Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
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Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA
Consular Directorate CD

Support for Swiss Nationals in Emergency Situations Abroad
Case Studies

Case Study 1

Arrest for Drug Use

Sabine K., 28 years old

Situation

Sabine K. has taken a sabbatical and is travelling throughout Thailand for three months. One evening, she is sitting on the beach with other travellers in a relaxed atmosphere. When a joint is passed around, she hesitates briefly but ultimately decides to participate, underestimating the country's strict drug laws. Later that same evening, the group is stopped by the police and Sabine K. is arrested. The situation escalates quickly: she does not understand the language, is unfamiliar with her rights, and does not know how to contact her family in Switzerland. She faces significant criminal charges under Thai law.

Consular Protection

The competent Swiss representation becomes active as soon as it becomes aware of, or is informed about, the deprivation of liberty. An employee of the Swiss representation contacts Sabine K. and may visit her in prison upon her request and where circumstances permit. Within the framework of consular assistance, the Swiss representation makes inquiries with the local authorities regarding her situation and seeks to ensure that fundamental procedural rights are respected, particularly with regard to humane detention conditions, the right to a fair trial, and access to legal counsel. The consular officer also provides Sabine K. with a list of local lawyers. At Sabine K.'s request, her relatives in Switzerland are informed of her detention and current situation. Consular services in such cases are generally subject to fees, as Sabine K. acted negligently within the meaning of the Swiss Abroad Act (SAA).

Limits of FDFA Assistance

The FDFA respects the sovereignty and legal system of the state in which the person is located. It cannot secure a person's release from detention, intervene in ongoing judicial proceedings, or influence their outcome. Pursuant to the applicable legal provisions, the FDFA does not cover legal fees, bail, fines, or other procedural costs, nor does it conduct trial monitoring. In all cases, local laws apply, even where they are stricter than those in Switzerland.

FDFA Recommendation
The FDFA recommends consulting the FDFA travel advice before every trip abroad. These provide important information on the security situation, legal particularities, risks, and applicable regulations in the destination country.
The travel advice can be accessed via the Travel Admin app.

Disclaimer: *These case studies are based on real cases from the FDFA's consular practice. To protect the individuals concerned, names, personal details, and certain elements of the cases have been altered or consolidated. The examples illustrate typical situations that Swiss nationals may encounter abroad and demonstrate both the possibilities and the limitations of consular assistance.*

Case Study 2

Road Traffic Accident With and Without Travel Insurance

Paul M., 62 years old

Situation

Paul M. is travelling through southern France with his partner. During a stop by the roadside, he goes to inspect the engine of their vehicle. At that moment, a passing car clips the vehicle; Paul M. is struck, dragged several metres, and sustains severe injuries. The police, ambulance, and rescue helicopter arrive quickly, and he is airlifted to hospital. His partner does not speak French and is completely overwhelmed. A doctor informs her in English that her partner's condition is critical. She subsequently contacts the FDFA Helpline, which is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Consular Protection and the Importance of Insurance Coverage

The FDFA acts as a central point of contact for Paul M.'s partner, providing advice and clarifying insurance-related matters. It also assists with communication with the local authorities and the hospital. Thanks to Paul M.'s travel insurance, responsibilities are quickly clarified: the insurer guarantees payment to the hospital and arranges the medically necessary repatriation to Switzerland. This significantly relieves his partner, allowing her to focus entirely on the situation at the hospital. Ultimately, Paul M. is repatriated to Switzerland by REGA, where his treatment continues in a familiar environment.

Without adequate travel insurance, such situations become considerably more complex. Medical and hospital costs abroad are often substantial and may only be partially covered by basic health insurance. Hospitals frequently require advance payments before treatment can continue. Family members must communicate directly with hospitals, insurers, and authorities – often in a foreign language and under considerable stress. Unclear responsibilities can lead to delays, and medically necessary repatriation may not be guaranteed or financially feasible.

By contrast, with adequate insurance coverage, rescue, treatment, and, where necessary, repatriation are coordinated by a single entity, typically the insurer. Family members are substantially relieved and can focus on what matters most: the health and well-being of their loved one.

Limits of FDFA Assistance

The FDFA cannot act as an emergency response centre for the immediate protection of life and limb. It does not provide medical care or treatment, issue medical advice, or replace an insurance provider. Medical treatment, decisions regarding therapies, and rescue and medical transport operations remain exclusively the responsibility of the local authorities, healthcare professionals, and insurance providers. Within the scope of its mandate, however, the FDFA may provide information, coordination, assistance with communication difficulties, and referrals.

