Seventy-fourth session
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Item 9 of the provisional agenda

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Opinion of the Quality Support and Trade Committee

Note by the Secretary-General

The Secretary-General transmits to the Council the present addendum containing the opinion of the Quality Support and Trade Committee regarding this matter.
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Opinion of the Quality Support and Trade Committee

1. The present note is prepared by the Secretariat (Quality and Trade in Tourism), at the request of the Secretary-General, following the second meeting of the Quality Support and Trade Committee (Madrid, 11-12 November 2004) and in relation to paragraph 70 of document CE/74/8(a), which reads: “The Council’s attention is invited to a particular item on “travel advisories” on which the Committee is expected to issue a separate recommendation.

2. In making its recommendation the Committee had before it, as a draft, a developed version of document CE/74/9, “Recommendations for responsible travel advisories”, under the same title and number CE/74/9 Add.

3. Said recommendation is included in the Committee report and reads as follows:

   - to make Article 6.5 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism a guiding principle of the future Code of Conduct;
   - to replace document CE/74/9 with document QSTC/2/7a Add. (attached) that the Committee considers as being more comprehensive;
   - to choose rather a Code of Conduct approach in which the various provisions of the proposed Recommendations could be accommodated;

4. The Committee therefore suggests that further work can be done on the proposed Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories, in particular using the experience, inter alia, of United Nations Security Risk Management (UNSRM) and the draft International Health Regulations (IHR 2005) in determining public health emergencies of international concern.

5. With respect to the WTO work at international level it is recommended to:

   (a) to adopt "Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories", which could be done by a General Assembly resolution;

   (b) to obtain support for these recommendations through an international consultation involving travel advisory issuing authorities of member and non-member States and competent international organizations, such as ICAO and WHO;

   (c) to keep the issue alive on the agenda of respective WTO’s Regional Commissions to address specific cases which could be brought up by Members;

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1 Report on the implementation and evaluation of the general programme of work for the period 2004-2004
(d) to continue to address the issue through the World Trade Organization;

(e) to address the issue at the United Nations General Assembly through ECOCOC, as requested by the WTO Commission for Africa, and coordinate this measure with the WTO General Assembly resolution or the prior Executive Council decision.
TRAVEL ADVISORIES

Draft

1. This document follows on the preliminary draft discussion paper submitted by the Secretary-General to the Executive Council during its seventy-third session (Hyderabad, India, 8-9 July 2004)\(^1\) and on its revised version submitted to it at its seventy-fourth session (Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, 2-3 December 2004). It is recalled that in response to the first submission, the Council noted with interest the progress made in the effort to address the problem posed by the proliferation of “travel advisories” and requested the Secretary-General to submit to it at its next session a proposal aimed at counteracting this phenomenon and attenuating the drawbacks it causes to many destinations.

Defining the problem

2. Travel advisories, travel advice or recommendations are notices issued by States, in most cases by their foreign relations departments, regarding the characteristics of travel to or in other countries. They are a means of providing information for citizens undertaking trips abroad on entry requirements, local customs, business hours, consular services, weather conditions and alerts, etc. In many respects this information may be on similar topics that are present in commercial information or in official information prepared in the destination countries, although the choice and tenor and actual information provided may significantly differ between the three due to different concerns and perspectives. Travel advice can also be issued by a competent international authority, such as the World Health Organization with respect to health emergencies of international concern.

3. The issue under discussion is the part of travel advisories which explicitly or implicitly may discourage travel to specified countries or their regions by means of expressing caution, warnings or outright prohibitions on the ground of safety and security considerations.

4. Travel advisories are issued in a wide array of formats, from consular sheets and information bulletins to specific travel alerts and announcements to the tourism industry and the media. Increasingly the primary means of distribution is via specific sites on the internet, maintained by Governments concerned, and in some cases includes a facility for alerts sent by e-mail.

5. The internet medium has the advantage of providing direct availability and access to the public in both origin and destination countries. It also allows readers to monitor this information. There seems to be no equal following from the travel warning affected countries and reaction to warnings appears to be more frequent if they issued in English.

\(^1\) It also builds on the position paper referred to in paragraph 12 below.
6. Following the events of 11 September 2001, 12 October 2002 (Kuta, Bali), attacks against tourism facilities and the SARS epidemics, the number and scope of travel advisories (in the latter case by the World Health Organization) have proliferated coinciding with the tourism industry having undergone a series of crises over the past three years. Issuing travel advisories by States is becoming a standard activity and featuring advice and warnings on safety and security problems has become a standing practice.

