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HD Tourism - Travel firms should advise the FO.

BY By Will Woodward.

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TOUR operators were yesterday urged to do more to help the Foreign Office formulate travel advice for British tourists in the wake of the Uganda massacre.

Amid general complaints about a lack of regular dialogue between tour operators and the Foreign Office, the Association of British Travel Agents said it occasionally criticised the FO for overcaution.

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Abta legal adviser Simon Bunce said sometimes the FO issued a blanket warning about a country when only a part of it was in danger. 'We want them to be specific.'

But he admitted that it was only 'in theory' that tour operators would, in turn, warn the FO that its was being too lax with its travel advice. He said an FO official had told him 'they've never yet had an operator saying you better change your advice because I wouldn't go there.'

Julian Matthews, of 'travel for conservation' tour operator Discovery Initiatives, said: 'The Foreign Office has got an incredibly difficult job to give impartial advice that basically won't scare just about everyone. The people on the ground are the people that are closest to the action, and if they hear rumours should feed them back to the FO.'

But Tricia Barnett, of pressure group Tourism Concern, said: 'The FO's advice is very much guided by the relationship Britain has with that country, unless something catastrophic takes place.'

Foreign Office Minister Baroness Symons met representatives of the travel industry last week to discuss advice for travellers, but any changes to be made to the system are still being considered.

A report that tour bosses had been warned of a Rwandan rebel threat to kill British holidaymakers was angrily denied by the company alleged to have made the claim yesterday.

Encounter Overland marketing manager Wayne Burton said: 'We had no prior knowledge of a warning letter being sent by the Hutu rebels to the Ugandan authorities and, to the best of my knowledge, neither did any other tour operator. Clearly it would be madness for a tour leader to ignore such a threat, if indeed one was issued.'

The Ugandan and British governments also said they had no knowledge of the threat, although a Foreign Office spokesman said it was 'seeking an urgent investigation' from the Ugandans.

The FO advice prior to the Uganda kidnappings warned that rebels were 'periodically active in the area'. It now warns against all travel to the border areas. The Foreign Office spokesman said: 'We still consider our travel advice was accurate.'

Arthur Kafeero, spokesman for the Ugandan tourism office, agree that FO advice had been 'fair enough'. He said 14,424 Britons had travelled to Uganda by air in 1995, nearly 10 per cent of all foreign tourists.

The Australian government told nationals in May 1998 not to travel to the nearby Rwenzori mountains.

Will Woodward.

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