



United States Department of State

*Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs*

*Washington, D.C. 20520*

Dear Dr. Brimmer,

Thank you for your letter regarding the Travel Advisory system and our Consular Information products, through which we provide information so prospective travelers can make informed decision as they plan travel and to keep U.S. citizens safe when they are outside of the United States. To accomplish this, our messages and advice must be viewed as reliable and accurate. We value opportunities to discuss our products and welcome the perspective of organizations like NAFSA on ways to increase their utility and accessibility. Our Consular Officers have participated in recent webinars and briefings with NAFSA members, which we view as essential to informing our audience about how to best use our products and how we produce them.

We recognize our data-driven products can have a profound impact on private and public sectors reliant on international travel. The Department of State strives to encourage and facilitate traveling, working, and studying abroad whenever it is safe to do so.

The continued unpredictable and dynamic nature of the COVID-19 threat means our travel advice must continually adapt to the changing threat landscape. Our recent updates to many Travel Advisory levels were the result of a change to the methodology we use to assess the level of COVID-19 related risk associated with living and traveling in each country and aligns our Travel Advisories closely with the CDC's Travel Health Notices (THN). CDC's THNs take a science-based approach to determining the level of risk in a country due to the COVID-19 incidence rate while also considering COVID-19 testing levels and healthcare infrastructure.

The CDC uses multiple data sources to set their THN levels. However, if a country fails to report data, the CDC's THN will reflect an "Unknown" level of COVID risk. When CDC determines the COVID-19 risk in a country cannot be known due to lack of data, we assign that country a high Travel Advisory level. In such cases, the Department of State and CDC also actively work with those countries and, in many cases, have been able to get additional data leading to updated THN and Travel Advisory levels. We believe it is in everyone's interest for our assessments to be fair and accurate, and we will continue to work to improve our products and the data and methodologies from which we derive them.

In addition to the data the CDC factors into its THN levels, our Travel Advisories consider entry and exit restrictions that are in place for U.S. citizens, the availability of commercial transportation, and whether or not COVID-19 testing is available in order to satisfy the CDC's predeparture testing order. The additional criteria we consider make U.S. citizens aware of situations in which they could become stranded overseas or incur time and money costs waiting for immigration or quarantine processes.

Unfortunately, the global epidemic is far from over and CDC's THNs provide invaluable information for people considering overseas travel. Incidence rates are rising in many of the destinations previously favored by U.S. travelers and students, and many countries still have



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stringent entry/exit restrictions and quarantine requirements in place to halt the spread of COVID-19. In some countries, limited exceptions to entry restrictions are available for students. Our embassies and consulates overseas publish detailed information on COVID-19-related conditions, including details on exceptions to entry restrictions. We strongly recommend that anyone interested in travelling overseas review the COVID-19 page for the embassy or consulate that covers their intended destination.

While we know that not all travelers have the same risk tolerance, our products are written for a general audience to highlight and inform of potentially life-threatening travel risks. We hope that travelers will read our advice, consider how or if it pertains to them, and use it to help make informed decisions. That said, our Travel Advisories are not binding on U.S. citizens and we expect that travelers will make decisions based on their needs and individual circumstances.

Your suggestion to provide a more nuanced approach to our Travel Advisories is well-taken. As we look at ways to evolve the Travel Advisory system, this is indeed something we wish to explore. We currently indicate at the top of each Advisory the reason or reasons a country is assessed at a specific level, with the highest level for any category of risk being the country's overall Travel Advisory level. We also list CDC's THN level in our own Travel Advisories so travelers can take specific account of the level of COVID-19 risk at their intended destination (and along their chosen route). When we have data from a reliable source that indicates a potential risk is geographically specific or otherwise limited, we include this information in the Travel Advisory to provide additional information and advice.

I share your concern that the pandemic has set back opportunities for U.S. citizens to travel, live, work, and study abroad, which could have a tangible future impact. Balancing this with the need to safeguard U.S. citizens from the dangers of the pandemic is a challenge that will continue until the end of the pandemic. Thank you again for reaching out and please do not hesitate to continue to engage with us on these important topics.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ian G. Brownlee', written over a horizontal line.

Ian G. Brownlee