7. Terrorism, war, disease, and economic problems have all taken their toll and eventually led to changes in the industry, its restructuring and adaptation to new challenges. Appropriate dealing by tourism-generating States with threats and risks in tourism is part of these challenges, since the tourism sector both benefits from State intervention in this area but also reasonably claims to suffer from ill-formulated travel warnings which it cannot control. It can be seen that the main controversies around travel warnings have their origin in terrorist acts and health risks and their interpretation as to the likelihood and intangibility of such future attacks and victims of epidemics in the affected destinations.

8. Member States have frequently complained in WTO meetings about the adverse consequences travel advisories are having on the industry worldwide. The kinds of criticism made of travel advisories are: they are not geographically specific; the real nature of the threat is not made clear; too wide an area is covered; they are inconsistent and unreasonable; they sometimes appear as politically motivated; they are not applied equally to developed and developing countries; the form of presentation is not clear; the update and review of advisories is not frequent enough; or the process of consultation is non-transparent, ambiguous and arbitrary.

**Work by WTO**

9. It is recalled that in his report to the General Assembly at its fifteenth session (Beijing, China, 19-24 October 2003) the Secretary-General referred to travel advisories in the trade context linking liberalization and sustainable development. Concurrently, the programme of work which was adopted by the Assembly for the period 2004-2005, under Quality and Trade in Tourism, seeks a “Recommended model Travel Advisory, and a “WTO service on Travel Advisory clearance/conciliation” as a result of “defining WTO’s role and preparing an Agreement on clearance/conciliation of national Travel Advisories based on objective criteria”.

10. At a much earlier session in 1991, in the “Recommended measures for tourism safety”, the General Assembly recommended that “Every State should undertake necessary measures to “provide to the public, both going on trips abroad and arriving in the country... appropriate documentation and information on tourism safety...”, including “warnings with respect to possible threats at tourism sites and facilities” or “possible health hazards” (A/RES/284(IX), II.2 (c) (iii) & (iv)). The practice of travel advisories can therefore be interpreted as being in conformity with these recommendations.

11. Under the current programme, the questions around travel advisories correspond to a subsidiary body of the Executive Council, the Quality Support
and Trade Committee, which dealt with this topic during its first meeting (Madrid, 15-16 April 2004). In its report, also submitted to the Council members, the Committee recommended:

"pursuing preparations for the international consultation sought by the Secretary-General, to prepare for such consultation a document - a code of conduct on travel advisories (guidance how to do such advisories) - to be based on provision 5 of Article 6 of the Global Code of Ethics, and to seek cooperation with ICAO and WHO in developing a common approach to travel advisories. The Committee also recommended considering clearance and clearing-house functions of WTO on travel advisories in which objective safety and security criteria could be factored in".

12. In view of this need of coordination, the WTO position on travel advisories was presented at the twelfth session of the Facilitation (FAL) Division of ICAO (Cairo, Egypt, 22 March to 2 April 2004) and is publicly available on the respective internet pages of both organizations. The FAL Division of ICAO largely followed on the WTO proposal and adopted the following recommendation:

Recommendation on Travel Advisories adopted by the Division 2

Contracting States, when issuing or significantly amending any Travel Advisory which cautions against travel to specified countries or regions thereof, should:

a) when time permits, inform other States, including both those issuing and those identified in Travel Advisories, with a view to mitigating the impact of the Advisory and ensuring to the extent possible consistency in the criteria for issuing the Advisory and consistency in the form and content of the Advisory;

b) ensure that the Travel Advisory is specific in terms of both geography and nature of threat, and is expressed in terms which are objective, clear and transparent; and

c) place an expiry date only regarding health issues on the Travel Advisory and/or ensure that a mechanism is in place for continuous review of the Travel Advisory prior to that date.

