

**MAXINE WATERS**

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March 18, 2020

The Honorable Mike Pompeo  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

As the country responds to the nationwide, and global, impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, I grow increasingly concerned that the State Department's response to United States citizens stranded abroad has failed to safeguard their wellbeing and protect their interests.

On Sunday, March 15, the Moroccan government announced that it would suspend all international flights as part of its effort to stymie the spread of COVID-19. This announcement left an estimated 3,000 Americans stranded in Morocco, without resources, answers, or support.<sup>1</sup> Included among those stranded is a constituent of California's 43<sup>rd</sup> District. These Americans require immediate assistance returning home, which is especially true for those with pre-existing health conditions, who are in danger of running out of their medications and face the prospect of having no access to health care in a foreign country during a global health crisis. The State Department and the United States embassy in Morocco must take whatever actions are necessary and appropriate to enable these stranded Americans to come home immediately.

Constituents have notified their Members of Congress that they are desperate for assistance, having received little to no guidance from embassy officials or other federal government representatives. Stranded Americans have been told to sign up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, which has done little more than send notifications that the Moroccan government has halted all flights in and out of the country, information of which they are clearly already aware. On March 17, travelers were notified by the U.S. embassy in Morocco that commercial flights were available out of the country, and to "contact the airlines immediately" and if travelers were unable to secure a booking, to "present yourself to the airline operator counter."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-18/coronavirus-caught-these-u-s-travelers-in-morocco-theyre-trying-to-get-home>

<sup>2</sup> <https://twitter.com/USEmbMorocco/status/1239949907852759040>

Following these instructions, constituents notified their Members of Congress that they could not get in touch with the airlines over the phone, that the airlines' mobile apps and websites had no information about outbound Moroccan flights, and that the airports were devoid of any staff for them to present themselves to, making it impossible to follow the embassy instructions. The embassy, upon being notified that constituents were unable to follow its instructions, simply told stranded Americans to keep trying. Furthermore, Members were notified by constituents that frustrated airport crowds have been growing riotous, and as such, the airports themselves posed a threat to their physical safety. On March 17, the Moroccan government announced that outbound commercial flights may not be allowed after March 19, causing more distress and panic for stranded Americans who have received no support from their government.<sup>3</sup>

This lack of guidance and support has not only left Americans stranded in Morocco, it has subjected them to unnecessary distress, panic, and trauma. When the State Department's actions, or lack thereof, are juxtaposed with those of other countries assisting citizens stranded in Morocco, it is apparent that the Department has wholly failed to protect Americans in the region.

The United Kingdom, Germany, France, Croatia,<sup>4</sup> Austria,<sup>5</sup> and Spain have successfully repatriated citizens from the region.<sup>6</sup> Germany has gone further, orchestrating a plan to bring 100,000 German citizens home as more countries follow Morocco's example and close borders. Reports indicate that these countries "maintained a steady stream of updates on social media," including the British embassy, which "set up a 24-hour crisis center to ferry its nationals home." In contrast, U.S. authorities have "done little more than direct citizens to book seats on those rescue flights..."<sup>7</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a host of conflicts and chaos with which all United States governments—local, state, and federal—have been forced to rapidly reckon, and I recognize that the task before us is not easy. I further acknowledge that thousands of State Department employees are working tirelessly to address each and every one of these conflicts under the Department's purview. These efforts, however, do not excuse lapses in judgment, especially when such lapses implicate the safety of my constituents and Americans nationwide. The situation in Morocco was not handled by the State Department with any semblance of expediency or efficiency, and I have serious concerns that these subpar results will only repeat in countries which follow Morocco and close their borders. The Americans stranded in Morocco must be allowed to come home immediately.

Therefore, I request that you immediately provide the following information, both to Congress as well as the general public:

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<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/MOROCCOinUK/status/1239997424283848704>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/42205-morocco>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/lifestyle/42205-morocco>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-18/coronavirus-caught-these-u-s-travelers-in-morocco-theyre-trying-to-get-home>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2020-03-18/coronavirus-caught-these-u-s-travelers-in-morocco-theyre-trying-to-get-home>

1. An immediate explanation as to how and when the State Department, as well as United States Ambassador to Morocco David T. Fischer, will implement its plan to repatriate stranded Americans in Morocco, including but not limited to State Department chartered flights leaving the region;
2. Guidance as to when the United States embassy in Morocco and the State Department will establish an emergency hotline that offers citizens stranded in Morocco, including those who have already signed up for the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program, assistance and information;
3. Immediate recommendations and guidance as to how stranded Americans can best protect their health and safety while awaiting transport out of Morocco;
4. A detailed briefing on the Department's operation plans for any Americans stranded, in any country, due to COVID-19 related issues, which shall include how the operations in Morocco failed stranded Americans and what will be done to ensure such failings do not repeat in subsequent countries.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Maxine Waters". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Maxine" and last name "Waters" clearly distinguishable.

Maxine Waters  
Member of Congress