

19 March 2020

Minister of Foreign Affairs

For action by

20 March 2020

COVID-19: Assistance for Stranded New Zealanders

BRIEFING Issues

PURPOSE To outline assistance being provided to New Zealanders stranded overseas in line with current consular policy, and to provide additional options for assistance as it becomes more difficult for New Zealanders to return home.

Recommended referrals

Prime Minister

For concurrence by

20 March 2020

Contact details

NAME	ROLE	DIVISION	WORK PHONE	MOBILE PHONE
Janet Lowe	Divisional Manager	Consular	s9(2)(a)	
Justin Fepuleai	Emergency Coordination Centre Incident Controller	Emergency Coordination Centre		

Minister's Office comments

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Key points

- New Zealand overseas missions and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (MFAT) Consular Division are receiving an increasing number of calls from New Zealanders as countries' border measures become stricter in response to Covid-19.
- It will not be possible for every New Zealander who would like to return home to do so. Some will need to "shelter in place".

Our Consular Policy

- MFAT's consular policy as set out on the SafeTravel website is based on the principle that individual travellers take responsibility for their own risk management and have a contingency plan in the event of a disruption to their travel plans. These are extreme circumstances however, so we are exploring additional options for assisting New Zealanders who may become stranded overseas.
- The options requiring greater government intervention also represent higher per capita and opportunity costs, set precedents and raise issues of equity.

Official travel advice

- We propose to encourage New Zealanders resident overseas to weigh up their local circumstances in reaching a decision to remain or return to New Zealand, and to clearly link our SafeTravel advice to in-depth country specific Covid-19 advice provided by our 5 Nations partners focusing ourselves on the Pacific.

Options for providing financial assistance

- We propose developing options to provide emergency and other financial assistance to New Zealanders needing to change travel arrangements or who need to remain in place and who are in financial difficulty and have exhausted other options. Options include: increasing the size of the Ministry's fund for financial advances and expanding access to these funds through increased publicity and relaxing criteria; officials approaching commercial banks to explore options to increase credit card limits or put in place other measures to provide access to funding; and exploring options with the Ministry of Social Development to increase access to financial support, including for pensioners, where applicable.
- New Zealanders in Australia are starting to request intervention from the New Zealand government to access Australian support due to job losses from Covid-19.

New Zealanders on cruise ships

- We are aware of 303 New Zealanders on cruise ships (although we expect there are more). Some ships have not been able to make arrangements to dock. It will become increasingly difficult for passengers to return to New Zealand on commercial flights.

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- Where there are New Zealanders on board cruise ships being prevented from docking we will work with the cruise ship companies, local authorities and 5 Nations partners to find solutions.

Commercial airlines

s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(ba)

Assisted departures

- Given the number and wide geographical spread of locations affected by COVID-19, MFAT's strong preference is to maintain the position that the Wuhan and Diamond Princess assisted departure flights were exceptional.
- s6(b)

We remain in close contact with our 5 Nations partners on this issue.

- There may be a stronger case for assisted departure where individuals are considered to be at high risk, and/or where medical facilities in the country are very limited. In most cases assisted departure would only be viable in conjunction with one or more 5 Nations partners. We have suggested a set of criteria upon which we would base advice on a case-by-case basis. The cost and logistical difficulties should not be underestimated.
- In all cases, we would request seats on any evacuation flights by our 5 Nations partners from difficult locations as we did with the Diamond Princess. Evacuees would still require onward flights to New Zealand and the New Zealand Government would be expected to make these arrangements.
- Even with assisted departure flights it will not be feasible to bring all New Zealanders who want to return home as some will be unwell, in quarantine, or unable to get to departure points.
- Flights using New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) aircraft are a challenging proposition beyond Australia and the Pacific Islands region.
- Any assisted departure from the Pacific would enable New Zealand to assist third-country nationals.
- There are public health risks associated with encouraging New Zealanders to return from parts of the world where COVID-19 is already well-established. To date, all of New Zealand's confirmed COVID-19 cases are traceable to overseas travellers. We can expect that some New Zealanders returning will be infected, even if they are asymptomatic.

Deborah Geels
for Secretary of Foreign Affairs and Trade

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Recommendations

It is recommended that you:

- | | | |
|---|--|-----------------|
| 1 | Note that the Ministry will continue to update consular advice as circumstances dictate; | Yes / No |
| 2 | Note that in most circumstances New Zealanders unable to get home on commercial flights will need to remain where they are for an extended period of time; | Yes / No |
| 3 | Agree that officials should explore options for providing financial support to stranded New Zealanders including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Increasing the size of MFAT's emergency travel funding, and provide easier access to this funding including through increased publicity; b. Exploring options with commercial banks to increase credit card limits and/or ease repayment conditions; c. Exploring options with the Ministry of Social Development to increase access to financial support for New Zealanders overseas, including pensioners; | Yes / No |
| 4 | s6(a)

s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(ba) | Yes / No |
| 5 | Agree that where assisted departure in conjunction with other countries or on our own may appear feasible, officials apply the criteria in paragraph 28 in preparing advice to Ministers | Yes / No |

[Please note: this recommendation should reference the criteria in paragraph 30, not paragraph 28.]

