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World's perils give rise to a rescue business

Firm extricates travelers from hot spots

By **Katie Johnston** | GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 02, 2013

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By the time Egypt's president, Mohammad Morsi, was ousted from office in early July, Global Rescue, a Boston security company, had been on the ground in Alexandria for a week, monitoring protests and identifying the best routes out of the city.

So when a Washington company called on the firm to bring its workers home, Global Rescue's 11-man team quickly loaded 60 people into vans, drove them to a hotel outside the city, and put them on a plane back to Washington.

It wasn't a nerve-wracking escape like the one depicted in the movie "Argo," said the former Navy SEAL who led the evacuation, because of the carefully devised plan that avoided roadblocks and crowds of protesters. In fact, he said, "It was pretty cut and dry."

At a time when companies are sending employees to every corner of the globe and adventure travelers are seeking thrills in droves, Global Rescue's evacuation and medical assistance services are in great demand. The prevalence of natural disasters, terrorist attacks, and civil uprisings also means travelers are more likely to find themselves in crisis.

"You start collecting the data and looking at the direction all these numbers are going in, and there's kind of a disturbing parity," said Dan Richards, the former private equity investor who started Global Rescue in 2004. "We're responding to a need that is real and growing,"

Richards' outfit conducts more than 1,000 operations a year. It has responded to coup attempts in Mali and Madagascar, terror attacks in India, and the 2011 tsunami in Japan. A few weeks ago, Global Rescue evacuated two mountain climbers via helicopter in Switzerland.

After the devastating 2010 earthquake in Haiti, Global Rescue spent three weeks getting people out. To find one woman, they went from hospital to hospital, calling her name until they found her lying on a broken door used as a stretcher, her legs crushed. The team flew her to a hospital in Miami and monitored her progress as she recovered from multiple surgeries.

The company doesn't have clients in Syria, where more than 1,400 people were allegedly killed by chemical weapons recently, but it is working with companies in the bordering countries of Israel, Turkey, and Lebanon in the event the conflict spreads and their employees need to be evacuated.

Global Rescue has opened three satellite locations since 2010: in Bangkok, Islamabad, and Lebanon, N.H. It has about 3.5 million individual and corporate customers and is seeing a 40 percent increase in clients every year. One of its more notable clients is NASA — but only for earth-bound operations.

"We haven't figured out how to do space rescue yet," said Richards.

Richards started the company following the 9/11 terrorist attacks after looking to invest in a company that assisted travelers in crisis and finding there wasn't one. The Norwich, Vt., native picked Boston as a base because he needed a location that was easily accessible to both an international airport and outdoor training opportunities for his staff. He recruited former military special operations personnel to conduct rescues and partnered with Johns Hopkins Medicine in Baltimore for medical consultation.

People planning to travel out of the country for less than 30 days pay between \$225 and \$455 for medical and security assistance from Global Rescue, depending on the length of the trip. Individuals and corporations can also sign up for annual memberships.

Global Rescue turns down most requests from nonmembers who call for help at the last minute.

The company adheres to each country's laws, Richards said, and has not had a failed operation yet.

Global Forest Partners LP, a private equity firm in Lebanon, N.H., joined Global Rescue a few years ago as it expanded its business overseas. The firm sends teams to investigate investments on nearly every continent.

"We started looking at different geographies that we hadn't been in before," said chief financial officer Jim Healy. "We had more people and more complexity. We were getting to a scale where we needed to provide a safety net."

Similarly, Middlebury College has expanded its study abroad program, sending students into seven new countries since 2006, including Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. During the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the Vermont liberal arts school called on Global Rescue to evacuate 22 students from Alexandria, Egypt, when "all hell broke loose," said Jeffrey Cason, dean of international programs. When the school found out that Global Rescue — led by Middlebury alum Richards — was in Egypt and could fly students out in a matter of hours, the school signed a contract and stayed on long-term.

The 200-member staff of Global Rescue is an unusually fit bunch. The senior member of the operations security team is a former Navy SEAL who sometimes paddleboards to work from Hingham — that's a 2 1/2-hour trek in good weather. A former Olympic skier works in business development. One of the company's lawyers runs marathons; another, Richards' wife, was drafted to play professional soccer.

Even the employees in retail sales and corporate accounts participate in regular workouts on the Greenway in front of the Boston headquarters. On a recent morning, a group of six workers ran sprints with 80-pound sandbags, swung kettle bells, and did push-ups.

The drills often involve memorization to keep employees sharp. And everyone is expected to keep up with international news.

"We stay very closely in touch with everything that's happening in the world," said the former Navy SEAL, who asked not to be identified for security reasons. "You definitely have to be curious about current events, geopolitical events that affect the world, so you can kind of almost predict what's going to happen tomorrow in certain locations."

As more companies do business around the world, sometimes in volatile regions, traditional travel insurance may not be enough, said Gary Oliver, chief executive of BSG LLC, a security risk management consultancy in Herndon, Va.

Employers need a plan if a situation escalates, Oliver said, especially now that news about demonstrations spreads lightning-fast online and situations deteriorate quickly.

"You need someone 24/7 monitoring," he said.

At the same time, the number of travelers scaling peaks and scuba diving in exotic locations is skyrocketing, many of them novices who are more likely to get into trouble, Richards said.

But some clients are just looking for reassurance.

When 18-year-old Liam Mulhern broke his leg skiing after a race in Breckenridge, Colo., in 2009, his mother in Longmeadow called Global Rescue.

The company had Johns Hopkins specialists review Mulhern's X-rays, then sent a paramedic from Boston to Colorado to deal with his medications and plane tickets and accompany him on his return flight to Logan Airport.

If the family hadn't been Global Rescue members, Mulhern said: "My mother certainly would have been on the first plane to Colorado."

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WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF
Global Rescue employees Bryan Kewley (left) and Kevin Helm participated in company training exercises.

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