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INTERNATIONAL SOS: KEEPING TRAVELLERS INFORMED AND SUPPORTED

Tim Willis, security director with International SOS and Control Risks, recounts his companies' response following the hotel siege in Mali last year

On 20 November 2015, terrorists attacked the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, the capital of Mali.

Providing real-time support for clients wherever they may be requires a deep knowledge of local environments, cultures, health systems, endemic risks, security threats and local infrastructure

The terrorists took 170 hostages and killed 20 in a mass shooting. International SOS and Control Risks had clients at the hotel and provided them with advice, emotional support and logistic services during and after the attacks.

The companies' security analysts are constantly monitoring potential safety issues that may affect clients via a number of sources. In this case, the analysts identified the reports of an attack via social media, and immediately moved to verify the accuracy of the reports through their relationships with trusted partners in the area. This collaboration allowed them to provide actionable personal safety

advice to clients – well before the attacks were reported by western news media.

Timeline:

- 8:50 a.m. – Identified potential issue via social media monitoring. Once the information was confirmed with their partner on the ground, a special advisory was issued to clients.
- 9:05 a.m. – Client organisations began to call for advice and guidance. International SOS and Control Risks helped them activate their response plans.
- 9:15 a.m. – Members started calling from their hotel rooms.

One member was in her hotel room when she heard gunfire and called International SOS. The International SOS and Control Risks team member stayed with her on the phone, and for four hours provided emotional support and expert advice. During the call, the security analyst advised the client on how to deal with the smoke in her room, discussed life-safety techniques, and advised her on what to do in the event the attackers tried to gain entry. The security analysts considered all possible, likely scenarios that could result from the terrorists' activities. In addition to the active shooters, a concern was the possibility of a fire spreading throughout the hotel. Members in the hotel were therefore given the following advice:

- Lock the doors.
- Don't open the door to anyone, even if they state they are from the authorities – if needed, ring out to confirm identity before opening the door.
- Stay in the bathroom.
- Maintain communications – but place phones on vibrate and keep a charger with you.
- Fill the bath, soak towels and dampen the walls and doors.
- Hang a sheet out the window to notify others of your position in the hotel.



- Switch off air conditioning.

Meanwhile, other team members were liaising with the security forces on the ground and local government to co-ordinate the safe release of members at the hotel. In addition to the support provided to members within the hotel, there were requests for assistance from members that had escaped or were freed by the local security forces. Mental health support services were offered, as well as on-the-ground security assistance. Logistic services included relocating members to lower-profile hotels and arranging flights out of the area. Diplomatic representation was provided for those whose passports had been left in the hotel. Providing real-time support for clients wherever they may be requires a deep knowledge of local environments, cultures, health systems, endemic risks, security threats and local infrastructure. These requirements have led to a number of innovations that are continually refined through technological enhancements. Major trends/needs include:

- Traveller tracking.
- Ability to communicate.
- Fast assessment of situations.
- Trusted network of partners around the world.

Rather than rely on information from a single location, we use a network of security and medical experts – both in-house and externally credentialled – to provide real-time information to keep travellers informed and supported. It's important to have a process of checks and balances to test the credibility of sources and ensure that output is consistent and reliable.

At International SOS and Control Risks, our personnel and network of third-party providers around the world gives us the unique ability to source additional information or assess unconfirmed reports as necessary. Information is cross-referenced and verified through multiple sources and all of our content is rigorously validated prior to publication in order to uphold factual accuracy and analytical consistency. We have also seen an increase in calls requesting advice on appropriate accommodation and hotel recommendations. We are seeing roughly three times the volume of calls where people specifically request advice on where to stay.