Rt Hon Winston Peters
Minister of Foreign Affairs

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Report

1. New Zealand overseas missions and MFAT's Consular Division are receiving an increasing number of calls from New Zealanders as countries' border measures become stricter in response to Covid-19.
2. MFAT currently provides consular support to New Zealanders overseas in the form of an established 24/7 call centre/consular duty phone in Wellington and through our posts overseas. Our official travel advice for the whole world is now "avoid non-essential travel" and to urge New Zealanders currently travelling overseas to consider returning home while commercial options remain available. We recognise, however that as options for New Zealanders to fly home narrow, more New Zealanders will need to "shelter in place" and more innovative measures to assist them may be required.
3. The Ministry is monitoring the availability of commercial flight options and transit rules for key airport hubs. It will be critical for us that key hubs such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Dubai, Doha and Los Angeles (where reduced air services seem likely to continue) allow passengers to transit without applying border restrictions.
s6(a), s9(2)(j)
4. Covid-19 is now a declared global pandemic affecting almost all countries. While many countries including New Zealand have advised their nationals travelling overseas to return home while commercial options remain available, the large number of New Zealanders resident overseas in developed countries with advanced health systems are likely to choose to "shelter in place".

What we know about New Zealanders currently overseas

5. We do not have comprehensive data about the number of New Zealanders overseas at any one time. Our standard estimate is that there are approximately 1 million New Zealanders overseas at any time (including approximately 80,000 on short-term travel). The number of short-term travellers will now be significantly lower as New Zealanders follow advice to avoid non-essential travel.
6. As at the time of writing there are 19,665 registrants on SafeTravel, of which 11,350 are registered as residing offshore. The number of registrants is surging, and the message to register is continuing to be emphasised. The Safetravel data is indicative of New Zealanders being concentrated in some countries (2,832 registrants in Australia, 2,752 in UK, 1,769 in US) but spread throughout the world (5,842 in Asia, 2,363 in Europe, 1,000 in Pacific, 661 in Africa, 682 in South America, 55 in the Caribbean).
7. We are now receiving more than 100 calls per day in Wellington, and significant numbers at our overseas posts. A week ago the majority were seeking travel advice; now, most are asking for government assistance with repatriation. While we are receiving calls from New Zealanders all over the world, current "hotspots" are Morocco, South America (Peru, Chile) and Europe.

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New Zealanders on cruise ships

8. We are compiling data about New Zealanders currently on cruise ships from consular calls and in some cases, from cruise companies directly. As at Wednesday 18 March we were aware of 303 New Zealanders on cruise ships (although we expect there are more).
9. Circumstances vary from ship to ship. Some ships have not yet been able to make arrangements to dock as a result of bans on cruise ships. Some passengers will be required to complete 14 days of isolation on the cruise ship or at their port of disembarkation before they are able to get a flight back to New Zealand. It will become increasingly difficult for passengers to return to New Zealand on commercial flights.
10. Some cruise ships are making arrangements at their own expense for flights to hubs for passengers. s6(b)
11. Where there are New Zealanders on board cruise ships being prevented from docking we will work with local authorities and 5 Nations partners to find solutions.

What we are currently doing

12. The submission led by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) of 16 March 2020 outlined the wide range of activities MFAT is already doing to assist and support New Zealanders offshore.
13. The MFAT assisted departure flights for New Zealanders in Wuhan, China and passengers of the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan reflected exceptional circumstances. These New Zealanders faced a high degree of risk as a result of the Diamond Princess being COVID-19 epicentres, limited or no commercial options for returning home, and at that time a pandemic had not been declared by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Options for assistance

14. MFAT's consular policy as set out on SafeTravel is based on the principle, that individual travellers take responsibility for their own risk management and have a contingency plan in the event of a disruption to their travel plans (e.g. insurance cover and sufficient back-up funds). Our consular services are focused on supporting and assisting New Zealanders in difficult situations but we do not, for example, make bookings or provide funds – apart from *in extremis* in the form of a

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cash advance with an undertaking to repay. This is made clear on SafeTravel and is important as it maintains realistic expectations of what MFAT will do in the case of an emergency, thereby avoiding s9(2)(g)(i) setting precedents that we are unable to sustain.

15. These are extreme circumstances however, and we are actively exploring additional options for assisting New Zealanders who may become stranded overseas. These are presented in the annexed table, and below we outline those proposals we think warrant the greatest consideration. The options requiring greater government intervention also represent higher per capita cost, opportunity cost at a time when resources are under pressure, set precedents s9(2)(g)(i) and raise issues of equity (including amongst travellers, and with respect to New Zealanders at home). We also need to keep in mind the capacity of the Ministry to pursue multiple options simultaneously.

