



## **When Disaster Strikes A Disaster Overseas**

This guide has been written by members of Disaster Action, all of whom are survivors and bereaved people from disasters. Some of the disasters we have been affected by are the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, King's Cross underground fire, Lockerbie aircraft bombing, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Dunblane shootings, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, the 11<sup>th</sup> September attacks, the South East Asian Tsunami and the Bali, London 7 July, Sharm El Sheikh and Dahab bombings.

While each disaster is unique, we hope that the following suggestions may be helpful whatever the circumstances. Our aim is to enable you to understand what may happen in the hours, days and weeks after the disaster, and give you the opportunity to maintain some control over events. In addition to the emotional trauma, you may be faced with language, distance, and administrative and political difficulties.

This leaflet is divided into two parts – see Part One if you are reading this soon after your disaster has happened (at this time you may find Disaster Action leaflet *Overseas Disasters the Immediate Aftermath* helpful) and Part Two if you are reading it later.

### **Part One: Your Disaster has just Happened**

After an overseas disaster, it is even harder to gain information about what has happened and to make contact with those who are responding to it. Details of the disaster and involvement of your family member or friend may not be clear. At this stage, try to make contact with: other relatives and friends; any company that may be involved (such an airline, coach firm, holiday company, school or your relative's employer); the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; and news organisations.

Keep a record of telephone calls you make, recording names, contact numbers and any relevant email addresses.

#### **Family and friends**

If relatives and friends are in the country where the disaster took place, they may be in a better position to find out what is happening. Try to share information with them, and share responsibilities, if you can, for making contact with the organisations involved. This can reduce the immediate stress and demands on your time. It is a good idea for only one person to contact an organisation.

#### **Organisations**

When you contact an organisation, explain who you are and why you are getting in touch. Following many if not all disasters, an emergency telephone number will be issued through the media, which you should contact. You may need to be persistent as such phone lines can become very overloaded. If it is suspected that the disaster is the result of a crime, the police in the UK may assign you a family liaison officer (FLO) who will try to get information on your behalf.

#### **The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)**

If you are based in the UK, contact the FCO (see Useful Contacts below) Consular Directorate. Explain who you are, who the person you are concerned about is, and your relationship to them, what the disaster is and why you think they may be involved. The FCO can provide consular assistance in relation to British nationals who die or suffer injury abroad and to their families.

The FCO may not have special knowledge of the disaster, and you may be the first to alert them to a UK involvement, although they may well become the route by which you will be best informed about developments in the future.

Normally, the consular section of the British Embassy or High Commission of the country in which the disaster occurs will liaise with those who are responding to it. Information will be passed from the consular official on the spot to the Consular Directorate in London, who will ask the local police force to inform the family member or members who are next of kin.

What you are told by the police should be authoritative. However, you may get information through a number of different routes. You may be informed of developments by a consular official in London, or one on the spot abroad. Sometimes there will be direct contact with those in charge of the disaster.

### **News organisations**

Overseas disasters involving few UK citizens are rarely reported here as fully as they are in the local media. Discovering what is reported locally is now much easier, thanks to the Internet. News agencies such as Reuters may have more information than is used in media and newspaper reports here. On the Internet you may also search for a newspaper local to the disaster. Try using an Internet search engine to search for national newspapers in the country concerned. Such a paper may have an English edition. If not, you may be able to use a web-based translation tool to translate relevant articles (see Useful Contacts). Such information, however, will only be of general use in understanding the disaster and will not usually contain details of your personal connection with it.

### **Dealing with the media**

The media may approach you looking for photographs or interviews. It is up to you whether or not to talk to them, but remember that you cannot change your mind later about what you have said. You may be unable to stop them taking photographs, but don't be afraid to tell them to leave you alone. If the media is bothering you or your family, tell the police. Bear in mind that what you learn from the media may not give you the level, or accuracy, of information that you would like to have.

## **Part Two: The Aftermath**

What you have experienced may have a great effect upon you now and in the future. Although you may not have been physically injured or survived the disaster yourself, coming to terms with what happened may be extremely difficult. Each person's experience of and feelings about a disaster are unique; some people may have problems because of it and others may not.

### **Legal advice**

Getting appropriate legal help can be especially important in overseas disasters. You are likely to need more specialised advice than your family solicitor can give you. In addition to a specialist lawyer in the UK, you may also need a lawyer who is local to the disaster. The Law Society or the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (see Useful Contacts) can give you lists of lawyers with experience in this area.

