



Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

Written Ministerial Statement

21 February 2012

Foreign and Commonwealth review of consular evacuation procedures

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (William Hague):

In my Written Statement of 4 July 2011 (*ref*), I informed the House that in light of the challenges posed by the evacuation of British Nationals from Libya, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) had conducted a review of its evacuation arrangements in a crisis. A copy of the Review of Consular Evacuation Procedures (*ref*) was placed in the Library of the House.

I gave instructions that the recommendations of the Review should be implemented in full by 31 December 2011. This statement updates the House on the FCO's progress in implementing the Review's recommendations.

The crises of early 2011 were an unprecedented series of challenges for the FCO's crisis management capability. They also presented an invaluable opportunity to learn the necessary lessons and to refine our crisis management systems in order to ensure we deliver the best possible service to British Nationals in future. In response to the recommendations in the Review the FCO has:

- Developed a more agile and clear crisis decision making structure, based on the Gold/Silver/Bronze crisis response system used by emergency services. As part of this, the FCO Board will be carrying out a high-level training session in early March;
- Introduced London Crisis Response Teams made up of trained FCO staff across London who can be rapidly deployed to augment the FCO's crisis response;
- Expanded our crisis training and exercising capability, to deliver an increased level of training across the global network;
- Improved the use of digital and social media for messaging British Nationals before and during a crisis;
- Improved our call handling systems;
- Launched a project to define our longer-term Crisis IT and communications needs, under which we have successfully piloted pre-crisis registration of British nationals via SMS text messaging;
- Revised our Guidance for FCO staff on crisis planning and response

- Designed a new framework for Crisis Management Planning by our overseas Posts, which will be in place across the network by the end of 2012;
- Increased the numbers of volunteers in our Rapid Deployment Team network, including by expanding the coverage of the Americas Team to include South America, and recruiting for a new Middle East and South Asia Team;
- Clarified key policy issues, for example on how costs are charged in a crisis, in order to ensure that decisions can be taken more quickly during future crisis responses;
- Intensified our contact with others involved in our response to key crises, including private sector companies, chartering companies etc
- Developed closer links with Ministry of Defence crisis teams, including by embedding MOD staff in the FCO's Crisis Centre
- Increased the numbers of staff dedicated to crisis work in Crisis Management Department.

I have placed in the Library of the House a table which provides more detail of how we have implemented the Review's recommendations.

These improvements to FCO systems and practices were tested in recent crises, most notably the Bangkok floods (October 2011), the evacuation of Embassy staff from Tehran (November 2011) and the sinking of the cruise ship Costa Concordia (January 2012). On each occasion, we implemented the Gold/Silver/Bronze command and control system, which promoted clear and quick decision-making and communication, and activated the London Crisis Response Teams, enabling us to scale up our crisis response quickly and sustainably.

It will be a priority for 2012 to ensure that these improvements are fully embedded into FCO processes to ensure that we have genuinely upgraded our crisis planning and response systems. Specific priorities will include:

- Regularly exercising the London response to a crisis, including by the FCO Board
- Implementing a Crisis IT Project to design and implement best practice systems for maintaining reliable data about British Nationals before and during a crisis
- Adopting the new Crisis Management Plan across all UK posts overseas, supported by a programme of training and exercising
- Upgrading the FCO's Crisis Centre to expand its operational capacity and co-locate it with its out-of-hours Global Response Centre

Each crisis throws up a unique set of challenges. We attach importance to learning the lessons from each one, based on a thorough and objective assessment of our response. We are confident that by implementing the recommendations of the Review of Evacuation Procedures, we have made important and sustainable improvements to our crisis planning and response systems and that this has enhanced the quality of our crisis response. However, we

recognise the need to avoid complacency in this critical and unpredictable area of work, and will ensure that we continue to carry out regular reviews of our systems.