Work by WTO Regional Commissions

13. At its twenty-sixth meeting held in Damascus, Syria, on 29 April, the WTO Commission for the Middle East thoroughly reviewed the issue of travel advisories during a technical debate on measures to strengthen market confidence in tourism destinations in the region and adopted a decision which reads as follows:

"The Commission,

2 The lead-in to the Recommendation in the Report of the Division reads: "While recognizing the right and duty of sovereign States to protect their own citizens, the Division adopted the following recommendation:"
Having carried out a technical debate on measures to strengthen market confidence in tourism destinations in the region, in implementation of the Manama Declaration on Cooperation and Partnerships in Tourism Development in the region

Having examined the ways in which travel advisories are prepared, revised and updated and the issues and concerns arising from the different perspectives of generating country governments and tourism operators and destination countries' tourism sectors,

Bearing in mind WTO's position on travel advisories, as defined by Article 6 of the Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, and elaborated upon by the WTO Quality Support and Trade Committee,

1. **Emphasizes** the importance of a transparent exchange of information between stakeholders in tourism destinations and authorities in tourist generating countries, so as to ensure accuracy and fairness of the information that supports decision-making on the issuing of travel advisories and to enable timely revision, updating and, where appropriate, removal of cautionary advice;

2. **Notes with appreciation** the measures that are currently being taken by the competent authorities of some generating countries to this end;

3. **Requests** the preparation by WTO of a set of Guidelines and recommended practices that would constitute a Code of Conduct on travel advisories, addressing legitimate concerns expressed by Members on this important issue;

4. **Further proposes** the formation of a reference committee to consider possible disputes arising from non-compliance of the above-mentioned Code of Conduct;

5. **Expresses its appreciation and gratitude** to the Governments of Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom for their participation in the discussion of this important issue; and

6. **Entrusts** the Secretary-General with submitting the above-mentioned decision, on its behalf, to the Executive Council."

14. The issue was also discussed by the WTO Commission for Africa at its forty-first meeting held on 9 May in Victoria (Mahe), Seychelles and the decision adopted to this effect reads as follows:

"**Aware** that "travel advisories" issued by the governments of tourist-generating countries without prior consultation with the governments of tourist-receiving countries could harm the tourism-based economic development in many African countries,

3- **Entrusts** the Secretary-general with conducting a process of reflection on the contribution that the WTO could provide to minimize the negative impacts of "travel advisories" on the image of African countries and on the tourism destinations in the region; and

4- **Requests** the Secretary-General to propose, after consulting with the members of the Executive Council, a text on "travel advisories" to the General Assembly of the United Nations through ECOSOC."
Work by other organizations and bodies

15. Specific work carried out by the World Health Organization, notably on the preparation of the revised *International Health Regulations 2005 (IHR 2005)*, is most relevant in this respect and could be used as a guideline for the issuance of travel warnings. The instrument in question is annex 2 to *IHR 2005* called "Decision instrument for States to assess and notify events potentially constituting a public health emergency of international concern", the use of which may enable States to notify the event to WHO under the *International Health Regulations* which in turn may constitute the basis for the issuance of health advice for travelers.

16. The United Nations (Office of the United Nations Security Coordinator) has in place the Security Risk Management (UNSRM) process. It focuses on threats, risks and vulnerability, provides for threat assessment - consisting of situational analysis and determination of threats; for vulnerability assessment (determining vulnerabilities and mitigating factors); risk analysis (impact and likelihood of occurrence), and programme assessment. Accordingly, impacts can be negligible, minor, moderate, severe and critical. Although conceived to be used for the protection of the United Nations premises and operations, the system offers some clues and solutions which might be used in threat and risk evaluation and communication in tourism activities.

17. In the World Trade Organization the issue of unfair travel advisories is regarded as a measure restricting "consumption abroad", i.e. the volume and value of tourism services which can be consumed in the destination countries by visitors coming from the travel-warring issuing countries. So far, however, there has been no dispute in this area brought in by a WTO-OMC member State or suggested by the tourism sector of an affected country.

18. In the ASEAN area, at their sixth meeting, held in Phnom Penh, Cambodia on 24 January 2004 and attended by WTO, the ASEAN Ministers of Tourism committed themselves to "Create an ASEAN webpage to provide precise and timely information on tourism safety and security" and pledged that "This Tourism Safety webpage will provide the official information on safety and security for public and private media as well as foreign governments." This was followed by the meeting of the Commonwealth Ministers of Tourism (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 20-21 March) which discussed travel advisories at length and at which WTO was also involved.

