

A Disaster Overseas

This guide has been written by members of Disaster Action, who are survivors and bereaved people from disasters, which include transportation incidents, terrorist attacks and natural disaster. Many of these have happened outside the UK, such as the Zeebrugge ferry sinking, the *Jupiter* cruise ship sinking, the 11th September attacks, the South East Asian Tsunami, the Bali and Sharm El Sheikh bombings and other recent terrorist attacks and transportation disasters.

Although each disaster is unique, our aim is to enable you to understand what may happen in the days, weeks and months after the disaster, to give you the opportunity to maintain some control over events. As well as the emotional trauma, you may be faced with language, geographical, administrative and political difficulties.

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

Part One: Your Disaster has just Happened

After an overseas disaster, it can be hard to get information about what has happened. 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 as an airline, coach firm, holiday company, school or their employer); the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO); and news organisations.

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

Family and friends

If family 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 each 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, 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.

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 by one abroad. Sometimes there will be direct contact with those in charge of responding to the disaster.

If you live in the country where the disaster has happened, contact the Embassy or High Commission before the local police if you can and it is legal to contact a third party before calling the police.

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 also have more information than is used in media and newspaper reports here. On the internet you can search for national and local newspapers in the affected country. Some foreign newspapers 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

Information about what happened may become available through social media very quickly after the disaster or even while it is still happening, although this will depend on where the disaster has taken place and the circumstances. However, bear in mind that what you learn from all media sources may not give you the amount - or accuracy - of information that you would like to have.

You may be approached by the media, looking for photographs or interviews. The media may also try to speak to children and young people in your family. Think carefully about whether this is appropriate and the possible consequences of such exposure through the 24-hour news media.

It is your choice whether or not to talk to them, but remember that your aim (finding out what has happened to your relative or friend) will not be the same as theirs. Remember too 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 or the FCO officers you are dealing with – their press office will be able to help.

Part Two: The Aftermath

What you have experienced may have a considerable effect upon you now and/or in the future. Although you may not have been physically injured or survived the disaster yourself, coming to terms with what happened may be 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 will be important. 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 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. The advantages of going are that you may learn more about the disaster and benefit from sharing with others their and your experience. 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 unfamiliar. The process may also take some time. The coroner in the UK will have to be satisfied as to the identification of each person, 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 or other samples from their house, if the person was resident in the UK. Your FLO should keep you informed about how 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. The local authorities will normally register a death in their territory and issue a local death certificate. Local death certificates are usually accepted by UK institutions if accompanied by a certified translation. In addition to the local death registration you can register the death at the Embassy or High Commission. There is no legal requirement to register the death at the High Commission or Embassy, although you may find this useful as you will be issued with a UK-style certificate, in English, and the General Registrar's Office in the UK keeps a record. The Embassy will need to see the original local death certificate

when you apply for a consular death registration. A consular death registration may be applied for at any time. There will be fees to pay for consular registrations.

Non-identification

You need to prepare for the possibility, however distressing 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.

Personal property

After a disaster items of personal property may have become separated from their owners and later found at or near the site. If they have been recovered, you may have to wait some time for your relative or friend's possessions to be returned to the next of kin – this may be particularly difficult in an overseas disaster. It is also possible that the items may have been destroyed in the disaster. You can ask your FLO, if you have one, about what will happen to the items. You may also find the DA leaflet *The Return of Personal Property* helpful in understanding how property is dealt with.

Contacting others who are involved

One of the ways in which 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 similar experiences can help at a time when you may feel alone. There may also 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 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 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.

Disaster Action would like to thank all those who contributed to the writing of this leaflet.

Further Information

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Assist Trauma Care

Offer support and self-help in surviving trauma.

[Helpline 01788 560 800](http://www.assisttraumacare.org.uk/contact)

BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy)

BACP can provide a list of counselling organisations and practitioners in your area, with their specialisation and fees (some do not charge). Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: BACP

[House 15, Station's Business Park, Lutterworth, Leics LE17 4HB.](http://www.bacp.co.uk) **Telephone** 01455 883300

Compassionate Friends

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

[National UK helpline](http://www.compassionatefriends.org.uk) 0845 123 2304

Cruse - Bereavement Care

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

[Helpline 0844 477 9400](http://www.cruse.org.uk)

Disaster Action

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

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.

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

[Provides a clinical service](http://www.slam.nhs.uk) for people suffering from PTSD. Telephone: 0203 228 6000.

Traumatic Stress Clinic

Specialists in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Provide assessment and therapy for those who

have been affected by traumatic events such as disasters.

[Telephone: 0207 530 3666 services/services/traumatic-stress-clinic/](http://www.02075303666services/services/traumatic-stress-clinic/)

UK Psychological Trauma Society

The UKPTS is a multidisciplinary society which aims to promote evidence-based care for those who suffer traumatic stress related mental health and foster a greater understanding of the effects of traumatic events. Their website provides access to a selection of material for the general public and for health professionals about post-traumatic stress reactions and includes information about trauma [services across the UK](http://www.ukpts.org.uk)

Victim Support

Offers practical help and advice and emotional support to victims of crime and their families. Support <http://www.victimsupport.org.uk>

Useful Contacts

Association of Personal Injury Lawyers

[Telephone: 0870 6091958.](http://www.apil.org.uk)

British Red Cross

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

[Telephone: 0844 851 011 uk](http://www.0844851011.uk)

Foreign & Commonwealth Office

If you have been affected by an overseas disaster, the Consular Directorate of the FCO will be involved. Telephone: 0207 270 1500
<http://www.gov.uk/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office>

Law Society

The Law Society can put you in touch with law firms specialising in disaster and personal injury litigation. Telephone: 0207 242 1222.
<http://www.law.society.org.uk>

Reuters

[News desk: Telephone](http://www.reuters.com) 0207 250 1122.

World Newspapers

<http://lists.world.newspapersmagazines>, and news sites in English, sorted by country and region.

Further Information