Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Stolen items; Theft; Rape/Sexual Violence; Employee Health Safety; Hotels; Assault; Burglary; Riots/Civil Unrest; Earthquakes; Hurricanes; Economic Espionage; Intellectual Property Rights Infringement; Cyber; Other Threat / Incident; Drug Trafficking

East Asia & Pacific > South Korea; East Asia & Pacific > South Korea > Seoul

3/10/2014

Overall Crime and Safety Situation

Crime Threats

Crime rates throughout the Republic of Korea (ROK) are low by U.S. standards. While infrequent compared to the U.S., street crimes do occur. In 2013, at the direction of President Park Geun-hye, Korean National Police (KNP) focused on a campaign to combat four “social evils”: sexual violence, domestic violence, school violence, and unsafe food. Police statistics reflected increased arrest rates as a result of the campaign, while overall crime statistics have remained largely stable since 2010, according to KNP.

There have been few incidents involving Embassy, U.S. military, or expatriate victims. Most crimes reported by expatriates involve pickpocketing in tourist areas and crowded markets or non-confrontational property theft; and most crimes are non-violent in nature, although there are occasional reports of more serious crimes, such as sexual assaults.
Street crimes involving foreigners usually consist of robberies and pick-pocketing/purse slashing in tourist areas and crowded locations such as markets, buses, subways, hotels, and department stores. Such encounters are predominantly non-violent. The crimes that occur most frequently (e.g., pickpocketing, purse snatching, assault, and hotel room/residential crime) occur more often in major metropolitan areas. Itaewon, Sinchon, Myeongdong, and Hongdae are well-known entertainment and shopping districts in which crowds, alcohol, and a higher prevalence of drug activity present a higher risk for crime.

Criminal perpetrators are usually deterred by the risk of confrontation and engage principally in crimes of stealth; burglaries of occupied residences are also rare. While crimes involving firearms are extremely rare due to stringent gun control laws, violent crimes sometimes occur, often involving the use of knives.

### Overall Road Safety Situation

#### Road Safety and Road Conditions

Korea's roads are generally well paved, and traffic signals operate. Nonetheless, road fatalities per registered vehicle are almost two times greater than in the U.S., according to the OECD International Transport Forum’s 2013 Road Safety Report. Drivers are aggressive, especially in Seoul and other cities. Causes of accidents include frequent abrupt, un-signaled lane changes, running of red lights, and aggressive bus and taxi drivers. Pedestrians should be aware that vehicles frequently do not yield to pedestrians in marked crosswalks. While
technically illegal, it is common for drivers to watch live TV through their GPS devices via DMB (digital multimedia broadcasting) technology, a contributing factor in many accidents.

Seasonal heavy rains can cause isolated sections of road to become temporarily blocked or washed out. Korea’s mountainous topography dictates unusual road networks and interchanges in some areas; and many foreigners who cannot read Korean report finding road signs difficult to use for navigating.

There are occasional reports of taxi scams where drivers refuse to use the meter and quote unreasonable fares or stop at disreputable gem or souvenir shops, etc.

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence

Korea is a modern democracy with active public participation.

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

While Americans in South Korea are subject to the worldwide threat from international terrorism, no information suggests any specific terrorist threats directed at Americans or U.S. interests. While there has not been a terrorist incident against U.S. interests in South Korea in recent history, the possibility of al-Qai’da or other transnational terrorist organizations
Civil Unrest

Political demonstrations are extremely common. In recent years, there has been a marked decrease in violence associated with political demonstrations, but even demonstrations intended to be peaceful can turn confrontational quickly. In most cases, rallies and demonstrations are so frequent and so quickly arranged that the U.S. Embassy in Seoul will not send out messages to U.S. citizens regarding them.

Religious or Ethnic Violence

There is little to no threat of religious or ethnic violence in South Korea. Foreign residents or visitors, especially if they are darker-skinned, may find themselves the subject of stares in public places, especially outside urban areas, but for the most part Koreans are notably kind and helpful to foreigners. As much as 10 percent of marriages now involve a foreign-born spouse; often women from southeast Asian countries marry Korean men in rural areas.

Post-specific Concerns

Environmental Hazards
South Korea has experienced minor earthquakes with minimal or no damage in recent history.

The monsoon season usually runs from June to August, with four to six weeks of heaviest rain. Damages from flooding vary from year to year, but flooding is often a problem, especially in rural areas.

