

Egypt Crisis Spurs Rush for Aid at U.S. Rescue-Travel Companies

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By Sonja Elmquist

Feb. 2 (Bloomberg) -- U.S. emergency-travel specialists such as On Call International and Medex Global Solutions are rushing to arrange evacuations from Egypt for tourists, students and business people who bought protection for their trips.

As unrest spread in Egypt, more than 500 clients had been flown out on chartered jets as of yesterday, On Call and Medex said. Security workers moved through Cairo in armored vans to track down customers amid spotty telephone service and street signs toppled in demonstrations, the companies said.

"The situation is very fluid," Charlie LeBlanc, president of Medex's security services group, said in an interview. "Military checkpoints were popping up; curfew times were changing; protesters were setting up roadblocks, too."

Emergency evacuations are part of some travel-insurance policies, which can provide repatriation for customers who are injured or caught up in political strife abroad. Flights from Egypt set up by providers such as Baltimore-based Medex supplement those handled by the federal government.

Departures are difficult, with Cairo International Airport under curfew from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m. local time, On Call Chief Executive Officer Mike Kelly said in an interview. In effect, that means planes can land only until about 2 p.m., he said.

About 1,600 U.S. citizens left Egypt through yesterday under the State Department airlift unveiled on Jan. 30, a spokeswoman, Julie Reside, said in an e-mail. That's roughly half the total of requests for help. About 50,000 Americans are registered with the U.S. Embassy, the State Department said.

Flight Canceled

Some are turning to rescue-travel providers as their options dwindle.

Delta Air Lines Inc., the only U.S. carrier with nonstop Cairo service, canceled today's flight to New York's John F. Kennedy airport as it has since late last week when anti-government protests escalated. In the U.K., charter company Air Partner Plc said 1,200 people left Cairo in rented business jets and airlines in 2 1/2 days.

Travel insurers are expanding their service offerings in response to global events, said Linda Kundell, spokeswoman for the U.S. Travel Insurance Association, a Washington-based trade group whose members include eight travel-assistance companies.

Political Risk

Policies generally cover expenses related to scheduling or weather-induced travel disruptions, and typically cost 4 percent to 8 percent of a trip, Kundell said. Medical evacuations are a common feature. Often a separate package must be purchased for political evacuations, she said, and trips to countries deemed the most dangerous command higher premiums.

Closely held Medex has evacuated 500 people from Egypt in the past week, moving passengers mainly to large hub airports in Europe, LeBlanc said.

“Our first large-scale evacuation was Jakarta in 1996,” Medex’s LeBlanc said, recalling the political tensions in the Indonesian capital that spilled into anti-government violence. “Now it seems like every year something big is going on.”

On Call, which is also closely held and bills itself as the largest travel-assistance provider to students and leisure travelers, airlifted about 70 U.S. university students from Cairo and Alexandria to Athens. From there, the Boston-based company arranged commercial flights home.

“Egypt seven days ago was viewed as no security risk,” Kelly said. “Usually we have more time. After four days, we decided they had to go.”

Knocking on Doors

With Internet service down and Egyptian telephone systems unreliable, On Call workers resorted at times to knocking on doors and asking neighbors to point out clients’ local addresses, Kelly said. Driving across Cairo to the airport may have taken some evacuees four hours, twice as long as the flight to Athens, he said.

“It’s a very time-consuming process,” Kelly said.

Medex’s LeBlanc said airport authorities held a planeload of his passengers on the runway for nine hours on Jan. 31 as the government searched all departing aircraft anew for fleeing Egyptian politicians or large sums of cash.

Egypt was considered to be a country of “medium” risk in a Jan. 19 report by Aon Risk Solutions, a division of insurer Aon Corp. That assessment, released before protests paralyzed Cairo, took into account such threats as strikes, riot, civil commotion and terrorism, and supply chain disruption.

Aon Risk Solutions judged 19 countries to be riskier in its annual review, while 11 nations were deemed less risky. Somalia, North Korea, and Venezuela were rated “very high” while New Zealand, western Europe and Canada earned a “low risk” rating.

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