

THE CHALLENGES OF COVID-19 FOR REPATRIATION FIRMS



Rowland Brothers
INTERNATIONAL

THE REALITIES OF REPATRIATION DURING COVID-19

Fiona Greenwood, Operations Director,
Rowland Brothers International

“ DURING THIS PERIOD, HOWEVER, THE COMPLEXITIES HAVE INCREASED, WITH GOVERNMENTS IMPOSING MORE RESTRICTIONS, INCREASED TIMESCALES, COUNTRY LOCKDOWNS AND FLIGHT AVAILABILITY. ”

“In the current climate, Rowland Brothers International remains at the forefront of managing repatriations on a global basis for those loved ones that have succumbed to COVID-19.

“The reality of the impact of COVID-19 on every aspect of our lives has now, for the most part, sunk in. The global travel sector and related industries that rely on international travel are desperately trying to plan for an uncertain and undoubtedly different looking future whilst remaining hopeful that the travel industry will start to pick up again.

“Despite the travel bans across the globe, many foreign nationals remained overseas, either through choice (residents, expats, students) or in some cases simply travellers who were unable to make it home before the restrictions were implemented.

“For those that succumbed to the COVID-19 virus and sadly never recovered, the journey in repatriating them to their home country under exceptional circumstances has been challenging and, in some instances, repatriation has not been possible - due to the country's health regulations around the management of confirmed or suspected COVID-19 making either local cremation and repatriation of remains, or local burial, the only options available to the family.

“Complexities involved in managing a repatriation have always been present and are something RBI is extremely familiar with. During this period, however, the complexities have increased, with governments imposing more restrictions, increased timescales, country lockdowns and flight availability.



GLOBAL PANDEMIC PLACES FURTHER PRESSURE ON REPATRIATION CASES

Sam Tester, Operations Manager,
Homeland International

“ THIS PLACED EVEN FURTHER PRESSURE ON THE DELIVERY OF REPATRIATION CASES IN AN ALREADY CHALLENGING POSITION AND, OVERNIGHT, THE ABILITY TO MOVE WORLDWIDE BECAME AN INCREDIBLY COMPLEX TASK. ”

“It has been a challenging time for all businesses, and no less so for those involved in the repatriation sector.

“Homeland International provides international repatriation services all over the world, to and from any location, and has thus been at the epicentre of many of these challenges. The lockdown measures in place have differed from country to country and, at times, within countries, which has required adaptability and specialist expertise to understand and overcome.

“Back in March, ‘normal’ working life changed dramatically, seemingly overnight. In response to Government guidance, Homeland International made the decision to move its operations team from the office to working from home, to protect the core workforce from possible risk of infection. Thankfully, the company's set up was fully able to move and the team was ready to go almost from the point of opening their front doors on their return home. A cloud-based case management system and access to company data and mobile phones allowed the team to seamlessly transition to a remote working environment. This technology infrastructure is imperative to our operations; with colleagues often travelling around the world for work, it is important that the system is accessible from everywhere and anywhere in the world. Communication is key within repatriation, so quickly the company initiated the installation of additional team communication technology so, although not physically together, the team could still operate cohesively.

“Our team has been able to navigate these due to the strong working relationships built up over the years, and we have been able to put families’ minds at rest, knowing what the next steps will be.”

CASE STUDY: UK TO SLOVAKIA

“Rowland Brothers International was appointed directly by family members to arrange a mortal remains transfer for someone who had died from COVID-19 from Leicester to Bratislava, Slovakia, in June 2020.

“No flights were available at the time to repatriate, due to flight restrictions, and there were additional complexities due to the cause of death. Therefore, we took the decision to repatriate by road.

“The case took 22 days to complete. This comprised 11 days from date of death until the Out of England certificate was issued, a further nine days from collection of the body to complete embalming, preparations, consular documentation, translations, etc, and then a two-day road transfer.

“It was particularly interesting as special documentation was required to travel from the UK to Slovakia via France, Belgium, Germany and Poland. Members of the RBI team arranged visits to the various embassies to ensure all permissions were in place and coordinated with the Logistic Transportation Team to complete all arrangements.

“Since death was due to COVID-19, embalming was essential and special additional documentation was required besides the Embalming Certificate. RBI had to satisfy each embassy that all transportation regulations for road transfer had been observed before permission was granted to travel via the various countries for this repatriation to take place.

“The family were extremely thankful that RBI was able to repatriate their loved one home to enable the funeral to take place.”

CASE STUDY: FLORIDA, USA, TO THE UK

“In April, Rowland Brothers International was appointed to arrange repatriation from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA to Staffordshire, UK.

“The deceased person had died following infection with COVID-19 and so the repatriation of mortal remains was not permitted, leaving the family with two options - local cremation and repatriation of cremated remains or local burial. The family opted for local cremation and repatriation of the cremated remains.

