



Over 13 years of Expats helping Expats

SUMMARY OF NOVEMBER 23, 2014 MEETING

At the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, life is never boring. Officials report that just about every day they encounter a new situation.

Paul J. Herman, Chief of the American Citizens Services unit (ACS), spoke to the club last Sunday. ACS is one of three units in the embassy's consular section. Paul said that Bangkok ACS is one of the most active of the ACS units in U.S. embassies around the world. He has a staff of about 20, half U.S. citizens and half Thai. Paul said he was very proud of the contribution of his Thai staff.

ACS deals with documentation services and specific citizen services, such as assisting Americans who have been injured, arrested, etc.

For Americans coming to Thailand, ACS provides a range of services. It produces a regularly updated consular information sheet, available at <http://travel.state.gov/content/travel/english.html> which includes information on visa and entry requirements, safety and security issues, health issues, etc. ACS also provides the latest information on security issues, scams and political events such as street demonstrations via their website <http://bangkok.usembassy.gov>.

Americans can register with the embassy's Smart Traveller Enrolment Program, available at either of the above websites and receive routine, security or emergency messages from the embassy.

The Thai government estimates that there are some 60,000 Americans in Thailand on long-term visas (retirement, student, work, etc.). In 2012, there were 811,000 entries of person from the U.S. into Thailand.

Paul said that the embassy deals with 5,000 passport applications a year in the Bangkok office, and another 1,000 in the Chiang Mai office. Passports are normally issued within 10-14 days. The embassy also handles about 700 reports of birth each year.

In 2013 there were about 300 deaths of U.S. citizens in Thailand, most from natural causes but also some from accidents or foul play. When there is a death, Paul explained, the role of ACS is to oversee the security of the estate and inform the next of kin. ACS also produces the "Consular Report of Death Abroad" of a U.S. citizen, an administrative document that provides

essential facts about the death, disposition of remains, and custody of the personal estate of the deceased U.S. citizen and which can generally be used in legal proceedings in the U.S. as proof of death.

Contacting the next of kin is not always simple, especially when there are multiple families involved. Americans would be well advised to get a will that explains everything they want to have happen when they die (including funeral arrangements).

There are currently about 30 U.S. citizens in Thai jails. Paul said that ACS staff visit them regularly and do what they can to assist, which basically means ensuring that they are treated fairly. The unit has a list of attorneys that it can provide, but being on the list does not constitute a recommendation. If we hear of someone who has just been arrested, Paul said, we may ask one of our volunteer wardens to check it out, especially if the arrest takes place far from Bangkok.

Wardens are volunteers who assist consular sections in disaster preparedness by alerting U.S. citizens to emergency situations and passing on information. Wardens also provide ACS with key information, both about specific individuals and for situational awareness, from the local community or area. There are currently about 100 wardens spread throughout Thailand.

Paul explained that many of the arrests are for visa overstay. There are a lot of deportations every year, the cost of which must be borne by the individuals. ACS may be able to help facilitate payment from family or friends.

Thai police are obliged to notify the U.S. Embassy when an American is arrested, but some policemay not be aware of this requirement.

Each year, the ACS arranges for the transfer of a few U.S. citizen prisoners back to the U.S. where they can serve the remainder of their sentences.

In 2013, Paul said, the ACS processed over 11,000 notarials, most of which involved income statements. There are about 100 appointments a day at the ACS offices, of which 70-80% are for notarial services. The fees for these services are set by the State Department in Washington.

Regarding visas to the U.S., Paul said that the U.S. Embassy gets about 60,000 visa applications a year; and the approval rate is about 90%.

Paul said that the ACS deals with a number of issues, most of which fall into the category of "welfare or whereabouts" – i.e. Americans who are in difficulty or in hospital or are simply missing.

Americans who contact ACS from hospitals often don't know what to do, Paul explained. Occasionally, they don't have money to pay the hospital bills. ACS does not have the resources to pay their medical bills, but it can help them contact their families in the U.S. (Paul recommended all Americans coming to Thailand purchase travel insurance.)

ACS sometimes deals with Americans who are quite elderly. They may be suffering from dementia or other mental health issues. Many of them need care but cannot afford it. Some of them have no one to go back to in the U.S. This is a very difficult part of our work, Paul said.

There are many reasons why Americans in Thailand might become destitute, Paul explained. They may not have done adequate financial planning. They may have had to deal with a serious illness. They may have been scammed. If people in this situation can't work out their problems, as a last resort the U.S. Embassy may be able to provide a repatriation loan. There are a number of requirements for obtaining such a loan.

ACS also assists Americans who have been victims of crimes, including families of the few U.S. citizens who have been murdered in Thailand.

Paul stressed that much of the work ACS does is bound by the U.S. privacy act, which means that the Embassy cannot share information with anyone without the person's consent. This sometimes creates misunderstandings when dealing with family members.

Paul said that the ACS unit is in frequent contact with other embassies, particularly the ones from English-speaking countries. This contact is very valuable when "new" issues emerge, such as when foreigners start coming to Thailand for surrogacy reasons, a fairly recent phenomenon.

Paul mentioned that ACS does outreach visits to several cities in Thailand. It comes to Pattaya four times a year (visit http://bangkok.usembassy.gov/consular_outreach.html for schedule).

Paul said that email is a good way to get in touch with ACS in Bangkok (acsbkk@state.gov). The unit is also on Twitter (@ACSBKK).

During the Q&A, one person suggested that the U.S. Embassy make available small cards that state that "if this person is arrested, please contact the U.S. Embassy."

One person mentioned that at least one Thai bank was refusing to open accounts for Americans because of the recent requirements that the banks report deposits above a certain amount to the U.S. Government. Paul said that this was an issue the embassy was monitoring.

Before taking up his current assignment in Bangkok, Paul was the countrywide coordinator for American Citizen Services in India where he oversaw efforts covering the five consular districts of New Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Hyderabad, and Chennai.

For more information on the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, go to <http://bangkok.usembassy.gov>.