

Expats flee Middle East chaos

BY SARAH DOBSON

THE CRISIS IN Libya caught many unaware. Despite its location in the Middle East, under a totalitarian regime, the country had enjoyed years of relative stability. But with the recent uprisings spreading across the region, at least three Canadian companies — Suncor Energy, SNC-Lavalin and Pure Technologies — had to move quickly to evacuate employees.

"We wish to thank all of those who made this difficult journey for their courage and patience, and thanks also to their families, friends and colleagues for their support and understanding. We know how difficult this period was for you all, and are glad that everyone made it out in perfect safety, despite trying conditions," said a release from SNC-Lavalin, which also thanked everyone who worked tirelessly to ensure the evacuation's success.

While the situation in the Middle East surprised many, these kinds of disruptions can happen pretty quickly, said Stephen Cryne, president and CEO of the Canadian Employee Relocation Council, citing 9-11, the SARS pandemic and the Japanese earthquake and tsunami.

"That's the thing today, many of our companies are global in their operations and there's no shortage of things going on, whether it's a natural disaster, the kind of political unrest that's taking place in the Middle East or what happened in Mumbai a couple of years ago (attack on a hotel) or the (bombing of the) London subway, the Madrid trains," he said. "What you're talking about is how do you move people around in the throes of chaos, which is what's going on over there right now."

And while larger companies might have well-laid-out contingency plans, it's the smaller employers that could be unprepared.

"Everybody thinks that companies that are overseas are large multinational corporations but today they're not, they are increasingly small- and medium-sized enterprises," said Cryne.

The problem is some employers consider certain locations as safe zones but, of course, there have been attacks in New York, London and Madrid, which are "supposedly three advanced cities in the world where these things don't happen," said Alex Puig, regional security director for Americas at International SOS in Philadelphia.

Employers should be treating all relocations the same, regardless of whether it's a stable city or one in chaos, such as Cairo during the Egyptian rising, he said.

Companies should monitor the stability of any political situation where employees are located, said Ann Wyganowski, vice-president of HZX Business Continuity Planning in Toronto.

"There are indicators that a situation is escalating and a good, proactive employer will get their people out of there well in advance of that sort of situation erupting."

But Canadians and Americans are not necessarily the most global of travellers, said Wyganowski.

"In North America, we are very myopic about rest of world," she said. "There is a lot of complacency because we live in a peaceful country."

It's important to prepare in advance, in the quiet time, with a multi-disciplined approach that involves well-researched, well-developed plans that cover for evacuations, business continuity and project security, said Cryne.

"(The good companies) realize the critical importance of it, to their employees, to the families of the employees, to the future of the projects. It's all part of that whole process. If you want people to go overseas, you better make sure you're giving them the kinds of supports they need."

The two most basic parts of the planning are being aware of where your people are at all times — details of their itineraries and any changes in plans — and knowing how to communicate with them, said Puig.

"You should be prepared to answer those questions on a moment's notice because, when a terrible event happens, those are the questions you're going to ask yourself: 'Do I have anybody there and how do I communicate with them?'"

Communication tools, such as the Internet or cellphones, can be severely hampered or taken down by a government, so knowing employee locations is even more crucial, said Puig. If, for example, terrorists take over a hotel where employees have checked in, it's crucial to advise the government before it storms the building.

"Any scrap of information is worth its weight in gold in that type of scenario," he said.

A lot of people talk about a "black swan event" — meaning it will never happen — but those are pretty rare, said Jay Rosenblatt, a partner at SimpsonWigle Law in Hamilton. And if it's a foreseeable disruption, the board and senior management have a legal obligation to ensure the safety and security of employees, he said.

"The courts do not expect the golden standard for trying to look into a crystal ball and figure everything out," said Rosenblatt.

That means looking at the standards, policies and recommendations of industry associations, looking at international or Canadian standards that are applicable and then adapting them to the company's specific industry and business, he said. Companies should also put together a business continuity or crisis planning committee, involving senior management, employees and professionals to "look at the risks, the impacts and then start developing procedures and policies for safety, security, evacuations, first aid, communication," said Rosenblatt.

Employees who are based or travelling overseas should also be schooled in the basics of travel, said Puig. They can range from the inexperienced, to the experienced, to people who tack on a vacation to the end of a business trip — each company and country can have different plans and levels of support.

"It never hurts to have some sort of refresher training and also to educate them about what the company that's sending you abroad is prepared to do on your behalf," he said.