

- V CONTENTS V
- EVENTS NEWS REVIEWS
- TAX FINANCE PENSIONS
- EXPATRIATE SUPPORT
- MANAGING YOUR EXPATS
- RELOCATING
- PERMITS & PAPERWORK
- JOB MARKET PLACE
- COST OF LIVING

War in Iraq: how HR is reacting, and what you can do for your expats

Many multinationals have already put employees around the world on alert. Here's how they are handling the crisis, plus experts provide sound reminders on how to communicate with your nervous employees. Kirin Kalia reports.



For many multinationals, the 9-11 attacks were a wake-up call: increase building security, back up data, create evacuation plans and improve emergency communications, among other measures.

In many cases, companies have filled the holes in their security and crisis planning. And with events ranging from the paralysing labour strikes in Venezuela to the Bali bombing in Indonesia last year, a number of companies have already been forced to implement their emergency procedures.

But while your company may not be panicking about the impending war in Iraq, you, as the HR manager, may have some of the responsibility of putting crisis plans into action. And you may also have to prepare your expatriates for evacuation. Already, thousands of civilians working in Kuwait have left that country; some expatriates are also leaving countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel on the eve of war.

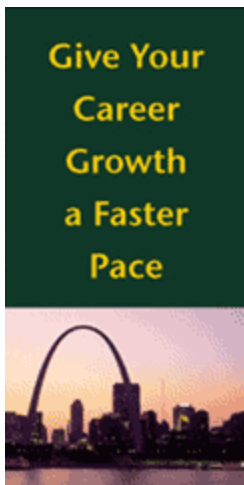
One HR manager at a major multinational tells Expatica HR, "We have put together a contingency plan to evacuate our expatriates in the case of war being declared on Iraq by the US. This is only for countries specifically deemed to be 'at risk' at the moment. We have a website that we log on to every day to keep abreast of current situations in various countries.

"We have been in touch with country senior officers and heads of security and they have a plan worked out to move forward quickly if necessary. As far as the expatriate and their family are concerned, we have prepared them to be on alert and they have all been in touch with the security heads to make plans if anything should happen."

A Europe-based HR manager at a different multinational says, "Potential local security issues for expats and their families are already constantly and on a global basis centrally monitored. Security issue escalation processes

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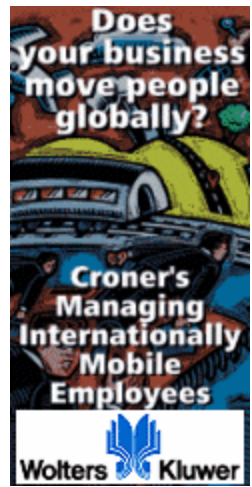


and emergency repatriation scenarios are in place."

The memo this manager received, which was also posted to the company intranet site, includes instructions such as "Remain close to your family and local workplace in the coming days. Only essential business travel should be undertaken and then, only with the prior approval and consent of your line management."



As many expatriate consultants would agree, these companies are doing exactly what they should do. The importance of contingency plans and a centralised way to communicate them to employees and their families — which top any consultant's recommendations — cannot be underestimated.



Neil Krupp, a practice leader with Deloitte & Touche's international HR consulting group in Chicago, says a contingency plan must be easily available to employees.

"We typically recommend to put it on an intranet site so it can be accessed. It needs to be one that is called a working document, it needs to change as the situation changes," Krupp explains.



If assignees don't have access to a computer, Krupp advises having a call-in number where they can get the latest information.



Additionally, the company should designate one person to be the information gatekeeper if an evacuation becomes necessary. "One person should be responsible for handling all matters related to evacuation or security," says Krupp, so that expats don't start to believe rumours or misinformation.

Of course, communication

Company's responsibility:

- Inform employee of the emergency evacuation plan
- Arrange transportation to the home country
- Pay Subsistence Allowance during evacuation
- Make arrangements for vacating property (lease)
- Arrange for relocation of household goods
- Plan for relocation of pets
- Provide support through HR or work-life department
- Return employee and family to overseas location if necessary

Employee's responsibility:

- Discuss contingency plans with family members
- Make a list of items to pack in each suitcase
- Update inventory of household goods
- Consolidate personal records, financial records, school records, etc
- Arrange for a safe location for valuables
- Prepare house for departure

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works both ways, and it should be as easy for the company to reach the employee in the host country or on a business trip.

- Arrange for care of pets
- Arrange for personal financial payments

"Part of that communication plan is updating all [employee] contact info and making sure it's current," says Buzz Stillinger, corporate sales manager for US-based iJET Travel Intelligence, which delivers real-time travel risk management information to business travellers and expatriates.

Source: SHRM Global Special Report article by Peggy Love and Sylvia Theriault, Full Circle Relocations (February 2003).

"And if they are traveling or if they plan to travel, make sure all the plans are well-known and documented and that contact numbers are available for every destination on the itinerary."

A regional manager for a large software company, whose territory includes the Middle East, was supposed to fly to Israel this week, but tells Expatica HR he can't find an insurance company that will cover his trip. He says he will not go if war is imminent.

He is also not willing to put his colleagues into dangerous situations. "When the war starts, no travel to the Middle-East until further notice."

When it comes to actually removing people from a location, Krupp says companies should consider evacuating employees and their families in phases rather than all at once. Often times, the family will go first, and later the employee.

But be aware that a country's transportation system might not be running normally at such a time. Stillinger says, "Knowing what the transportation situation is is right behind knowing emergency numbers."

In other words, HR or someone else in the company has to know which roads are blocked, which trains are running, if there are any flights still available, if it is possible to charter a flight, etc.

Another point: don't forget to look beyond the immediate area of danger. "Impact is not just local," says Stillinger. Which means if you have American expats outside the Middle East, they could be the targets of anti-American or anti-British demonstrations.

Years ago, most companies believed that by telling employees and families about contingency and evacuation plans they would create unnecessary anxiety and panic.

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Today, the exact opposite is true: you must communicate emergency procedures long before a crisis happens so employees and their families will know what to do in case of a local uprising, a terrorist attack or a war.

"The reality is such that it [danger] is out there and you really need to reassure employees and families exactly what the company's position is," says Krupp.

Yvonne McNulty, who publishes thetrailingspouse.com and is herself a trailing spouse, says, "How an employee feels at a time like this and how well the company handles the situation is something the employee will remember for a LONG time after the war threat settles down or is over."

Krupp agrees. "It doesn't end with an airplane ticket. It's not a money issue, or about taking care of temporary living. That's not what families are concerned about... [instead] it's 'I left my husband or wife in Kuwait and I haven't heard anything, I don't know what's going on.'....and the company is the one who has responsibility for that."

McNulty's key words for HR: flexibility and communication.

"At a time like this expat families need the company to communicate that their expat policy is flexible to cater for 'current circumstances'. That means the expat family can take whatever measures it needs to without fear that the company will squabble about the costs involved when the threat of war is over and/or settles down."

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