“There were time delays with the Medical Examiner in Florida in making the death certificate available and this was required prior to the booking of the cremation, meaning that the cremation took place 15 days following the date of death. However, there was no flight availability for the repatriation of cremains until 01 May, increasing the timeline further. Eventually, the cremated remains

“Coronavirus has really changed the way the industry is able to support families and loved ones at an already difficult time. The same goes for repatriation, which has been near enough impossible to expedite in most cases. News images from UK airports showing endless rows of aircraft lined up and out of operation, and news of airlines and travel companies financially struggling and on the brink of collapse, has placed even further pressure on the delivery of repatriation cases in an already challenging position. Overnight, the ability to move worldwide became an incredibly complex task.

“There have been many difficult instances in the UK whereby families have been desperate to repatriate their loved ones and, sadly, many of these cases have not been possible to complete. The majority of destinations have been inaccessible, which continues to present challenging conversations with families wanting closure. Some have decided to wait until flights are possible, however in some situations this has not been possible to fulfil due to pressures on mortuary capacity within hospital and funeral homes.

“Other families have had to make difficult decisions, not wanting to risk waiting several months until a potential repatriation date. In these instances, many have opted for burial in the UK or a cremation service with the repatriation for the urn at a later date.”

CASE STUDY: UK TO ROMANIA

“Homeland International had five Romanian repatriations to complete from London, and the situation in Romania had changed rather rapidly. The Romanian Government essentially shut down its biggest airport, Bucharest, with no flights in or out. There are often situations around the world which repatriation companies have to respond to quickly, such as natural disasters, airline collapse and terrorist attacks. COVID-19 presented such a challenge and required swift adaptability, to ensure the families in our care were still supported.

“Homeland International is fortunate to have access to over 350 providers around the world. The team connected with our available providers in Romania to seek support and were assisted with local transportation, by road instead of by flight. This option is usually overlooked due to the distance and time, however the circumstances required it. After careful consultation with each family, permission was bought and we were able to safely repatriate to Romania despite the fact there were no flights.”

CASE STUDY: SINGAPORE TO INDIA AND ARGENTINA

“Homeland International is often called upon to support with cases which do not originate from, or go to, the UK.

“In May, this was the situation with two cases in Singapore. One case was from Singapore to India, and the other from Singapore to Argentina, and both needed quick research into what was, and was not, possible due to the virus. There are so many different regulations with repatriation, it is not just one set of regulations per country but a combination depending on both the country of death and the home country, rendering every case unique. Airlines were stopping services and others were restricting them, meaning there were still flights to India but, unfortunately, no options to get to Argentina.

“Homeland International opted to quickly repatriate the Indian deceased person as this was still possible. However, for the case

were collected from the airport in the UK on 03 May and delivered to the family.”

ADVICE TO FUNERAL DIRECTORS

“There remain many complexities involved in the repatriation of a loved one back to their home country at present. For repatriations out of the UK, we have to consider the restrictions imposed by the receiving country.

“If cause of death is COVID-19, although we can repatriate out of the UK following all the transportation preparation guidelines, it may be that the receiving country does not accept entry of mortal remains and, therefore, the only alternative is to arrange a UK cremation and then repatriate the cremated remains.

“In recent months, where borders have been temporarily closed at the destination country, the repatriation timeline has been affected. In addition, there are often reductions in flights to the final destination, or no direct flights at all, in which case we have to investigate alternative routes.

“For repatriations from abroad back to the UK, the same challenges apply. In some countries, if the cause of death is COVID-19 the authorities will arrange immediate cremation and then allow repatriation of cremated remains once their borders and flights are available. There are no set rules - the situation changes regularly with both countries’ government guidance and flight availability.

“We have not seen a huge increase in freight costs - for the most part the rates remain the same, maybe a slight increase if there is no direct route for the repatriation to take place, but these costs are minimal.”

to Argentina, there had to be an assessment of the situation and the future possibilities together with a consultation with the local police, airlines, Argentine embassy and the family. It became clear that it was going to be several months until repatriation was possible, so the family was consulted and ultimately decided they would prefer a local cremation in Singapore and for the urn to be repatriated when flights resume.

“Communication is key and, without consulting the relevant stakeholders, the wrong information could have been conveyed at the outset, setting undeliverable expectations for an already grieving family.”

OPERATING IN A CHANGING WORLD

“Within Homeland International, and the repatriation sector, there have been some really positive changes. There has been more collaboration than ever before, with providers, governments, embassies, airlines and other key stakeholders having been far more supportive and flexible than ever before.

“Conversations between different parties have increased, learning more about those tasks which each party completes as part of the overall repatriation process and how we can all work together to make these tasks simpler for all. We have for too long worked with dated procedures and unnecessary bureaucratic protocol which complicates the process.

“I hope the flexibility our stakeholders have shown during this period continues into the future and we can start to see some modernisation within the repatriation process and sector to make bereaved people’s lives slightly easier during a difficult time.”



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