Typhoons occasionally cause damage on the peninsula; in August 2012, typhoons caused a handful of deaths and moderate, isolated damage.

Industrial and Transportation Accidents

Industrial accidents with resulting injuries are common in South Korea, especially in its heavy industries and shipyards. Poor safety regulations and inadequate evacuation plans are often to blame for the large number of injuries and fatalities. In November 2012, counterfeit certificates of authenticity were discovered for non-core parts used in two reactors at the Yeonggwang nuclear facility, and later microscopic cracks were discovered in control rod tunnels at the same facility. Throughout 2013, prosecutors investigated reports of bribery, counterfeit safety test reports, and collusion among nuclear power companies, suppliers, and testing companies. Despite consistent concerns about nuclear safety and multiple temporary reactor shutdowns in recent years, the South Korean government in early 2014 approved a $7 billion plan to build two additional reactors by 2020.
Economic Espionage/Intellectual Property Thefts

The Republic of Korea has made great strides in terms of its protection of intellectual property rights in certain respects, and it cooperates aggressively with U.S. law enforcement to pursue criminal investigations and seize counterfeit goods, including luxury items such as handbags. In 2013, Korean police working with U.S. federal agents seized over $66 million worth of counterfeit goods, including clothing and leather goods.

But, industrial espionage remains a high-profile concern. In October 2012, a U.S. grand jury indicted a South Korean firm, Kolon, for allegedly stealing U.S. corporate secrets so that it could introduce its own version of Kevlar material. In early 2011, agents from the South Korean National Intelligence Service were widely reported to have been caught attempting to compromise a laptop inside a Seoul hotel room of a visiting Indonesian defense procurement delegation member. Open sources have also reported that South Korea may have attempted to compromise protected technology of U.S. F-15 fighters it purchased.

Privacy Concerns

The Republic of Korea enjoys the world’s fastest average Internet speed and is among the highest percentage of population with access to broadband. But, according to the OpenNet Initiative (ONI), the government imposes more constraints on the freedom of online speech than most other democratic countries; and the wide range of information blocked, from election-related discourse to discussion about North Korea, is subject to central government
filtering and censorship. In November 2010, ONI conducted testing on KT Corporation, the largest South Korean ISP, and found a select number of blocked websites, the majority focused on issues related to North Korea but also other sites focused on dating, pornography, and gambling. There have been widespread reports of large-scale data breaches of South Korean firms. In July 2011, for example, personal data of over 35 million SK Communications users was reportedly compromised. In July 2012, 8.7 million KT Mobile users had private information compromised. In January 2014, 20 million citizens had personal information stolen by a worker at the Korea Credit Bureau, leading to a massive effort by bank customers to replace compromised credit cards.

Regional Travel Concerns and Restricted Travel Areas/Zones

There are no areas within South Korea that are off-limits for travel by official Americans. U.S. Forces Korea maintains a list of specific commercial establishments that are off-limits to its service members because of concerns of prostitution, drug activity, or violence; the lists are updated monthly and can be viewed on USFK’s website (search “USFK Off Limits Information”).

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea, DPRK) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea, ROK) are in a state of war. There is peace on the Korean peninsula because of the armistice agreement that has endured since 1953, and in the past two decades, the number and type of political, economic, and social interactions between the Koreas have increased. Nonetheless, tensions remain high and have flared up into limited military confrontations. In the last decade, provocations from the North have included ballistic missile tests, nuclear warhead tests, and limited armed incursions into ROK-held territory. In recent years, some of these provocations have escalated into skirmishes near five isolated islands off the northwest coast of the ROK. The unprovoked sinking of a ROK naval vessel (the Cheonan) by the DPRK in March 2010 and the DPRK artillery shelling of Yeonpyeong island...
off the northwest coast of ROK in November 2010 significantly increased tensions; and the ROK government stated that it would respond militarily to any further provocation. The sudden death of Kim Jong Il in December 2011 led to widespread speculation about Kim Jong Un’s intentions. Hopes that he might prove to be a more modern and less confrontational leader diminished after the North tried twice to launch a so-called satellite into orbit in 2012, failing spectacularly in April and succeeding in December. North Korea claims that such research is a peaceful use of space; the RoK maintains that the real intent is to advance missile technology in violation of U.N. sanctions/resolutions. March and April 2013 saw a sustained period of especially vitriolic rhetoric by the DPRK in response to routine, defensive joint U.S.-ROK military exercises and led to the closure of the joint ROK-DPRK Kaesong Industrial Complex for months. The RoK maintains a high level of readiness to respond to military threats. Military training exercises are routinely conducted throughout the country throughout the year, including civil defense drills that are normally held at least quarterly. Although the DPRK typically responds to such activities with strong rhetoric, these situations rarely escalate beyond that but, nonetheless, warrant close monitoring.