19. The most recent action has been taken by PATA (Pacific Asia Travel Association). In its nine-point code for Fair Travel Advisory Issuance adopted on 20 October 2004. PATA calls for travel warnings to be lifted or lowered as soon as practical and for all destinations to be treated equally. PATA also lends itself as a "broker" providing that any PATA member destination that feels it is being unfairly assessed by an advisory is encouraged to inform PATA so that it could present the case to the issuing body. It also plans to seek the standardization of travel advisories via the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).
20. It should also be noted that during the recent period some governments have reviewed and modified their policies and practices regarding the issuance of travel advisories, in particular due to initiatives and pressure by the affected countries and advocacy groups.

Proposed action by the World Tourism Organization

Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories

21. In complying with its mission and the objectives of its work programme, WTO is expected to provide a practical interpretation of the rules outlined in WTO’s Global Code of Ethics for Tourism\(^3\) and request that warnings contained in travel advisories should respond to the following two principles:

(a) When issuing cautionary travel advisories, governments need to strive to find the right balance—keeping in mind the protection of their countries' nationals in specific places and from specific, objectively documented threats and risks and, at the same time, the economic consequences and possible loss of jobs and incomes an ill-formulated warning could cause.

(b) Travel warnings should be issued only when they are strictly necessary for safety and security reasons, and they should remain in place for the shortest possible time commensurate with the type and level of threats and risks in point.

22. These two principles can be developed into the following ten “Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories” (which could also be translated into rules of a Code of Conduct to provide a description of the contents of a typical Advisory), which should be used for advisory issuing authorities and their partners.

1) A wide variety of governmental and non-governmental sources should be used, including consultations with other issuing States, in gathering information before warnings are published.

Those responsible for travel advisories should consult with a variety of information sources both within their own government and outside of government, as well as the competent authorities of other issuing States, in

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\(^3\) Article 6, provision 5: “Governments have the right-and the duty- especially in a crisis, to inform their nationals of the difficult circumstances, or even the dangers they may encounter during their travels abroad; it is their responsibility however to issue such information without prejudicing in an unjustified or exaggerated manner the tourism industry of the host countries and the interests of their own operators; the contents of travel advisories should therefore be discussed beforehand with the authorities of the host countries and the professionals concerned; recommendations formulated should be strictly proportionate to the gravity of the situations encountered and confined to the geographical areas where the insecurity has arisen; such advisories should be qualified or cancelled as soon as a return to normality permits.”
order to make the best-informed decisions. A dialogue between staff at home and consular staff abroad should be initiated so that possible economic implications can be fully considered from the very start of the process. Those responsible for the ultimate issuance of cautionary travel advisories should make sure that the threat and risk evaluation is not amplified or exaggerated at each consultation level, bottom-up.

Consultations should also be made with international organizations, including the World Tourism Organization, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization and the International Civil Aviation Organization, to make sure information on the threat or risk is consistent. In the case of the World Tourism Organization, use should also be made of its Safety and Security focal points.

States issuing cautionary travel advisories should share information in a spirit of cooperation and transparency with respect to the criteria determining the need of an advisory or warning while respecting potential differences in threat evaluation according to nationality and its consistency in the content.

2) **Consultations with the affected government and tourism industry should be made before the travel warning is issued.**

A dialogue with the government concerned should be started before an advisory is put in place, except in the case of a serious emergency when the affected government should be informed simultaneously. Consultations should include the National Tourism Administration, promotion boards and representatives of the private sector. The receiving government should provide timely and transparent information, in the interest of making the advisory as accurate as possible. The private sector consultations should include airlines and tour operators working in the country, in order to fully evaluate the impact of a travel advisory and collect additional information on the current situation from people who are actually on the ground in the destination concerned.

3) **Travel advisories should be accurate, objective, clear and transparent and avoid any suspicion of discrimination or bias**

Cautionary travel advisories need to be fair and factual and avoid expressions of ambiguity. Criteria for issuing an advisory should be applied without discrimination as to race, ethnicity, religion or cultural characteristics of the targeted country.

4) **Travel advisories should not lend themselves to political motivation**

Neither should they be used for political reasons, whether external or internal. Travel warnings, in particular in the extreme form of prohibitions to travel, should not be issued in retaliation for travel restrictions or cautionary advisories put in place by another country or in relation to essentially non-travel considerations.
5) **Travel warnings should be specific about the geographical extent of the problem.**

Advisories that blanket an entire country, or even worse, an entire region should not be issued. Travel advice should be specific about the location of the problem and where it extends within a country. If major tourist centres within the country are not affected by the problem, then they should be listed in the advisory as places that are considered safe.

