risk assessment to be carried out by “an independent source of travel security advice”, and further, that such information “could be used by insurers” to help them make more objective decisions.<sup>38</sup> Another tour operator argues for a “simple global standard” set by “an impartial international body” which would categorize degrees of risk.<sup>39</sup>

This report has used the World Tourism Organisation's Crisis and Disaster Management Guidelines as a template for assessing the FCO's travel advisories. These guidelines, and indeed the organisation's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, could well form the basis for such an impartial and independent source of travel advice. Given the global nature of tourism – and the global nature of the ‘war on terrorism’ – an international body would seem an appropriate solution. However, since it is hard to envisage the UK (or other western governments) being willing to agree to such an ideal arrangement, we urge them to adopt the following recommendations:

## Recommendations

- Provide the travelling public and the tourism industry with information about how decisions are made regarding the imposition and lifting of travel warnings;
- Ensure that travel warnings are consistent, geographically-specific and appropriate in terms of scale and period of imposition;
- Establish on-going and appropriate mechanisms and procedures for engaging in open, transparent and regular consultation with a range of stakeholders including:
  - Tour operators and insurance companies in the UK
  - Tour operators and other stakeholders in tourism destinations
  - Local and national governments in tourism destinations
  - Government departments in the UK
  - International bodies concerned with tourism
  - NGOs in the UK and in destinations with expertise in tourism

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew Brace, ‘The Road Back to Bali’, *Geographical* 75 (10). October 2003 pp 26-34

<sup>38</sup> Andrew Levens, (The Steppes Group) *Travel advice mustn't be politicised*, *Travel Trade Gazette*, 3 March 2003

<sup>39</sup> David Johns (Worlds Apart Travel) *Independent body is vital*, *Travel Trade Gazette* 3 March 2003