

Thursday, 23 May 2013

BLBG Meeting May 2013

Lively, exciting, even occasionally confrontational, so what was the subject under discussion? Amazingly, the answer to the question is ... registration of British nationals in Lebanon with the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the FCO's [travel advice to Lebanon](#), and the British Embassy's telephone service here in Beirut.

Atif Janjua has the wonderful, Romanesque sounding title of Vice Consul at the Embassy. He was standing in for the Deputy Head of Mission, called away at the last minute to another appointment. Sincere thanks to Atif for leaping into the breach with so little warning.

In living memory, the communications part of the embassy's crisis plan has depended on a network of volunteers, the wardens, to be the major branches of a communication tree. Each week every warden has received a list of British nationals registered in his or her area to be able to be ready with said communications should they be needed. Registration used to be by going to the embassy and filling in a form, then the job could be done by fax and most recently using an on-line service called LOCATE. This was essentially a "registration just in case" service and has recently been withdrawn. Atif's first task then was to try to explain why the powers that be in London had taken such a decision and what the role of the wardens might be now.



The reasons he advanced were essentially threefold. When crises have happened in the last ten years, including the Bali bombing, the grounding of all commercial airlines' flights in and out of Europe thanks to the Icelandic volcanic ash cloud (see picture at the end of this piece), the tsunami in Japan (pictured above) and even the hostilities in 2006 here, LOCATE had proved ineffective due to low usage and insufficient data. With the arrival on the scene of social networking tools like Twitter and facebook, together with mobile phone penetration, a plethora of "push" information systems are available to communicate to those with access to those services. Finally, when a crisis hits, experience shows that the local embassy and the FCO are inundated, nay swamped with requests for help and information; a single full-time professional crisis management centre can be resourced to far greater levels than might be available to any individual embassy, so the investment has been made such a centre is now operational centrally in London (pictured below).



This naturally led on to the telephone service, which has not always been seen in the past as a model of efficiency. Here's where the meeting got lively, with the following question being posed in a number of different guises – given that the telephone service at the embassy is perceived as unresponsive, how can it possibly be expected to be a satisfactory instrument in time of crisis? Atif's response to this was simple – a significant investment has been made in a new 'phone system with a menu driven front end, personalised voice answering service and improved reception staffing. He invited us all to try it and let him know of any problems. Another recurrent theme was what if the internet is affected or even offline. It was then he assured us that wardens were still seen as a major part of the support structure for Brits abroad with new guidance expected out from the FCO in the near future.

Finally, Atif explained the way in which the travel advice was debated before change – at the highest levels of the UK government even – and the balancing act needed between looking after the interests of British nationals (without trying to appear “nannyish”) and managing the relationship between the governments of the UK and the various host countries. Opinions were mixed about which should take priority and the discussion showed just how sensitive a subject this topic is.



What you may ask, has all this to do with business? Well above all, business is looking for the unattainable nirvana of stability. Second best is to know that in the event of a crisis, people and systems are in place to minimize and cope with the extent of a consequent disaster. The short list above shows they can occur anywhere, anytime without warning,

Posted by [Graham in Lebanon](#) at [11:29](#)