6) **Travel warnings should be specific about the nature of the threat.**

As much substance, description and factual information as possible needs to be included in the text of the travel advisory. Vague warnings such as, "the threat may exist" serve no useful or practical purpose, except to stir up fears of permanent insecurity and travellers' vulnerability. Advisories using the word 'may' should include explanations of when or at least why the threat is being predicted. A distinction should be made between the types of problems in a destination, some of which might be permanent and others transitory.

7) **Prudence and restraint should be used in evaluating the threat and in the language of the travel advisory.**

As travel advisories can have repercussions for the tourism industry and economy, governments should use them sparingly and only when absolutely necessary. The level of the advisory should be commensurate with the gravity of the threat or risk (negligible, low, medium, high or critical). A destination should not be blacklisted by a travel advisory, when the safety and security problems could be addressed by another type of recommendation, for example, a series of traveller precautions and where to go for help in case of trouble. Language used in travel advisories should avoid alarmism and be proportionate to the reality of the situation and the statistical likelihood of adverse events which may affect the visitor.

8) **Consultations should be made periodically with the affected country about how to remedy the situation and get the travel warning lifted.**

If a dialogue on safety and security issues is undertaken with the affected country, as recommended above, the countries involved should use this exchange as an opportunity to share information and knowledge about how to bring a potentially dangerous situation under control. In a spirit of economic cooperation, assistance could be offered. The government issuing the travel warning should also provide information on the process used for issuing and lifting the warning.

9) **Information contained in travel advisories should be published on a central, easy-to-use and frequently-updated internet site, prior to which the various branches of government involved should coordinate their message to be published in the central site.**

Travel advisories are often communicated by more than one branch of
government, for instance, the Foreign Ministry, the Public Health Authority and the Tourism Administration. They do not always give out the same information and in some cases data may be contradictory. To avoid confusion, one single administration should be in charge of coordinating and publishing travel advisories to ensure the message communicated will be consistent and coherent. A travel advisory website should be maintained as the central information point, providing complete information that is updated on a daily basis.

10) Travel advisories should include a status date and reviews should be announced in advance.
Governments should review the criteria for issuing advisories with the aim of lifting whatever warnings as soon as practicable. The status issue date should always be attached to each respective warning. The overall review should take place at established intervals and be announced on the date of the advisory publication. Information published on Internet websites should be updated at the same time.

23. Further work can be done on these draft recommendations using the experience referred to in paragraphs 15 and 16 above, notably with respect to UNSRM and IHR 2005.

WTO's role as a clearing house and conciliation facilitator

24. While the World Tourism Organization does not have legal authority to actively enforce these recommendations, nor does it have at this time the mandate to issue comprehensive safety information about destinations, it is hoped that member States will comply voluntarily.

25. If a dispute should arise between two WTO member States, it could be settled on a bilateral basis within the framework of the recommendations. If a dispute should arise between a WTO member State and a non-member State, it could be settled within the framework of the recommendations through the mediation of the World Committee on Tourism Ethics.

26. The clearing-house function of WTO could be established by providing cross-references in the WTO internet pages to websites of issuing States, according to States of issuance, States identified and, to the extent possible, to the type of threat.

Action at international level

27. Various inter-related and complementary options are available to WTO to address travel advisories at the international level:

(a) to adopt "Recommendations for Responsible Travel Advisories", which could be done by a General Assembly resolution;

(b) to obtain support for these recommendations through an international consultation involving travel advisory issuing authorities of member and
non-member States and competent international organizations, such as ICAO and WHO;

(c) to keep the issue alive on the agenda of respective WTO’s Regional Commissions to address specific cases which could be brought up by Members;

(d) to continue to address the issue through the World Trade Organization;

(e) to address the issue at the United Nations General Assembly through ECOCOC, as requested by the WTO Commission for Africa, and coordinate this measure with the WTO General Assembly resolution or the prior Executive Council decision.

28. The Executive Council is invited to consider these options for further action, WTO’s future role as a clearing house and conciliation facilitator and, to the extent possible, to review at this drafting stage the proposed recommendations for travel advisories.

Points for decision

Paragraphs 22 to 28