Drug-related Crimes

Narcotics production or abuse is not a major problem in the ROK. However, continuing reports indicate that an undetermined quantity of narcotics is smuggled through South Korea to the U.S. and other countries. In response, the South Korean government has taken significant steps to thwart the transshipment of drugs. There have also been increasing reports of the use of synthetic, manufactured drugs with marijuana-like effects (often called “spice”), including by U.S. service members. Korean National Police cooperate aggressively with USFK law enforcement and the DEA to target importation by U.S. service members or former service members of such manufactured drugs.
Kidnapping Threats

Kidnappings are rare, but they do sometimes occur. Government statistics indicate an average of 3-5 reported kidnappings annually. In late 2011, a Korean-American dual citizen was kidnapped and reportedly murdered by a Korean relative because of an inheritance dispute. In April 2012, a Chinese national of Korean ethnicity kidnapped and murdered a woman in Suwon; the case was mishandled by police, became a national scandal, and led to the resignation of the Korean National Police Commissioner General.

Police Response

The Korean National Police (KNP) is professional, well-trained and -equipped, and present throughout the country. They possess the latest technology and employ specialists in all areas found in other modern police forces, including a cyber unit, SWAT, world-class riot control, EOD, dignitary protection, etc. In October 2013, KNP introduced Tourism Police in four parts of Seoul (Myeongdong, Insadong, Itaewon, and Hongdae) with heavy concentrations of foreign visitors whose officers speak English, Japanese, or Chinese.

How to Handle Incidents of Police Detention or Harassment

Foreigners who are arrested or detained by police are treated with respect. Upon arresting a foreigner, police will notify the KNP Foreign Affairs Division (FAD), which will assume responsibility for the investigation. If the crime is a misdemeanor, the police will generally
release the individual on his/her own recognizance after confirming the individual’s ties to Korea through verification of the subject's address, telephone number, and employment.

Where to Turn to for Assistance if You Become a Victim of Crime

Foreigners should call the police emergency telephone number 112 if they are the victim of a crime or need police assistance. Officers with English-speaking capability are on duty 24-hours a day, 365 days a year.

Various Police/Security Agencies

The Supreme Prosecutors’ Office (SPO) consists of both prosecutors and investigators, and unlike prosecutorial services in most developed countries, SPO also possesses much investigative authority usually exercised by police. SPO representatives can detain and arrest subjects, execute warrants, etc. Tensions between KNP and SPO flared up in late 2012 in the wake of a series of scandals that led to the resignation of the Prosecutor General, and there remain calls for the government to devolve some authority from SPO to KNP.

The National Intelligence Service (NIS) is both the nation’s domestic and foreign intelligence service, but it also has a quasi-law enforcement function in that it is responsible for counter-terrorism activities and is involved in security planning for major international events (through its Threat Information Integration Center).
The Presidential Security Service (PSS) is independent from other agencies, administered from the Blue House, and responsible for the protection of the president, of the Blue House and other presidential sites, and of the U.S. president and secretary of state. (Other U.S. cabinet-level visiting dignitaries who are afforded protection details are protected by the Dignitary Protection Division of the KNP.)

Medical Emergencies

Hospitals in the ROK are generally well-equipped with state-of-the-art diagnostic and therapeutic equipment. High quality general and specialty dental care is available in Seoul. Western-style medical facilities are available in the major urban areas of Seoul, Busan, Daegu, and a few other large cities. However, not all doctors and staff in major urban areas are proficient in English; most clinics in rural areas do not have English-speaking doctors. Pharmacies are first-rate, and most prescribed medications, except psychotropics, can be obtained with a prescription.

South Korea has very good emergency response capability, but ambulances are not staffed by fully-trained and equipped emergency medical technicians akin to U.S. EMTs. Ambulances usually have only basic supplies like oxygen; they do not have sophisticated medical equipment. Nonetheless, ambulances operated by the fire department (dial 119) will respond very quickly and take patients to the nearest hospital.

