



**TRAVEL IN UNHEALTHY TIMES: KEEPING STRONG
AND CARRYING ON**

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Tickets, money, passports? Check. Check. Check.

Sleepcount to departure date? Getting smaller and smaller.

The excitement around upcoming travel is growing, the anticipation sweetening.

And then news breaks: there has been a breakout. A virus with an unfamiliar name has started to spread. As are the fears of the potential of escalation. Like a fever, news coverage starts to burn with a feeling of panic. More is unknown about the situation than known. All that is certain – travel is cautioned.

Suddenly, rapidly, travel warnings are being put out around the risk of going to the nation. Your destination!

Cautions spread like a contagion, reaching beyond areas directly impacted to those that may, just may, see the spread come their way. And even those far beyond logic but simply linked because of lack of understanding of the situation, and the geography. Guilt by association.

Rapidly, for travellers the beauty of an upcoming holiday (or buzz of an imminent business trip) is turning into a beast. Even with little concrete information, opinions get louder and louder. Official opinions start sending out advisories, with roll-on consequences across

Concerns of those nearby turn to firmly asked, clearly rhetorical questions: *“You’re not really going, are you?”*

Now what?

THE FAMILIARITY OF HEALTH FEARS IN TRAVEL

Alerts of a problem turning to travel pandemonium is no longer a rare occurrence. Over the past decade alone, several health crises have led to widescale panic resulting in paralysis of movements of people, immediately followed by the ripple effect on national economies, societies, identities and psyches. SARS, H5N1, MERS, Ebola, Zika – the list continues to grow.

Whether short-lived crisis or prolonged, the damage is deep, and more often than not, devastating, both for those nations genuinely suffering the crisis and those incorrectly impacted. Ebola reminded us of this reality, painfully. The entire continent of Africa was, by many, incorrectly labeled as high risk despite the actual impact zone being a limited region in West Africa and the World Health Organisation (WHO) overtly stating:

“WHO does not recommend any ban on international travel or trade, in accordance with advice from the WHO Ebola Emergency Committee. Travel restrictions and active screening of passengers on arrival at sea ports, airports or ground crossings in non-

affected countries that do not share borders with affected countries are not currently recommended by WHO.”

And yet, the Southern African region saw extended double-digit drops in tourism activity, even though the distance from the Ebola zone to Madrid and Moscow was significantly closer than the Ebola zone was to Mombasa. Even once travel activity restrengthens, the enduring effect on national image of the nation is bruising. To this day, a year on from the Ebola zone having been declared Ebola-free, travellers are still asked about exposure to West Africa.

More recently: the Zika virus, initially detected in the early weeks of 2016 and is still spreading from its Central American location of first detection to the East, initially Singapore. The virus, still trying to be understood, has played havoc on not only global travel and tourism, especially honeymoon and babymoon destinations in the Caribbean as well as Central and South America suffering from being on the front line of concerns of implications on unborn children, present and future. Across the travel industry, airlines, cruise ships and hotels began offering cancellations for travellers, empathetic to especially pregnant or hopeful-to-be-pregnant women.

Momentum grew from the outset, causing a natural building of confidence around reconsideration of travel plans, justified or not. Even before the end of January 2016, just days after news first broke of the virus, cancellations were coming through. As expressed by Jack Ezon, president of the New York based travel company Ovation Vacations, who had seen over 50 cancellations come through for clients planning travel to Mexico and the Caribbean,:

“I have a lot of clients who are pregnant or trying to get pregnant, so they’re scared and are halting their travel plans altogether or rebooking to travel within the U.S. instead.”

Sadly the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil was also stung by the Zika virus. A cascade of cancellations by both Games athletes and fans alike saw Games organisers suffering in a way no megaevent team could have planned for. On the eve of the Games, an array of high profile athletes pulled out of Games participation, only reinforcing fears, including:

Rory McIlroy (Golf), Vijay Singh (Golf), Thomas Berdych (Tennis), Adam Scott (Golf), Louis Oosthuizen (Golf), Shane Lowry (Golf), Charl Schwartzel (Golf), Dominic Thiem (Tennis), Feliciano Lopez (Tennis), Bernard Tomic (Tennis), Tejay van Garderen (Cycling), Nick Kyrgios (Tennis), Jason Day (Golf), Dustin Johnson (Golf), Jordan Spieth (Golf), Milos Raonic (Tennis), Simona Halep (Tennis). Source: International Business Times

Medals were lost by non-participation, not to mention hype, hope and vital economic gains for those calling Rio and Brasil ‘home’.

UNITED FRONT FOCUSING ON FACTS BEFORE FEAR

Often, and naturally where healthcare concerns are present, fiction can eclipse the facts of the situation. For the global T&T sector, having experienced travel panics in the past and knowing

there will be more in the future, leaders across the T&T sector have learnt invaluable lessons, especially as regards the need to carefully, clearly and quickly:

- Identify, monitor and manage situations regarding health crisis, and crisis per se,
- Align networks
- Centralize communication
- Contain the impact
- Establish and mobilise a path to recovery
- Share learnings

For this reason, a global task force of leading entities known as The Travel and Transport Task Force was established in August 2014 as a vehicle for immediate, inclusive and aligned international cooperation of governments and the transport sector. Task force members include UNWTO, IATA, WTTC, ICAO, ACI, CLIA and others.

This, alongside the UNWTO-lead Travel Emergency Response Network <http://rcm.unwto.org/content/about-tourism-emergency-response-network-tern-0>, the task force works to enable rapid, accurate, global assessment of risks, paths to recovery.

In the case of the Zika virus, the WHO was clear in its assessment of the situation, discouraging travel bans being imposed on destinations impacted by, or neighbouring, the Zika virus.

The UNWTO was firm in its echo of the WHO's assessment and greater task force's agreement of messaging, stating clearly:

“Travellers should refer to the health advice prior to travel and take precautions against mosquito bites. As advised by WHO, travellers should stay informed about Zika virus and other mosquito-borne diseases and consult their local health or travel authorities if they are concerned. It is important is to ensure quick and transparent information is provided to travellers as a precautionary measure and to avoid misinterpretations about the situation.”

In the end, while the fear of the Zika virus kept many athletes and fans away, the 2016 Rio Olympics Committee was pleased to report on August 25th, following the Games' conclusion, that:

“From the reports WHO received from national health authorities, there have so far been no laboratory confirmed cases of Zika virus in anyone associated with the Olympics.”

For leaders within the task force, the need to ensure stability of the travel & tourism sector remains paramount in such times of crisis. To fail to unite, align efforts, manage risks, and strengthen recovery efforts, could result in disabling of the sector's ability to create and sustainable economic and social wellbeing of nations.

Not to mention identity and spirit.

Dr Rifai, Secretary General of the UNWTO, is strong in his point of view regarding the need for collective efforts, maintaining calm into and through the storm:

“Facing crisis has become a way of life. Whatever the crisis might be, we must not panic. To immediately put travel warnings double-victimises the people of the country. First, they must face the crisis at hand. And then they must suffer the stopping to tourists that they need to rebuild their economy, and their spirits. Working with the WHO and our other partners is an important way to make sure that tourism can help countries through crisis.”

Will our future face crisis once more? Undoubtedly.

And we as a global T&T community prove our resilience. We must, as one, keep calm, and travel on.

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