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Have a safe trip

Not all firms here have emergency measures for staff working abroad

MAVIS TOH

When sales manager Raymond Foo was given a day's notice of a work trip to New Delhi two months ago, he packed his bags, kissed his two children goodbye and left.

His employer, a local company in the education industry, made arrangements for accommodation but did not provide him with any travel advisory or numbers to call should an emergency crop up.

Similarly, on each of his twice-monthly work trips now, he leaves Singapore armed with nothing more than his own vigilance.

"I think we tend to take our safety for granted," said Mr Foo, 32. "I'm definitely not prepared should an emergency happen."

But emergencies do happen.

When terrorists staged attacks in Mumbai recently, more than a dozen Singaporeans - many on business trips - were stranded in several hotels.

Lawyer Lo Hwei Yen was taken hostage in the Oberoi Trident Hotel and eventually killed.

Standard Chartered Bank employee Carol Tan made it out alive. She was staying in the Taj Mahal Hotel and it was the bank's security personnel who first called to tell her that the hotel was under attack.

They kept her updated on developments while she was trapped in her room. She was eventually ushered out by security officers who knocked on her door the next afternoon.

Ms Lo's death puts into sharp focus the fact that Singaporeans are not immune from dangerous situations abroad.

And the number of Singaporeans overseas is no small figure. Last year, at the Economic Development Board's 9th International Advisory Council meeting, it was revealed that 200,000 or more Singaporeans are working, studying or travelling abroad at any one time.

Which is why Ms Annie Yap, chief executive of recruitment agency The GMP Group, said Singaporeans' security and protection should be stepped up as more of them are sent overseas for work.

Companies should conduct risk assessments of the country, finding out about its economic, social, political and medical landscape, before determining the insurance coverage needed, she added.

But it is not enough just to provide basic insurance coverage.

“As recent events have shown, acts of violence and unrest can strike anywhere and at any time,” she said.

Staff should know how to react in a crisis and be provided with local emergency numbers and contacts.

Most multinational companies The Sunday Times spoke to said they send out regular travel advisories and buy travel insurance for staff on business travel.

At OCBC Bank, an online health and security site was launched five months ago to update staff on threats such as disease outbreaks, riots, terrorist activities and natural disasters.

SingTel employees posted overseas must register themselves and family members with the foreign affairs ministry in the host country. They also hold open air tickets as part of evacuation procedures in an emergency.

At SembCorp, where five to 10 employees travel overseas monthly, each has insurance coverage of up to 60 times the monthly salary. They are also given numbers to call if security or medical evacuation is needed.

Two years ago, an employee stationed in Vietnam was evacuated to Singapore by plane within hours after he had a heart problem.

In view of recent events in Bangkok - where anti-government protesters occupied the airports - and Mumbai, the company has also suspended all business travel to Thailand and India.

But despite assurances by these companies that staff-welfare measures are in place, only three of the 10 frequent business travellers The Sunday Times spoke to said they are given emergency numbers and briefings each time they head overseas.

They added that their firms know little about their schedules apart from the hotels they are staying in.

Few also update their companies if changes crop up en route. Most said they depend on their own vigilance to ensure safety.

Regional sales manager Ng Tiong Ling, 42, has travelled to places like Cambodia, Mongolia and even Afghanistan for work.

Not prepared

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MR RAYMOND FOO, a sales manager who goes on twice-monthly work trips

He has witnessed demonstrations, got caught in fights and even heard gunshots on these trips.

“There were no security measures taken; we just packed and went. That’s the mindset of regular travellers,” said Mr Ng, who now works for a French company dealing with household appliances. “Looking back now, the situations were rather dangerous.”

Recent events have led him to a rethink and made him feel that companies should do more to ensure the safety of their staff.

Mr Tony Ridley, security risk director of Travel Security Services, a joint venture of International SOS and Control Risks, said many companies are well developed in building and financial security, but under-developed in people-risk management.

In Singapore, International SOS works with about 400 firms, providing medical and emergency services to their staff worldwide. Last year, it conducted 16,000 aircraft evacuations to get people out of political-unrest and medical situations.

In the recent Mumbai attacks, the company handled 1,100 incoming calls, including 12 from Singaporeans, seeking advice and help. Besides providing information, it also sent medical aid and provided repatriation services.

The chance of an employee being caught in a terrorist attack, however, is less likely than if he were to face problems like flight delays and petty crimes, said Mr Danny Chan, director of global risk assessment at iJet, a United States-based private intelligence agency.

Loss of laptops and medical emergencies are the most common situations that business travellers face, he added.

Early this year, however, iJet had to manage a case where an American employee on a work trip in Myanmar was kidnapped. It quickly informed the next of kin and worked with the authorities on negotiating with the kidnappers.

A ransom was eventually paid and the employee was repatriated.

Country manager Teng Jen Tin, 41, who used to work in a multinational corporation, knows the importance of having good security coverage.

In 2003, when terrorists bombed the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, his three colleagues on business there were evacuated immediately. Now, in a smaller American firm, he feels he has to “find his own escape route” should an emergency happen.

When the Bangkok airport shut down two weeks ago while he was there on business, he was on his own. His company did not make alternative arrangements to get him back.

Though travel advisories are sent, he feels firms should stop staff from travelling to dangerous spots rather than leave the decision to the individual.

“What if I make a wrong decision?” said Mr Teng. “Those working in large firms will appreciate the security; it’s better to be prepared than panic when something happens.”

iJet’s Mr Chan agreed.

“When a company sends an employee out for work, it has the responsibility and duty of care to manage that travel,” he said.

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