Some Korean hospitals accept some U.S. medical insurance, but only a limited number have direct-billing procedures worked out with U.S. insurers. Most require foreigners to pay for
treatment then seek reimbursement through their insurance company. Hospitals, including emergency rooms, also will not usually admit foreigners as patients without payment up front (meaning, either one must have insurance that the hospital will accept or one would likely be required to make a deposit or put up a guarantee in order to be admitted).

Contact Information for Recommended Local Hospitals and Clinics

The U.S. Embassy in Seoul maintains a list of English-speaking health care providers (i.e., hospitals in various cities with English-speaking staff). While the list is not intended to be exhaustive nor indicative of any official Embassy endorsement, it can be viewed at: http://seoul.usembassy.gov/acs_health.html.

Foreigners may also call and speak with an English-speaking doctor 24 hours a day for assistance with emergency medical information; within Seoul, dial 1339 (from a cell phone or outside Seoul, dial 02-1339).

Recommended Air Ambulance Services

U.S. citizens can call the Seoul "International SOS" office at (02) 3140-1700 in the event emergency medical evacuation is required. Travelers should consider obtaining temporary medical insurance prior to departing the U.S. Information on purchasing medical insurance and evacuation assistance can be obtained at the website: https://www.internationalsos.com/en/ Visitors may also contact the U.S. Embassy in Seoul to
request information about other air ambulance/medevac services options.

CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Food sanitation is usually up to U.S. standards, but caution should be taken when eating at small street vendors. Local city water is considered safe for drinking, though most local people drink bottled, boiled, or specially treated purified water. When in doubt, beverages that are either bottled or otherwise packaged are usually safe to drink.

For additional vaccine and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/south-korea.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Best Situational Awareness Practices

The common sense security precautions a person would take in any large U.S. city are appropriate throughout Korea. Visitors do not need to avoid Itaewon, Sinchon, Myeongdong, and Hongdae but should use caution in all crowded entertainment, nightlife, and shopping districts throughout Korea. American citizens should remain alert to their surroundings and avoid carrying anything that is not needed while traveling around Seoul and other cities. They
should avoid carrying valuables in backpacks, which are more easily targeted by pickpockets.

Official U.S. government travelers are advised not to leave personal electronic items, laptops, etc. that have any sensitive information on them unsecured in hotel rooms.

U.S. visitors should register through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), and if they cannot speak or read Korean, ask their hotel for language cards with the names and contact information for their hotel, destinations, etc.

U.S. citizens should stay informed through local media about military exercises and civil defense drills that sometimes occur at short notice and for which the Embassy may not always be able to provide advance notification. Visitors should also avoid demonstrations if possible (foreigners may not participate in political demonstrations in Korea since doing so would violate one’s visa terms), avoid confronting demonstrators, and exercise caution if within the vicinity of protests or rallies.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

188 Sejong-daero, Jongno-gu, Seoul
Embassy Contact Numbers

Regional Security Office (RSO)
Tel: 82-2-397-4161
Fax: 82-2-397-4382
E-mail: DS_RSOSeoul@state.gov

Consular Section
E-mail (all public inquiries): SeoulInfo@state.gov;
Fax: 82-2-397-4080; DSN Fax: 721-4080
U.S. Passport inquiries only: 82-2-397-4040; DSN: 721-4040
All other American citizen services inquiries: 82-2-397-4114; DSN 721-4114
All Visa inquiries: 82-2-397-4373
Telephone inquiry hours: 08:30 - 16:30 Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday 08:30 - 16:00 Wednesday
For American citizens with after-hours emergencies, please call 82-2-397-4114. If you have
access to DSN, please call 721-4114.

Foreign Commercial Services (FCS)
Tel: 82-2-397-4535; Fax: 82-2-739-1628;
E-mail: Seoul.office.box@mail.doc.gov

Embassy Switchboard: 82-2-397-4114

Duty Officer: Cell phone: 82-11-9101-9057

Embassy Medical Unit: 82-2-397-4140; Fax: 82-2-397-4566

Political Section: 82-2-397-4210; Fax: 82-2-733-4791

Economic Section: 82-2-397-4400; Fax: 82-2-722-1429

OSAC Country Council Information

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