It is important to bear in mind that if the death has occurred abroad and the body is returned to England or Wales, the coroner in whose district the body now lies is legally in charge of the body, until he or she releases it. If the deceased was cremated abroad before being returned, the coroner no longer has any duties or powers to deal with the matter in any way.

### **Going to the disaster site**

Arrangements may be made for you to go either to the disaster site or some appropriate location to coincide with acts of remembrance or other such events. It is your choice whether to go or not. The advantages of going are that you may learn more about the disaster and benefit from sharing with others their and your loss. The disadvantages are that the trip may be emotionally demanding, will take you away from your existing sources of news and information and may be frustrating.

If you are offered a trip by one of the agencies involved in the disaster, even if you think there may be a future legal claim against them, your position should not be affected by accepting their hospitality.

## **Identification**

All those involved in a disaster will need to be identified, a process referred to as disaster victim identification or DVI. In some circumstances the UK police will assist in this process. This may be especially complicated when the disaster has happened abroad, in a country whose customs may be completely unfamiliar, and it may take some considerable time. It will be important that the coroner in the UK is satisfied as to the identification of each individual, in order to prevent any problems arising at the time of repatriation to this country.

A police family liaison officer (FLO) may contact you for:

- A physical description of your relative, or friend, including any distinctive features, such as scars or tattoos
- Clear, recent photographs of them
- Name and address of their doctor and dentist (if they were living in the UK)
- Details of items they may have been wearing or had with them - driving licence, wallet, handbag, jewellery, keys
- Items that may contain fingerprints or DNA.

This information will probably be required whatever the circumstances of the disaster. The police may also need to take fingerprint samples from their house, if the person was resident in the UK. Your FLO should keep you informed about the way in which the identification is being carried out. Even if you have no contact with the police, it can be a good idea to collect this information, in case it is asked for.

## **Registering the death**

You may be faced with difficult decisions concerning the body and registering the death. The FCO may be able to help you decide what needs to be done and what is feasible. The process will be more complicated and take longer than a similar death in the UK. There is no legal requirement to register the death at the High Commission or Embassy, although this is recommended as you will be issued with a UK-style certificate and the General Registrar's Office in the UK keeps a record. A consular death registration may be applied for at any time, and it may be possible to deal with the UK aspects of the death without a UK death certificate.

## **Non-identification**

You need to prepare for the possibility, however incredible it may seem, that no body will be found. It may take weeks, months or even longer, before a decision is taken that an identification is not possible.

## **Contacting others who are involved**

One of the best ways people caught up in a disaster can best help themselves is by contacting others affected by the same disaster. Sharing your feelings and information with others who have had very similar experiences can help at a time when you may feel very alone. There may be an advantage in belonging to a group, when you need to approach the authorities, government departments, or lawyers.

Disaster Action can put families in touch with each other, if they make contact with us. We can also put you in touch with other Disaster Action members with relevant experience.

Groups may be set up to assist those who are local to the disaster, and they may welcome contact from you. Your FCO contact or FLO should know of any such groups, or can find out about them on your behalf.

## **How might you be affected?**

You may have a number of different reactions, such as loss of appetite or sleepless nights. You might find it difficult to concentrate. You might have anxiety attacks. You may find it hard to relate to your family or friends who have not shared your experience. And you may keep re-living the disaster or have vivid flashbacks. It is important to understand that these reactions are not abnormal in themselves. If such reactions and feeling persist or disturb you, then you may find it beneficial to seek help. There's nothing wrong with knowing that you need help and trying to find it. Whether you feel you need help or not, take care in driving or doing other things that are potentially dangerous.

## **Where to find help**

You can go to your doctor (who can refer you to a counsellor) to talk about how you feel, but if he or she has had no training in disasters, they may be unsure how best to help you. There are a few clinics, mostly in London, which specialise in helping those affected by disasters. Ask your doctor what is available locally, or speak to Disaster Action. Some of the organisations that try to help the bereaved and those who have been affected by traumatic events are listed under Support Groups and Caring Organisations.

Some people will not want or feel the need to talk to anyone outside family and friends, although for others it may be essential. There is nothing wrong with knowing that you need help and trying to find it. If you contact a group but don't find it helpful, don't give up. It may be that whoever you spoke to was not the right person for you. It is never too early or too late to get help - the hard thing is to recognise, or admit, that you need it.