Changes to travel advisories

16. Where New Zealanders are resident overseas we propose to encourage them to take into account the circumstances (eg ability to access quality health care) in their country of residence in reaching a decision to remain or return to New Zealand.
17. s6(a), s9(2)(g)(i)

18. It will be important to continue to be transparent about actions the Ministry is taking with respect to New Zealand government staff off-shore and their dependents.

Making funds available for unanticipated expenses

19. Currently MFAT maintains a small fund of money that can be loaned (interest free) to New Zealand citizens when all other options have been exhausted.

s9(2)(g)(i), s9(2)(f)(iv)

20. We could explore options for expanding access to these funds including publicity, widening the criteria, relaxing the requirement that individuals first explore other funding avenues eg family, or streamlining approval processes. We understand that a majority of travel insurance policies exclude coverage of Covid-19 related costs, claiming *force majeure*.

21. On 17 March Canada announced an emergency fund for its citizens stranded abroad. s6(b)

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s6(b)

22. Another option would be for the Ministry to approach commercial banks to ask them to consider making it easier for individuals to extend their credit card limit, relax repayment timeframes, lower interest rates or put in place other measures that would provide individuals with cashflow to cover unexpected costs eg re-booking flights.

23. s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

24. s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)

25. New Zealanders in Australia are starting to request intervention from the New Zealand government to access Australian support due to job losses from Covid-19. Eligibility depends on a number of factors, including visa class and length of residence in Australia. Some New Zealanders will be eligible for a A\$750 one-off payment for households receiving social security payments in Australia and business support will be available to New Zealand businesses with a registered Australian business number. s6(a)

Commercial airlines to bring New Zealanders home

26. s9(2)(ba)

s6(b)

Government funded assisted departure flights

27. As noted above, we have already conducted two assisted departure flights out of Wuhan and Darwin (for passengers of the Diamond Princess cruise ship evacuated from Japan by Australia). These s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(j), s9(2)(g)(i)

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s9(2)(b)(ii), s9(2)(j), s9(2)(g)(i) were funded out of MFAT's budget (with a \$500 contribution from passengers). These marked a departure from previous practice whereby we have not put on our own assisted departure flights, making use of partner country flights where necessary.

28. Given the range of locations now affected by Covid-19, MFAT's strong preference is to maintain the position that the Wuhan and Diamond Princess assisted departure flights were exceptional. Any additional assisted departure flights would likely set a precedent, raise equity issues, and come at significant cost to the Government at a time of economic difficulty.

29. Flights using New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) aircraft are a challenging proposition beyond Australia and the Pacific Islands region.

30. There may, however, be a stronger case for assisted departure where individuals considered to be high risk are involved, and/or where medical facilities in the country are very limited. In most cases assisted departure would only be viable in conjunction with one or more 5 Nations partners. We suggest the following set of criteria upon which we would base advice on a case-by-case basis (with no particular weighting):

- Assisted departure is for individuals who are fit for travel according to advice from health authorities.
- No commercial flight options to New Zealand are available.
- It is unsafe to shelter in place.
- 5 Nations partners are evacuating their citizens.
- The New Zealand health system is not overwhelmed.

31. Any assisted departure from the Pacific would enable New Zealand to assist third-country nationals. Given the high financial and opportunity cost of assisted departure flights, any missions beyond the Pacific Islands, and are unlikely to be logistically viable beyond the Asia-Pacific rim.

32. In considering either the charter option at commercial rates or a government-funded assisted departure, we would work closely with our 5 Nations partners (Australia, UK, US, Canada) to request seats on their evacuation flights from difficult locations for New Zealand citizens as we did with the Diamond Princess. Evacuees would still require flights to New Zealand and the New Zealand Government may be expected to make these arrangements. All our 5 Nations partners note on their websites that citizens should not rely on assisted departure flights to get home.

	Government Supported		Government Provided
	Shelter in Place	Return to New Zealand	Assisted Departure Operation
	<p>Remain in country, with New Zealand government support e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial assistance to cover medical, accommodation and/or living expenses; either with undertaking to repay s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i) Extension of MSD financial support including pensions s6(a) s9(2)(b)(ii) Extended consular assistance with seeking accommodation/ medical care/visa extensions. 	<p>Return to New Zealand partially government funded or organised e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Financial assistance to pay for return to New Zealand; either with undertaking to repay s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i) Encourage airlines to maintain service or put on additional ad-hoc services. s9(2)(j), s6(a) Extended consular assistance with travel visa requirements Subsidise commercial flight 	<p>Return to New Zealand via:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government-chartered flight or ship, or NDZF operation Could involve partnering with 5 Nations country.
Conditions	s9(2)(f)(iv), s9(2)(g)(i)		