



Seventy-fourth session  
Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, 2-3 December 2004  
Item 9 of the provisional agenda

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL ADVISORIES**

### **Note by the Secretary-General**

In this document the Secretary-General submits to the Council a proposal aimed at counteracting this phenomenon and attenuating the drawbacks it causes to many destinations. The Council is to discuss the recommendations and deliberate on what actions to take regarding them.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL ADVISORIES**

### **Executive Summary**

In recent years the use of travel advisories has greatly increased, a development which has caused concern in the tourism industry worldwide. Traditional tourist generating countries are issuing more advisories, new destinations are issuing travel advisories for the first time, and even a United Nations' Specialized Agency, the World Health Organization has issued travel advisories during the SARS crisis in 2003.

While travel advisories have an undisputed role to play in providing useful information that protects citizens and makes the travel experience safer, they can also have significant and negative consequences for the tourism industry in particular countries and destinations.

For this reason, the World Tourism Organization has taken a leadership position on this issue by preparing ten ***Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories***, which provide a practical interpretation of the rules outlined in WTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism and respond to the following two principles:

Travel advisories should be issued only when they are strictly necessary for safety and security reasons, and they should remain in place for the shortest possible time.

When issuing travel advisories, governments need to strive to find the right balance— keeping in mind the protection of their nationals and, at the same time, the economic consequences and possible loss of jobs and incomes the advisory could cause.

The recommendations:

- 1) A wide variety of governmental and non-governmental sources should be used in gathering information before issuing travel advisories.
- 2) Consultations with the affected government and tourism industry should be made before the travel advisory is issued.
- 3) Travel advisories should avoid bias or political motivation.
- 4) Travel advisories should be specific about the geographical extent of the problem.
- 5) Travel advisories should be specific about the nature of the threat.
- 6) Prudence and restraint should be used in evaluating the threat and in the language used in the travel advisory.

- 7) Consultations should be made periodically with the affected country about how to remedy the situation and get the travel advisory lifted.
- 8) Information contained in travel advisories should be published on a central, easy-to-use and frequently-updated internet website, where the various branches of government involved can coordinate their message.
- 9) Travel advisories should include an expiration date and be reviewed regularly, at least monthly.
- 10) Travellers should use a variety of information sources in collecting travel advice.

### Background

*The tourism industry has undergone a series of crises over the past three years. Terrorism, war, disease, and economic problems have all taken their toll and led to changes in the industry, some of them positive and others less so.*

There has been a spate of mergers, for example, more travel by road and less by air, a new focus on regional and domestic tourism, an increase in tourism communications and a better awareness of the social and economic importance of tourism-because it is human nature not to appreciate something until it is gone or endangered.

On the other hand, new visa restrictions and security measures have made it more cumbersome to travel. But perhaps the most tangible outcome of this difficult period has been the proliferation of travel advisories, which are often seen as unfair or discriminatory especially in the developing world.

Member States have frequently complained in WTO meetings about the adverse consequences travel advisories are having on the industry worldwide. The kind of criticisms made of travel advisories are: they are not geographically specific; the real nature of the threat is not made clear; too wide an area is covered; they are inconsistent and unreasonable; they are sometimes appear politically motivated; they are not applied equally to developed and developing countries; the form of presentation is not clear; the update and review of advisories is not frequent enough; and the process of consultation is too informal and arbitrary.

In an effort to address this issue and shed light on the process used in formulating travel advisories, WTO initiated several discussions on the issue in 2004, at the meeting of the WTO Quality Support and Trade Committee (Madrid, 14-15 April), the meeting of the Commonwealth Tourism Ministers (Kuala Lumpur, 20-21 March), the facilitation division of the International Civil Aviation Organization-ICAO (Cairo, 22 March-1 April), the WTO Regional Commission for the Middle East (Damascus, 29 April) and the WTO Regional Commission for Africa (Mahe, Seychelles, May 10-13). WTO's Quality Support and Trade Committee, chaired by Portugal, and WTO's Middle East Commission, chaired by Syria, both asked the organization to draw up a series of guidelines or a Code of Conduct on travel advisories. ICAO approved a three-point Travel Advisory recommendation, calling for a consultation process, specificity regarding the nature and geographic extent of the problem and an expiry date on advisories. In addition, the World Health Organization has adopted new criteria and procedures for determining public health emergencies of international concern and subsequent "temporary travel recommendations".