FDFA Recommendation
The FDFA recommends taking out travel insurance before travelling abroad. Such insurance should cover rescue operations, medical treatment, medical evacuation, repatriation of mortal remains, and legal protection. Basic health insurance generally does not cover these costs abroad, or only partially. As medical and hospital expenses can be very high and advance payments are often required, travel insurance provides protection against substantial costs and administrative burdens. Questions relating to coverage and the effective scope of benefits should always be clarified with the insurer in advance, as only the contractual agreement with the insurance provider is legally binding. The Travel Admin app provides travellers with important local emergency numbers (ambulance, police, fire brigade), as well as the contact details of the FDFA Helpline and the local Swiss representation.

Case Study 3

Natural Disaster
Wildfires on Rhodes 2023

Alexandra F., 22 years old

Situation

In July 2023, several large-scale wildfires broke out on the Greek island of Rhodes as a result of prolonged drought and strong winds. The fires spread rapidly and forced tens of thousands of residents and tourists to evacuate. Alexandra F., a Swiss tourist, was staying in an affected area in the south of the island during her holiday. As the fires approached, the Greek authorities evacuated her, together with other tourists, and transported them by bus to Rhodes Airport. In the rush, she forgot her passport in the hotel safe.

Consular Assistance

The competent Swiss representation established a temporary Swiss assistance desk at the airport to support Swiss nationals on the ground. As Alexandra F. had registered her trip in the Travel Admin app, she – like all travellers registered on Rhodes – received an SMS containing information about the location and services of the temporary Swiss desk. Upon arrival, the loss of her passport is formally recorded. Following verification of her identity, FDFA staff issue Alexandra F. with a provisional travel document (laissez-passer) on the same day, valid for her return journey to Switzerland. At the same time, Alexandra F. receives up-to-date information regarding the situation, available return flights, and recommended conduct at the airport. FDFA staff also assist with practical matters, including access to check-in counters and communication with airline personnel concerning the replacement travel document. Thanks to this coordinated support, Alexandra F. is able to book a return flight for the following day, check in using the issued laissez-passer, and return safely to Switzerland.

Limits of FDFA Assistance

Swiss nationals are, in principle, responsible for arranging their departure and onward travel themselves. The FDFA does not generally organize evacuations. Evacuations are carried out exclusively by the local authorities, whose instructions must be followed at all times. There is no guarantee of transportation or accommodation. The organization and financing of accommodation and return travel remain primarily the responsibility of the traveller, tour operators, and travel insurers. The FDFA provides advice, coordination, and facilitation but cannot guarantee comprehensive protection or individualized solutions.

FDFA Recommendation

The FDFA recommends following the instructions of the local authorities (evacuations, assembly points), remaining calm, proceeding at an early stage to the airport or official assembly points, actively arranging return travel independently (through airlines or tour operators), and making use of available assistance. In addition, the FDFA recommends contacting the FDFA desk or the Swiss representation without delay (particularly in the event of lost travel documents) and keeping proof of identity (copies, photographs, digital documents) readily available to facilitate the issuance of replacement documents. Comprehensive travel insurance capable of covering additional expenses is also strongly recommended.

Case Study 4

Death

Stefan L., 64 years old

Situation

Stefan L. is travelling in Brazil for a holiday. During his stay, he suffers a heart attack and passes away. The Brazilian police inform the Swiss Embassy. The FDFA subsequently verifies the deceased Swiss national's civil status records in order to identify potential family members in Switzerland. Stefan L. is married. The FDFA informs the competent police authorities at his wife's place of residence. Specially trained personnel visit her at home to notify her personally of her husband's death and provide her with the FDFA's contact details for further assistance. The news comes unexpectedly and is deeply distressing. She is unfamiliar with procedures abroad, does not know what steps need to be taken, and is uncertain where to obtain reliable information. In this situation, she contacts the FDFA Helpline.

Consular Protection

The FDFA Helpline provides personal support to Stefan L.'s wife, listens to her concerns, and offers initial guidance during this difficult time. Where appropriate, it may refer her to psychological support services or specialized organizations. In the meantime, the FDFA clarifies the deceased's insurance situation and determines that Stefan L. held travel insurance. The FDFA establishes contact between the insurer and his wife. The insurance provider subsequently assumes responsibility for organizing and covering the costs of repatriating the mortal remains to Switzerland. At the same time, the FDFA remains in close contact with Stefan L.'s wife and the competent local authorities in Brazil. It assists her in obtaining the autopsy report and with administrative matters. The FDFA also helps ensure that her late husband's luggage and mobile phone are secured and returned to her.

Limits of FDFA Assistance

The FDFA cannot conduct medical investigations or influence local procedures relating to death investigations. Repatriation costs are not covered by the FDFA; they are either borne by the travel insurance provider or by the next of kin. Within the scope of its mandate, however, the FDFA may provide support through information, coordination, and referrals.

