

A Helping Hand to British Nationals in Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka has strong ties to the UK, where British Nationals ranging from tourists, to residents, and those on business and retirement comprise a large portion of foreign visitors to the Country. The Consular Office at the British High Commission in Colombo is dedicated to providing assistance to British Nationals faced with an emergency or any difficulties during

their stay in Sri Lanka. During her visit to Sri Lanka Helen Wright, Consular Director for South Asia Region of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office spoke about the facilities and services offered by the Consular Office as well as the importance of being prepared when travelling to a foreign country.

Words Udeshi Amarasinghe

Each year over 100,000 British Nationals enter the country with the majority never needing to come in contact with the Consular Office – a fact that can be attributed to a trouble free stay. “The Consular Service is in place to assist British Nationals, who run into difficulties or need some form of assistance overseas,” states Helen Wright. As such, accidents, hospitalisation, victims of crime, loss of travel documents, and in the event of death or any other emergency while overseas, the role of the Consular Office comes into play.

At such a time the Consular office extends a helping hand to navigate the local system or dispenses advice and takes necessary steps to tackle situations. For instance the Consular Office issues emergency travel documents and visits those in hospital as they may be travelling alone and in need of support. “Traveller’s may encounter communication issues since they do not know the local languages. At times the facilities may not be what they expect during those instances and we step in, to look into their welfare,” explains Helen Wright.

In the case where a traveller has a brush with the law the Consular Office makes visits to the prison to ensure the welfare of the British National, however they will not get involved in the legal process. As such assistance will be provided to the extent of securing an English speaking lawyer to represent the British National. Helen further elaborated that, “the Consular Office also liaises with the Police. At times the progress on Police investigations may be slow, and generally a British National expects certain measures to be taken quickly. We register our interest with the Police, track the progress and keep the British National informed. That is the maximum we can do.”

The Consular Office offers support where in an emergency, help can be sought to get in touch with the relevant people in the UK. “We may, on request, put them in contact with lawyers or doctors, but we ourselves don’t provide that professional advice. Similarly we do not offer financial support, but help is afforded for them to get in touch with friends and families, or have access to their bank accounts in such

instances where they have had their wallet stolen," she elaborated.

"The UK winter is a Busy time for the Consular Office as tourists visit Sri Lanka to enjoy a better climate"

Many retired British Nationals have made Sri Lanka their home because of the beautiful climate. They may not have visited the UK in a very long time and not be in touch with their family. "That can be quite difficult. In such instances in an emergency situation such as an accident or death we assist them, however, possible," she assures. This may include connecting them with family and friends and making sure they receive the relevant support. While there exists a large expatriate community here that generally does not face many issues, the Consular Office assists them in acquiring documents such as birth certificates and death certificates. "We assist them in the event of a death, providing support to the families as well," she says.

The Consular Office, she states does not provide general travel information or lifestyle advice. "With direct flights by British Airways and Sri Lankan Airlines, travelling to Sri Lanka has been made that much more easier. Sri Lanka is a popular destination and those who visit speak well about the country and the facilities available." The busy months for the Consular Office is during the period of November to February. The UK winter is a popular time for tourists to visit Sri Lanka to enjoy a better climate. "We also have those who come throughout the year to do business. Additionally we have residents, people who have connections to Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan families that are living in the UK - British Nationals come to Sri Lanka for various reasons, not just as tourists."

While observing that many British Nationals who visit Sri Lanka never come across the Consular due to a trouble free visit, she notes a number of instances where the need arises, as may be the case anywhere in the world. "People might lose their passport, be a victim of a crime, have an accident and become hospitalised anywhere in the world. The proportion that we see in terms of Consular cases is very small compared to the overall number of the visitors who come here, which is a good thing," she adds further.

Another important aspect for a tourist is travel insurance as often it is seen that people travel without it. "In the time of an accident, private health care can be much more expensive than they realise. We cannot assist with money. That is a very difficult area. Similarly, if their money is stolen; again, we cannot replace that,

therefore having proper insurance is extremely important," she stresses.

The Consular also advises British Nationals on basic precautions such as keeping their documents safely and being aware of what is stipulated in the documents. "We do not process passports ourselves within the country. We have to explain to them that they need to send their application to Hong Kong to be processed, which can take a few weeks. Providing emergency travel documentation is very expensive," elaborates Helen Wright.

According to the Consular Director, the support received from local authorities in Sri Lanka has been very good. "The Consular team has very good relationships with the Police, Immigration, Prisons, hospitals and airport. At times we only need to make a phone call. For instance those who arrive as tourists, want to prolong their stay after they see the country, but they do not have the right visa. Then we direct them to the Department of Immigration and Emigration." In turn British Nationals are encouraged to obtain the correct visa before arriving in the country so that they may stay longer or work. "Even the hotels and airlines have been very supportive," she says adding that "after the tsunami and volcanic ash many hotels gave their rooms for free and even airlines would call us and tell us to inform our nationals that flights are available. This strong relationship has been of help to us."

A key message of the Consular Office is that travellers should be prepared before they visit the country.

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The provision of communication material to keep travellers informed prior to their visit and after is an important aspect of Consular work. A travel advisory booklet called Travel Tips that has been done is distributed at the Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau office in London, "they give the book to tour operators, and to anyone who walks in and asks about Sri Lanka, before visiting the country. The booklet is also distributed to potential travellers and is available at Bandaranaike and Mattala Rajapaksa International airports SLTPB Counters." 'Travel Advice' is also made available on their website. "Locally we have travel brochures, trip brochures and posters. The team here does a large amount of work to get our message out to the people and we provide information about local laws and customs," she says of the efforts to encourage visitors to be prepared for the journey in advance.

“We have our ‘Know Before You Go’ FCO’s KBYG campaign in the UK. We use the media, airports and tour operators for this campaign. Additionally we have the campaign ‘know before you go partners’, which includes many of the major tour companies such as British airlines and travel insurance companies. They have links to our ‘Travel Advice’ from their websites,” she adds. This helps get the message across as many people book their holidays online and with tour companies. Visitors are also encouraged to subscribe to ‘Travel Advice’ as well as to visit the Consular Office Facebook page.

The Consular Office is working on some interesting communications material, which includes posters that provide key messages to be displayed at local cafes where British Nationals might go out to relax. This includes general safety messages to women anywhere in the world, to ensure that they take care of themselves while travelling. “These could be little things such as organising their own transport to and from a place to their accommodation,” Helen Wright says.

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In the South Asian region Sri Lanka stands out as the most popular destination for British tourists. “UK has many links with South Asia. There are large Diaspora communities in the UK from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and India. That means we have many connections with the British Nationals coming back to visit their families, or friends. We have a real mix. Sri Lanka has obviously both groups of visitors – particularly, tourists. And that is growing,” Helen Wright said on a concluding note.

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