A telephone helpline may be set up by the local authority to offer guidance to those who need help. You should be able to get the number from your police contact or social services. You can go to your doctor (who can refer you to a counsellor) to talk about how you feel, but if he or she has had no training in disasters, they may be unsure how best to help you. There are a few clinics, mostly in London, which specialise in helping those affected by disasters. Ask your doctor what is available locally, or speak to Disaster Action.

## **Support Groups and Caring Organisations**

### **Disaster Action**

Telephone: 01483 799 066.

[www.disasteraction.org.uk](http://www.disasteraction.org.uk)

### **ASSIST Trauma Support Care**

Offer support and self-help in surviving trauma.

Trauma Support Line Answer Service: 01788 560 800.

[www.traumatic-stress.freeserve.co.uk](http://www.traumatic-stress.freeserve.co.uk)

### **BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy)**

Will give list of counselling organisations and practitioners in your area, their specialisation and fees (some do not charge). Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: 1 Regent Place, Rugby, Warwickshire. CD21 2PF.

Office: 01455 883300

Information on counsellors: 01455 883316

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

### **British Red Cross Society (BRCS)**

Telephone: 020 7877 7250

[www.redcross.org.uk](http://www.redcross.org.uk)

The BRCS responds to emergencies from major incidents to evacuations, floods and fires.

### **Compassionate Friends**

Organisation of bereaved parents offering shared experience (with local groups throughout the country) and series of leaflets

Helpline: 0117 953 9639.

[www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk)

### **Cruse - Bereavement Care**

Offers counselling, advice and the chance to meet other bereaved people throughout the UK.

126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR.

Telephone: 0208 939 9530

Helpline: 0844 477 9400

[www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk](http://www.crusebereavementcare.org.uk)

### **South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (Traumatic Stress service)**

Provides a clinical service for people suffering from PTSD.

Telephone: 0203 228 6000

[www.slam.nhs.uk](http://www.slam.nhs.uk)

### **National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE)**

NICE publishes guidance for the treatment of disorders and conditions on the NHS. One of these guidelines relates to post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). You can access information on the PTSD guideline at <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG26/publicinfo/pdf/English>

### **Traumatic Stress Clinic**

Specialists in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Provides assessment and therapy for those who have been affected by traumatic events such as disasters.

Telephone: 020 77530 3666.

<http://www.cimhscaretrust.nhs.uk/pages/go.asp?pageID=511&Path=4&Parent=287.072&instance=451>

### **Samaritans**

Provides confidential, non-judgemental emotional support 24 hours a day for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair.

National helpline: 08457 909090.

[www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk)

### **Support after Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM)**

Has a section specifically concerned with overseas.

Telephone: 020 7735 3838.

[www.samm.org.uk/](http://www.samm.org.uk/)

### **UK Trauma Group**

The UK Trauma Group is a managed clinical network of UK Traumatic Stress Services. Their website provides access to a selection of material for the general public and for health professionals about post traumatic stress reactions.

<http://www.uktrauma.org.uk/>

### **Victim Support**

Offers practical help and advice and emotional support to victims and their families following crime. (Monday-Friday 9.00am - 5.30pm).

Telephone: 0845 303 0900.

[www.victimsupport.org.uk](http://www.victimsupport.org.uk)

## **Useful Contacts**

Some or all of the organisations listed below may be helpful to you, depending on the circumstances of the disaster.

### **Association of Personal Injury Lawyers**

0870 6091958

<http://www.apil.org.uk/>

### **Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Humanitarian Assistance Unit (HAU)**

The HAU has responsibility within Government for coordinating support in the UK to those affected by major disasters. If you are having difficulty accessing support services or have questions about help that may be available, write to the HAU, DCMS, 2-4 Cockspur Street, London SW1Y 5DH, email [hau@culture.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:hau@culture.gsi.gov.uk) or call 0207-211-6200.

[http://www.culture.gov.uk/what\\_we\\_do/Humanitarian\\_assistance/](http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/Humanitarian_assistance/)

### **Foreign & Commonwealth Office**

Telephone: 0207 270 1500

[www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk)

**Law Society**

Telephone: 0207 242 1222

[www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk)

They can put you in touch with law firms specialising in disaster and personal injury litigation.

**Reuters**

News desk: 0207 542 7950

[www.reuters.com/news](http://www.reuters.com/news)

**World Newspapers**

Lists world newspapers, magazines, and news sites in English, sorted by country and region.

[www.world-newspapers.com](http://www.world-newspapers.com)

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