FDFA Recommendation
The FDFA recommends purchasing comprehensive travel insurance before travelling abroad. Such insurance should, in particular, cover rescue operations, medical treatment, repatriation, the return of mortal remains, and legal protection. Mandatory Swiss basic health insurance generally covers such services abroad only partially or not at all. Questions relating to coverage and the effective scope of benefits should always be clarified with the insurer in advance, as only the contractual agreement with the insurance provider is legally binding.

Case Study 5

Loss of Travel Documents Emergency Passport

Reto M., 42 years old

Situation

Reto M. has fulfilled a long-held dream and is travelling across South Africa in a rented minivan. After a wonderful journey, he spends his final day before his return flight sitting at a street café in Johannesburg. An unknown passer-by approaches him and points out a yoghurt stain on his shoulder. Reto M. had not noticed it. The woman is very friendly and even helps remove the stain with a handkerchief before disappearing into the crowd. “If only everyone were so kind,” thinks Reto M. However, when he asks for the bill, he is shocked to discover that the jacket containing his passport has disappeared. His flight back to Switzerland is scheduled for the following evening, but how can he return home without a passport?

Consular Protection

Using his mobile phone, Reto M. immediately contacts the Swiss Embassy in Pretoria. A consular officer informs him that it is possible to issue an emergency passport (a provisional passport with limited validity). However, he must first obtain a police report from the nearest police station and then appear in person at the embassy. The consular officer also advises him to contact his airline in advance to confirm whether it will accept an emergency passport for travel. Reto M. follows these instructions and returns to his hotel later that day with his new travel document. What a day! He is relieved that he will still be able to return to Switzerland as planned.

Limits of FDFA Assistance

In most cases, return travel to Switzerland with an emergency passport proceeds without difficulty. However, the FDFA has no influence if an airline refuses boarding or if migration authorities deny departure using a provisional passport. Certain countries (for example, the United Arab Emirates) do not permit entry with a provisional Swiss passport, which may be relevant for transit flights on the return journey to Switzerland.

FDFA Recommendation

The FDFA recommends reading the FDFA travel advice before departure, registering with the Travel Admin app, and recording travel details. During the trip, it may be advisable to leave one’s passport at the hotel (ideally in a safe) and carry only the Swiss identity card for excursions. Travellers are advised not to carry both identity documents at the same time.

Case Study 6

Crisis in the Middle East March 2026

Florence L., 52 years old

Situation

In March 2026, the security situation in the Middle East deteriorated significantly following military strikes against Iran and subsequent retaliatory actions. This resulted in heightened tensions throughout the region, accompanied by sudden airspace closures, flight cancellations, and widespread disruptions to air travel. Oman was also indirectly affected. Although the country was not directly involved in the conflict, disruptions to air traffic and increased uncertainty affected foreign travellers. The FDFA updated its travel advice accordingly and, in certain instances, advised against non-essential travel to specific areas. Florence L. is travelling independently in Muscat. Due to cancelled flights and the uncertain security situation, she is unable to return to Switzerland as planned and is temporarily stranded in Oman.

Consular Assistance

Florence L. had previously registered her trip in the Travel Admin app. As a result, the FDFA and the Swiss Embassy in Muscat are able to contact her directly and provide relevant updates. She receives SMS notifications containing current security information and details of available departure options from Muscat. Through Travel Admin, she is informed about a special SWISS flight from Muscat to Zurich organized in coordination with the FDFA and receives the contact details for the booking hotline. Thanks to this support, Florence L. is able to secure a seat on the flight and arrange her return to Switzerland. The Swiss Embassy in Oman and the FDFA Helpline remain available to answer any questions. Florence L. is reminded to comply with the instructions of the local authorities and to monitor developments continuously. Upon her return to Switzerland, she marks her trip as completed in the Travel Admin app. This helps the authorities maintain an overview of individuals who may still be present in the affected area and potentially require assistance.

Limits of FDFA Assistance

As a matter of principle, the FDFA does not organize departures from crisis areas. Departure is voluntary, undertaken at the individual's own responsibility, and at their own expense. Even in the case of special flights, these are not government-guaranteed evacuations or repatriations, but are often commercial solutions (e.g., operated by airlines), which travellers must arrange and pay for themselves. Consular assistance is provided only when affected persons are unable to find a solution independently or with the assistance of third parties (e.g., tour operators or insurers). In exceptional cases, the FDFA may facilitate departure for particularly vulnerable individuals through cooperation with partner states. However, the FDFA cannot intervene directly in operational matters such as airport capacities, security conditions, or border openings.

FDFA Recommendation

The FDFA recommends registering travel in the Travel Admin app and monitoring the news regularly.
It is also important to follow the instructions of the local authorities and to remain informed about developments in the security situation. Furthermore, the FDFA recommends continuously checking available flight options (airlines, airports, and travel providers) and booking alternative return arrangements promptly whenever opportunities arise. In an emergency, travellers may contact the FDFA Helpline or the Swiss Embassy.