### WTO'S Position

WTO members recognize that sovereign states have the right and the responsibility to protect their citizens when travelling abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany, for example, considers the freedom to travel to be a hallmark of its open society and defines travel advice as a government service, not only for tourists but also for the media, businesses and public institutions. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, reports that 280,000 visits are made each week to its Travel Advice website. It is clear that the advisories wield tremendous influence not only on decisions made by tourists, but also by businesses—especially insurance companies that underwrite travel enterprises and may limit or decline coverage for destinations that are subject to travel advisory.

Travel advisories are issued in a wide variety of forms. They include Consular Sheets that provide general information on visa requirements, local customs, and safety precautions, as well as cautionary Travel Alerts and Travel Warnings that recommend against going to certain places due to safety and security concerns.

In today's world, no one can predict accurately where terrorists will strike next or where other types of problems may arise. It is more difficult than ever to assert that one destination is safe and another is not. All too often travel advisories are put in place urgently after an unexpected incident takes place.

Therefore, the aim of these new **WTO Recommendations on Responsible Travel Advisories** is to provide the industry and governments with a series of practical guidelines that insert a degree of fairness and transparency into the travel advisory process.

They are based on the rules outlined in Article Six of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism:

*“Governments have the right-and the duty- especially in a crisis, to inform their nationals of the difficult circumstances, or even the dangers they may encounter during their travels abroad; it is their responsibility however to issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the tourism industry of the host countries and the interests of their own operators; the contents of travel advisories should therefore be discussed beforehand with the authorities of the host countries and the professionals concerned; recommendations formulated should be strictly proportionate to the gravity of the situations encountered and confined to the geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen; such advisories should be qualified or cancelled as soon as a return to normality permits.”*

The recommendations respond to the following principles:

- a) Travel advisories should be issued only when they are strictly necessary for safety and security reasons and they should remain in place for the shortest possible time.
- b) When issuing travel advisories, governments need to strive to find the right balance—keeping in mind the protection of their nationals and at the same time the economic consequence and possible loss of jobs and incomes the advisory could cause.

The overall goal of these recommendations is to bring this issue to the attention of those involved in drawing up travel advisories, raising awareness of the far-reaching consequences of their decisions. In the event that it is necessary to use a travel advisory, WTO hopes that it will be circulated in full consciousness of the economic implications it may have for the travel industry, both in the destination as well as in the home country.

#### The recommendations one-by-one

**1) *A wide variety of governmental and non-governmental sources should be used in gathering information before issuing travel advisories.***

Those responsible for travel advisories should consult with a variety of information sources both within their own government and outside of government in order to make the best-informed decisions. A dialogue between staff at home and consular staff abroad should be initiated so that possible economic implications can be fully considered from the very start of the process. Consultations should also be made with other nations and international organizations to make sure information on the threat is consistent. States issuing travel advisories should share information in a spirit of transparency and cooperation.

**2) Consultations with the affected government and tourism industry should be made before the travel advisory is issued.**

A dialogue with the government concerned should be started before an advisory is put in place, except in the case of a serious emergency. Consultations should include the National Tourism Administration, promotion boards and representatives of the private sector. The receiving government should provide timely and transparent information, in the interest of making the advisory as accurate as possible. Consultations should also be made with airlines and tour operators working in the country, in order to fully understand the impact of a travel advisory and collect additional information on the current situation from people who are actually on the ground in the destination concerned.

**3) Travel advisories should avoid bias or political motivation.**

Travel advisories need to be objective, fair and factual. They should not be issued in retaliation for travel restrictions or advisories put in place by another country. Neither should they be used as a political instrument or for political reasons. They should be non-discriminatory and not issued on the basis of race, religion, gender or nationality.

