



[EXTRACT]

Egyptian unrest leads to evacuations

International concern about the ongoing violent unrest in Egypt has prompted the governments of the US, Israel and Turkey to send aircraft to Egypt in order to evacuate their citizens, while other countries, including the UK, have urged their citizens to leave the country by commercial means if their visit was not essential. William Hague, British foreign secretary, said that UK nationals should avoid nonessential travel to Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor and Suez, and recommended that nationals 'without a pressing need to be [there] leave by commercial means where it is safe to do so'. Many countries, perhaps mindful of the detrimental effect such warnings will have on the country's economy, have stopped short of issuing formal travel warnings about Egypt. The governments of Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Canada and Australia all recommend travellers exercise 'a high degree of caution' for the country overall, with specific warnings about travelling to Sinai and Cairo. As the situation continued to worsen, though, by 31 January the governments of Canada, China, Japan, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and others were all arranging flights to evacuate their citizens from Egypt.

It was noted by tour operators that the vast majority of international tourists in Egypt head to resorts in the Red Sea, such as Sharm el-Sheikh, where so far there has not been any violence. A spokeswoman for Thomson and First Choice, UK-based tour operators, said: "We currently only have 27 customers staying in Cairo and our experienced resort team has been in contact with each of them to discuss the situation. None have requested to return early." A spokesman for Thomas Cook said the firm had cancelled planned trips to Cairo, replacing them with trips to other parts of the country. He remained confident, though, that the Red Sea resorts, which are 200 miles from Cairo, were 'fully operational', adding: "Our experienced teams on the ground assure us that no tourist areas at the Red Sea have been affected in any way by the recent demonstrations." Hague said: "We will watch over it (the situation in Sharm el-Sheikh) very, very carefully. I'm sending extra resources to our embassy there." The US Government, however, announced an immediate airlift for all the Americans who wished to leave Egypt: "The department of state is making arrangements to provide safe transportation to safe haven locations in Europe."

Also in response to the continuation of violent demonstrations, the Egyptian

authorities imposed a night time curfew, causing problems for international airlines whose aircraft were due to arrive after the curfew was brought in. The Associated Press reported that several international carriers had been forced to rework their schedules to ensure their passengers arrived outside the curfew, adding that some others had cancelled or rerouted flights that were supposed to arrive on the evening of Friday 28 January. On the same day, Norwegian Cruise Line announced that its Jade cruise ship would not be making its scheduled stop in Alexandria, instead being rerouted to Istanbul. Elsewhere, extra flights are being added to schedules to remove people from Cairo by Royal Jordanian and Gulf Air, while Lufthansa, Air Berlin and Delta Airlines have suspended flights to the country, with Delta taking the decision to suspend flights indefinitely.

Speaking to ITIJ, head of corporate intelligence for security firm red24 Lee Niblett said: "Although the situation in the Red Sea and Sinai resorts is stable relative to the rest of the country, Egypt's overall political situation remains volatile and the security environment in Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Suez, Ismailia, Gamyat, Biba, el-Arish, Rafah, Mansoura, Assiut, Minya and Giza is unpredictable and subject to rapid deterioration. Additionally, road travel in all of these urban environments is currently compromised by official and unofficial roadblocks, and demand for flights out of Cairo is extremely high." The company has already evacuated several clients, and has plans to evacuate more over the coming days. It is currently advising against all non-essential travel to Egypt and that clients currently in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Luxor and Ismailia depart as soon as is practically possible.

The violence in Egypt was in part inspired by the achievements of protestors in Tunisia. The protests in Egypt are against what is seen by anti-government groups as a corrupt regime that ignores the needs of a populace angry at high unemployment, rising food prices and a lack of opposition. Protestors are calling for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak and the creation of a unity government. The protests, which have so far lasted a week, have caused the death of 150 people. The army was deployed in Cairo to try and restore order and enforce the curfew, with tanks on the streets, helicopters flying overhead and repeated flyovers from jet fighters. However, the thousands of protestors on the streets of Cairo ignored such efforts for the most part, resulting in shots being fired and people being injured.

As this article was being written, tens of thousands of protestors were gathering in Tahrir Square in central Cairo for a seventh day of protests, with a new call for a general strike being heard. The BBC's correspondent in Cairo has said the military presence is high, with tanks acting as a cordon to the square, but they are seemingly relaxed and allowing people in and out of the square.

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Source: International Travel Insurance Journal (ITIJ) website (31 January 2011)
<http://www.itij.co.uk/story/egyptian-unrest-leads-evacuations>