**4) Travel advisories should be specific about the geographical extent of the problem.**

Advisories that blanket an entire country, or even worse, an entire region should not be issued. Travel advice should be specific about the location of the problem and where it extends within a country. If major tourist centres within the country are not affected by the problem, then they should be listed in the advisory as places that are considered safe.

**5) Travel advisories should be specific about the nature of the threat.**

As much substance, description and factual information as possible needs to be included in the text of the travel advisory. Vague warnings such as, "the threat of terrorism may exist" serve no useful purpose nowadays, except to stir up fears in an already apprehensive world. Advisories using the word 'may' should include explanations of when or at least why the threat is being predicted. A distinction should be made between the types of problems in a destination, some of which might be permanent and others transitory. Useful positive information should also be included in the advisory, such as how to dress, simple precautions to take and/or where to go for help.

**6) Prudence and restraint should be used in evaluating the threat and in the language of the travel advisory.**

As travel advisories can have repercussions for the tourism industry, governments should use them sparingly and only when absolutely necessary. The level of the advisory should be commensurate with the gravity of the threat. A destination should not be blacklisted by a travel advisory, when the safety and security problems could be addressed by another type of recommendation, for example, a series of traveller precautions. Language used in travel advisories should avoid alarmism and be proportionate to the reality of the situation.

**7) Consultations should be made periodically with the affected country about how to remedy the situation and get the travel advisory lifted.**

If a dialogue on safety and security issues is undertaken with the affected country, as recommended above, the countries involved should use this exchange as an opportunity to share information and knowledge about how to bring a potentially dangerous situation under control. In a spirit of economic cooperation, assistance could be offered. The government issuing the travel advisory should also provide information on the process used for issuing and lifting the advisory.

**8) Information contained in travel advisories should be published on a central, easy-to-use and frequently-updated internet website, where the various branches of government involved can coordinate their message.**

Travel advisories are often communicated by more than one branch of government, for instance, the Foreign Ministry, the Public Health Authority and the Tourism Administration. Unfortunately, they do not always give out the same information and in some cases data is actually contradictory. To avoid confusion, one single administration should be in charge of coordinating and publishing travel advisories to ensure the message communicated will be consistent and coherent. A travel advisory website should be maintained as the central information point, providing complete information that is updated on a daily basis.

**9) Travel advisories should include an expiration date and be reviewed regularly at least monthly.**

Governments should review and update travel advisories on a regular basis, with the aim of lifting the advisory as soon as possible. The review should take place automatically at periodic intervals of at least once a month. Information published on Internet websites should be updated at the same time. The issue date and the date of the update should also be included on the advisory along with the new information. Travel advisories issued in response to a health crisis should be reviewed and updated more frequently. Media reporting of travel advisories should be responsible and include the full text and not just the headlines. Media should also make reference to other travel advisories in effect on the same country.

**10) Travellers should use a variety of information sources in collecting travel advice.**

In the end, each traveller must take responsibility for making his or her own decision on whether or not to visit a certain destination. Travel advisories issued by governments are perhaps the first place to look, but they are only one piece of information available to travellers. Other good sources of safety information that should be consulted and evaluated include the World Health Organization ([www.who.int](http://www.who.int)), Centers for Disease Control ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)), the Lonely Planet ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) and the Pacific Asia Travel Association ([www.travelwithpata.com](http://www.travelwithpata.com)).

While the World Tourism Organization does not have legal authority to actively enforce these recommendations, nor does it have at this time the mandate to issue comprehensive safety information about destinations, it is hoped that member nations will comply voluntarily.

If a dispute should arise between two WTO member countries, it could be settled on a bi-lateral basis within the framework of the recommendations. If a dispute should arise between a WTO member country and a non-member country, it could be settled within the framework of the recommendations through the mediation of the World Committee on Tourism Ethics.

### Conclusion

As an inter-governmental organization with 143 Member States and overall responsibility for tourism, WTO is the right forum to debate the problem of travel advisories and seek solutions.

In its new status as a specialized agency of the United Nations, WTO reserves the option of submitting the **Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories** for consideration by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and for subsequent decision to the General Assembly of the UN, if that is what members agree to do.